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**From Cooperation to Confrontation? Trade Unionism, British Politics and the
Media, 1945-1979**

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For my grandparents

Abstract

Despite the media's significant influence on British society's transformation between 1945 and 1979, relatively little is understood about their effect on the mythologised decline of trade unionism. In response, this research forms the first comprehensive study of the media's role in the battle for public support between government and trade unions. Facilitated by the recent digitisation of newspaper sources and television reports, this research assesses media content from across the political spectrum, including five national dailies. It explores coverage of particular moments in the political relationship between the government and unions, as well as wider structural concerns in economic discourse. Beyond content, this thesis assesses the personal and political motivations behind production, utilising memoirs from prominent editors and journalists, as well as evidence from the BBC and TUC archives. It reflects on the way changes to the media landscape, including the waning influence of left-wing media and the rise of right-wing tabloids, shaped and restricted the dominant frames of explanation for Britain's supposed decline. The influence of the media on public attitudes is assessed through extensive exploration of Gallup polls and political surveys, enriching our understanding of trade unionism's engagement with wider social change.

Through these processes, the research seeks to scrutinise the validity of common simplistic assumptions about the media's attitudes towards the labour movement. Rather than a story of inevitability and relentless hostility – an impression which is difficult to reconcile with union's rising membership during the period – coverage of industrial relations was fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions which at times favoured the union cause. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to illuminate the cumulative power of industrial relations coverage over several decades, which was fundamental to the political battles of the 1980s.

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Introduction

One dominant assumption underpins historical understanding of industrial relations coverage during the twentieth century: consistent and unremitting media hostility towards unions. Jean Seaton, for example, has argued that 'union-bashing' is a 'convention of the British media' that has been accepted 'fatalistically' by the unions.¹ Several overviews of industrial relations, such as those provided by Richard Hyman, have typified the press's response to industrial unrest as one which held workers and trade unions 'exclusively responsible' for disagreement.² Sociologists Peter Beharrell and Greg Philo argued in 1977 that, in cases of serious crisis or conflict, trade unions have been the media's 'favourite scapegoats'.³ If such conclusions were based on the two extremes of twentieth-century industrial relations, the 1926 General Strike and the 1985 miners' strike, in which the press and television media played a significant role in discrediting the efforts of the labour movement, this would appear to be an entirely reasonable line of argument. Colin Hay's extensive assessment of media coverage during 1979's Winter of Discontent also reinforces these perceptions, as coverage of the winter's public sector strikes were found to be decisive in buttressing Margaret Thatcher's case against the unions.⁴ However, little is understood of the coverage between 1926 and the crisis of the late 1970s Labour government, and such an exclusively negative perception of media influence is difficult to reconcile with the fact that trade unions consistently grew between 1945 and 1979, the zenith of its membership, and the continued public belief that trade unions were a 'good thing' for British society.⁵

According to Mike Molloy, editor of the *Daily Mirror* in the late 1970s, trade union leaders of the period 'followed the wishes of the rank and file and led their mass members on a yellow brick road that ended directly at Margaret Thatcher's door', a journey which 'instigated terrifying inflation and a destabilisation that nearly destroyed the Labour Party, before finally putting the wind up voters.'⁶ This partisan portrayal of the events that led to Labour's election defeat in 1979 is indicative of a wider perception of linearity and inevitability to the climax of tensions between government and

¹ Jean Seaton, 'Trade Unions and the Media', in Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook (eds), *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First 250 Years* (London, 1991), p. 257.

² Richard Hyman, 'The Historical Evolution of British Industrial Relations' in Paul Edwards (ed.), *Industrial Relations: Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 1995), p. 50.

³ Peter Beharrell and Greg Philo, 'Introduction', in Peter Beharrell and Greg Philo (eds), *Trade Unions and the Media* (London, 1977).

⁴ Colin Hay, 'Narrating the Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology* 30 (1996), pp. 253-277.

⁵ David Marsh, 'Public Opinion, Trade Unions and Mrs Thatcher', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 28 (1990), pp. 58-59.

⁶ Mike Molloy, *The Happy Hack: A Memoir of Fleet Street in its Heyday* (London, 2016), p. 174.

unions, and the supposed futility of trade union activism. In such portrayals of trade unionism, it is difficult to recognise the central and positive relationship the trade unions enjoyed with the Labour government in the immediate post-war period. For Labour, the trade unions formed an important part in supporting their attempts to improve productivity while, for the Conservatives, Churchill's conciliatory approach to the trade unions, eager to boost the party's working class appeal, was a distinct contrast to the aggressive style of Margaret Thatcher three decades later. This research explores not only how trade unionism was portrayed by the media, but the nuances that developed in the battle for public support between the trade union movement and high politics. Aside from a few key episodes, scholars have overlooked the potential of the post-war media as brokers in the relationship between trade unionism and politics.

The historiographical background

This research addresses several deficiencies in historiographical understanding to provide a comprehensive analysis of long-term trends in three separate but interrelated areas of historical research. Historians John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Nina Fishman have recognised both the recent 'general neglect' of trade unionism in the post-war period by social scientists and historians, in both dedicated studies of labour history and more comprehensive histories of the period and, perhaps more significantly for this research, the way myths about the role of trade unions in the post-war era 'extended and lodged themselves deeper in the public consciousness'.⁷

The historiography of the 1926 general strike has an important influence on the themes and relationships explored in this thesis. Although historian Keith Laybourn has questioned the significance of the strike as any kind of 'watershed' for industrial history, it established important trends in the relationship between government, unions and the media.⁸ May 1926 saw 1.7 million strikers participate in an unsuccessful, TUC-sanctioned 9-day general strike, which represented a 'defining moment in the renegotiation of the balance of power among unions, industry, and the state'.⁹ With the country's press impeded by the printers' involvement in industrial action, the government issued the *British Gazette*, edited by Winston Churchill, which condemned the strike throughout as an 'attempt to wreck the state'.¹⁰ Additionally, the Baldwin government sought to decisively influence the coverage of the BBC, as the corporation established a genuine national

⁷ Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy, 'Approaching Post-War Trade Unionism', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The Post-War Compromise, 1945-64* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 1-2.

⁸ Keith Laybourn, *The General Strike of 1926* (Manchester, 1993), p. 103.

⁹ Laura Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (London, 2010), p. 100.

¹⁰ Laybourn, *The General Strike*, p. 56.

audience and purpose as an authoritative current affairs provider. According to Curran and Seaton, in this process, the strike marked the transition from 'propaganda based on lies and the start of a more subtle tradition of selection and presentation'.¹¹ These ideas of selection and presentation are not only central themes of research but are inextricably linked to the trade union movement and depictions of it.

Historian Laura Beers has convincingly argued that the TUC's policy during the strike reflected the leadership's deepening 'hostility' towards popular media, as well as an 'unwillingness to see the value of political persuasion and their limited appreciation of the public's interests', signalled by their demand for printers' involvement early in the strike, which limited avenues of communication.¹² Although there is debate about whether a more sophisticated publicity campaign would have had an impact on the fundamental outcome of the strike, this thesis explores the long-term legacy of such experiences on the attitudes of trade unionism towards the mass media. It assesses the further development of the TUC's public relations strategy in a changing media environment. Despite the TUC's development of a broader media strategy after 1926 and the emergence of the TUC's *Daily Herald* as a serious force in popular journalism, Ross McKibbin has argued that the Conservative's electoral success in the inter-war period was 'achieved by creating a coalition of classes and interests united only by a normative hostility to a political notion of the working class', particularly organised labour, which fed on vulgar stereotypes 'absorbed into the language of popular Conservatism'.¹³ This work explores the legacy of such stereotypes, as they re-emerged and evolved in the period after the Second World War, despite trade unionism's bolstered status under a Labour government.

Recent research of post-war trade unionism has been dominated by assessment of Thatcherism's impact on the labour movement, despite increasing uncertainty about the realities of post-war political consensus. Furthermore, media historian James Curran has highlighted media history's continued difficulty with engaging in wider social trends, as the scholarship is often 'media-centric'.¹⁴ The combination of such trends has clouded understanding of the complex relationships between media and trade unions. James Thomas's work on the Labour Party in the media has convincingly argued that between 1945 and 1970 the Labour Party's concerns were well represented in the

¹¹ James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain* (London, 1997), p. 113.

¹² Beers, *Your Britain*, p. 102.

¹³ Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1994), p. 293.

¹⁴ James Curran, 'Media and the Making of British Society, c 1700-2000', *Media History* 8 (2002), p. 135.

popular press.¹⁵ According to Thomas, it was only after 1970 that the balance of the press began to swing against the left, following the demise of key left-of-centre newspapers and the transformation of the *Sun*. However, while Thomas's work provided a comprehensive analysis of the Labour Party's relationship with and treatment by the press in general election coverage, the wider labour movement has yet to be addressed by such studies. By the late 1960s, increasing tensions between Labour and the trade unions meant that it was difficult to comprehend media coverage of the labour movement's political party and industrial unions as a cohesive subject.

Despite the paucity of directly relevant work, there are some useful studies which this work will draw upon, which have sought to forge links between media coverage and trade unionism. Tim Claydon's work on the car industry, a sector so central to this research, Nina Fishman's work on the 1950s industrial scene, and Colin Hay's reflections on the impact of the media during the 'Winter of Discontent' have all guided this research and offered useful avenues for analysis. However, as valuable as these pieces of research are, they do not stitch together the broader trends of the period or enable historians to understand the cumulative impact of decades of particular frames or the influence of salient topics on the media agenda.

Kevin Williams has warned that 'integrated media history' should avoid the tendency to reinforce 'totalizing narratives', such as the growth and dominance of right-wing media narratives, without understanding the resistance against such change.¹⁶ This research seeks to establish the often-overlooked inconsistencies in media narratives during the post-war period. As Walton and Davis argued during the late 1970s, the media is 'too complex and media personnel too varied for the notion of a "right wing plot" or deliberate manipulation to hold water as a complete theory of how the media works'.¹⁷ The scarcity of literature on the topic has meant that the frequency of coverage which supported the aims of industrial disputes, as well as the trade union response to negative coverage, are yet to be sufficiently explored. Jay Blumler and Alison Ewbank's 1968 study of public attitudes towards trade unionism found the media coverage of industrial relations was 'not strictly at odds with the thesis which regards the media as forces for social and political integration', but could instead be regarded as forces for the 'selective integration' of trade union interests in

¹⁵ James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers, the Labour Party and British Politics* (Abingdon, 2005).

¹⁶ Kevin Williams, 'Doing Media History', in Martin Conboy and John Steel (eds), *The Routledge Companion to British Media History* (Abingdon, 2015), p. 33.

¹⁷ Paul Walton and Howard Davis, 'Bad News for Trade Unionists', in Peter Beharrell and Greg Philo (eds), *Trade Unions and the Media* (London, 1977), p. 125.

coverage, as 'gatekeepers'.¹⁸ This research explores how the media portrayed the aims and claims of trade unions and, in the process, introduces greater nuance to our broader understanding of the relationship between media and trade unions.

In order to assess the role of press and television in mediating the relationship between trade unions and British politics, this research seeks to answer a number of key questions about content of industrial relations coverage. What relevant issues did the media highlight? How did the communication and salience of these issues change over time? How did opinions and political agendas manifest themselves and show development during the period? Arguably more significantly, *why* did these agendas and priorities change? What kind of influence did industrial correspondents, editors, controllers and proprietors have on these changes? The intention is not that this work will exhaustively answer these questions, largely due to issues of feasibility, but will provide some indication of the key trends of media coverage, as well as provide further avenues for research. Moreover, while these questions emphasise the evolution of trade union coverage, this work also raises and highlights important continuities and underlying assumptions which apply to the period more generally. In order to provide useful answers, this research is underpinned by thorough analysis of the production, content and reception of industrial relations news.

Analysing Media Content

The national daily newspapers analysed have been selected to provide a mix of 'upmarket' (the *Times* and the *Guardian*) 'middle-market' (the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*) and 'lower-market' or 'tabloid' newspapers (primarily the *Daily Mirror*), in recognition of the historically strong correlation between newspaper choice and social class in Britain and the mixed fortunes enjoyed by these three different markets. They represent a spectrum of political attitudes and loyalties. Analysis of the *Daily Herald*, originally the TUC's own newspaper, and the *Sun* have also informed this thesis to varying degrees but, as they did not publish across the entirety of the period, and the latter assumed the place of the former, they are not explored to the same extent. While the *Herald* enjoyed success in the pre-war period, by the 1950s the realities of decline were clear and coverage of trade unionism was relatively predictable, given the paper's allegiance to the TUC. Rather than providing an in-depth analysis of the *Herald's* content, this thesis instead focuses on contextual material from the TUC archives. The *Sun* has been included in analysis of newspaper content due to

¹⁸ Jay Blumler and Alison Ewbank, 'Trade Unionists, the Mass Media and Unofficial Strikes', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 8:1 (1970), p. 53.

its cultural and political significance after 1974 and particularly during the 1978-9 Winter of Discontent.

The digitised availability of these five core newspapers, unlike the *Herald* or the *Sun*, has allowed primary source analysis to be nuanced and extensive in its examination of key trends in coverage. This selection been surveyed according to date for specific case studies; key words, referencing trends in language in industrial relations coverage; and also by article type or position. Front-page stories are particularly influential for public opinion and are prioritised by editors because, on average, front pages enjoy twice the readership of the pages inside a newspaper.¹⁹ In the case of the *Sun*, which is not available in digitised format, the front pages and editorial pages of long periods, as well as choice moments, have also been probed. All of this has combined to ensure that this work is grounded in primary sources which are as representative of media output as possible and to ensure there is a ‘diversity of content’.²⁰

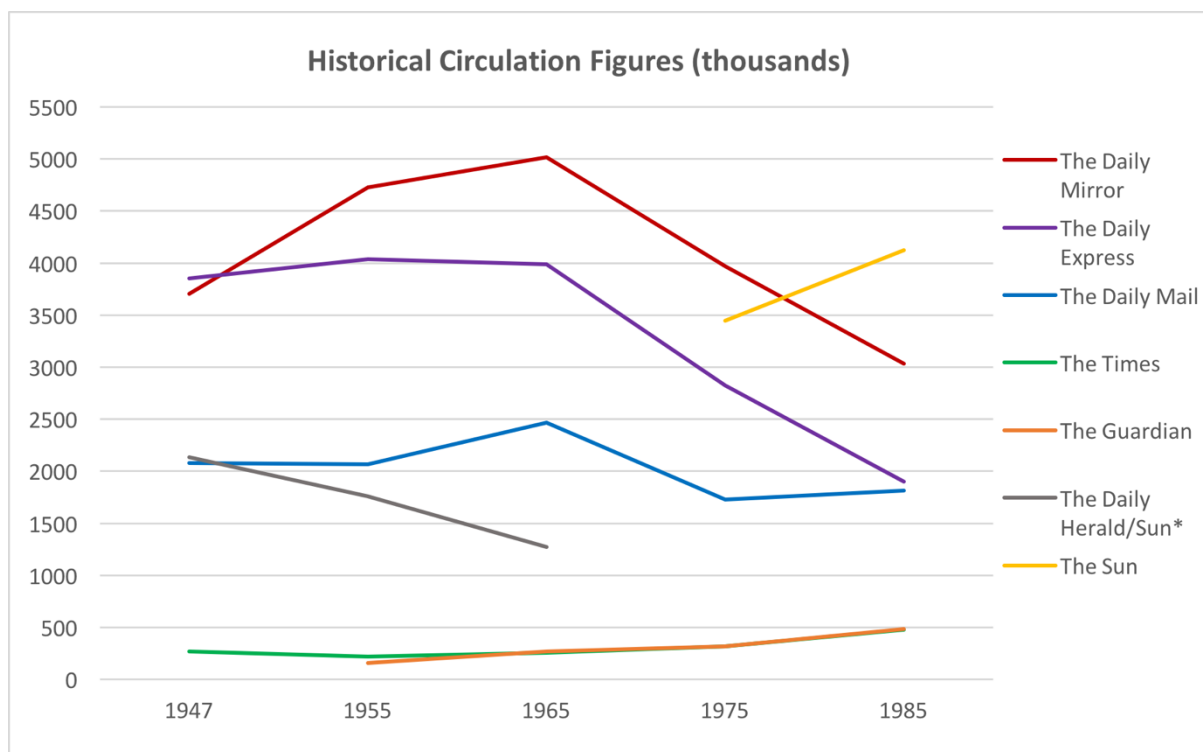


Figure 0.1: National Circulation Figures (1947-1985)

Sources: Jeremy Tunstall, *Newspaper Power: The New National Press in Britain* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 41, 47, 54 and the *Royal Commission on the Press, 1947-49: Report* (Cmd. 7700), p. 12.²¹

¹⁹ Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 52.

²⁰ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life and the British Popular Press, 1918-1978* (Oxford, 2009), p. 7.

²¹ In 1947, the *Manchester Guardian* was considered a provincial newspaper so it was not incorporated into surveys of national circulation figures. By 1965, the *Daily Herald* had been relaunched by the *Mirror* Group as the *Sun* but was very different to Murdoch's 1969 *Sun* so it has been incorporated into the *Herald* figures.

The circulation data, Figure 0.1, reflect a few important issues relevant to this research. Firstly, the sheer scale of circulation for the selected newspapers illustrates their centrality to British popular culture in the period assessed. More significantly, they illustrate the evolution of press fortunes in Britain. While the 'quality' press enjoyed a small upturn in fortunes over the period, the 'popular' newspapers generally experienced a decline in readership, thanks to rises in production costs, exacerbated by industrial unrest, and television competition. The exception to this general trend was the *Sun*. Bought in by Rupert Murdoch in 1969, it first established itself as a Labour-supporting paper and surpassed the *Mirror's* sales in 1978, by which time it was firmly pro-Thatcher. As the final chapter on governance and power explores, the *Sun* and its editor, Larry Lamb, had a decisive impact on how industrial relations were perceived in the latter half of the 1970s. Its appeal to individualism and consumerism, which targeted the 'flat-cappery' of Labour's 'C2' youthful working-class support, provided countless problems for trade unions, the Labour Party and the *Mirror*.²² The *Mail* did enjoy a small upturn towards the end of the period, as it also turned to the tabloid or 'compact' format to improve its fortunes with a similar impact on coverage.

The changes to the media landscape, precipitated by the pressures of mounting costs and falling readership, were not passively experienced by the press. These were trends they were forced to respond to, particularly through commercialisation. While Adrian Bingham has disputed James Curran's claims that advertising revenue played a substantial role in 'maintaining right-wing predominance', particularly during the 1970s, he has suggested that advertising did at least help to promote 'a general ethos of consumerism'.²³ In 1974, the *Mirror* and *Sun* combined were read by twenty five million British consumers, as the potential of greater advertising revenue intensified the competition between newspapers - demonstrated by the *Sun's* increased advertising content following the Murdoch takeover.²⁴

As far as trade unionism was concerned, this consumer trend was almost as problematic as any overtly political authority from newspapers, as union activity was increasingly portrayed as detrimental to such an ethos. The educative role of newspapers, "giving them what they need", and entertainment approaches, "giving them what they want", to journalism 'competed and collided

²² John Pilger, *Hidden Agendas* (London, 2010), p. 413.

²³ Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, p. 23.

²⁴ Dick Rooney, 'Thirty Years of Competition in the British Tabloid Press', in Colin Sparks and John Tulloch (eds), *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates Over Media Standards* (Oxford, 2000), p. 99.

with each other' across the period.²⁵ This tension was not always successfully managed, exemplified by the *Express's* 'confusion between serious propaganda and entertainment glitz', which was an important factor in the *Express's* terminal decline.²⁶ This work seeks to understand the impact of tabloidization and consumerism on the trade union movement, which simultaneously fought for wage increases to enable its members to enjoy Britain's affluence, but also provided obstacles to its continuance through industrial action and cessations in production.

These changes to the press landscape were complex and uneven. James Curran has highlighted how Fleet Street became 'less hierarchical' during the 1960s and early 1970s. This allowed specialist correspondents to flourish and promoted a 'more bipartisan approach to political reporting and commentary', albeit to a more limited extent than some have suggested.²⁷ This trend was significant because it reflected the growing influence of industrial journalists at their respective newspapers, as well as the varied editorial debates which led governments' industrial relations policy to come under scrutiny from their conventional press allies, as well as their opponents. The commercial demise of the *Herald* and *News Chronicle* in the 1950s seemed to suggest to many that 'rigid partisanship was no longer viable', while the popularisation of television led some to believe that 'bruising and partisan' press coverage was a thing of the past.²⁸ Although this belief was mistaken its prevalence at this time suggested the dominance of the right-wing press in the 1970s was far from inevitable and these changes require further exploration.

To date, the Glasgow University Media Group's *Bad News* is the only significant attempt to assess media coverage of industrial relations through content analysis.²⁹ The Glasgow University Media Group (GMG) study involved an entire team of researchers, studying all television news broadcasts of a six month period and, in doing so, illuminated key trends and biases in broadcast journalism. As far as this research is concerned, undertaking a study of similar depth was clearly not feasible, particularly given the difficulties in accessing television sources. Television experienced its greatest boom in the five-year period between 1955 and 1960 as household television access soared from 35 per cent to 75 per cent, while the press and radio broadcasts went into gradual decline from this point.³⁰ From 1955 onwards, by looking at both newspapers and television sources in tandem, this

²⁵ Kevin Williams, *Read All About It!: A History of the British Newspaper* (London, 2010), p. 13.

²⁶ Jeremy Tunstall, *Newspaper Power: The New National Press in Britain* (Oxford, 2005), p. 56.

²⁷ Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, pp. 67-68.

²⁸ Tunstall, *Newspaper Power*, p. 244.

²⁹ Glasgow University Media Group, *Bad News* (first published 1976; Abingdon, 2010).

³⁰ James Obelkevich, 'Consumption', in James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall (eds), *Understanding Post-War British Society* (London, 1994), p. 145.

research begins to explore the relationship between broadcast media and the press, a dialogue that is yet to be adequately understood by those researching industrial relations coverage. The press has often been assumed as the partisan media force, worthy of investigation, isolated from the regulated and supposedly impartial television sphere. Audience research surveys in 1957, 1962 and 1970 all found that 'viewers elevated television news to a greater position of trust than either radio news or newspapers', including those who said that their main source of news information was newspapers.³¹ Blumler and Ewbank's study found that, while newspaper use amongst trade unionists tended to be relatively low, they were 'highly dependent' on television broadcasts for their information and, more significantly, 'impression of public affairs'.³² While perceptions of press bias against unions had an impact on trade unionists' consumption of newspaper debate, this only made them more likely to accept the narratives of television coverage. Although television coverage was less explicit in the expression of opinion than the press, this work begins to uncover the way television accepted many of the press's themes and agendas, indicative of journalists' status as both producers and consumers of news coverage.

Unfortunately, this area of research has been impeded by the availability of such sources, and has relied predominantly on ITN clips, rather than entire programmes. While this conceals information about the salience of industrial relations coverage and its comparison with coverage of other issues on the media agenda, this research seeks to provide starting points for understanding the role of television in industrial relations coverage. This is particularly important for understanding the dialogue between different types of media, as well as the way they influenced each other. In parts, this research has leant heavily on press sources for more detailed understanding of media trends. For the first chronological section, this work has utilised alternative audio and visual sources, in the form of BBC radio scripts and limited clips of Pathé newsreels, indicative of patterns of media consumption in the 1950s.

Where digitised newspaper collections are concerned, content analysis provides an important analytical thread for the thesis. At a basic level, keyword searches illuminate core trends in media coverage. Press-invented industry-specific phrases such as 'wildcat strikes' and 'flying pickets' have 'assumed status in political mythology', holding almost exclusively negative associations for the trade union movement.³³ Even when the news media attempt to adopt a 'detached view' of industrial relations, according to Walton and Davis, they made 'use of assumptions similar to those

³¹ Glasgow Media Group, *Bad News*, p. 5.

³² Blumler and Ewbank, 'Trade Unionists, The Media and Unofficial Strikes', p. 53.

³³ Seaton, 'Trade Unions and the Media', p. 257.

of the dominant commercial, financial and political interests in society', far removed from the interests of the subjects of those events.³⁴ Reflecting on the social panic surrounding mugging, Stuart Hall analysed how the use of a media label mobilises 'a whole referential context, with all its associated meanings and connotations' and can thus develop as a 'symbol' of society's tensions and problems.³⁵ These labels or phrases condense pejorative connotations and discourage critical leadership. Their incidence and use are therefore crucially relevant to this research.

Figure 0.2 and Figure 0.3 provide important indications of the trends in press coverage over the period assessed. As newspapers changed and differed in size and format over the course of the period, particularly after the shortages caused by the Second World War, it was important that the comparisons were reflective of such change. Therefore, these comparisons represent the number of articles or editorials using the word 'strike' or 'strikes' as a percentage of all articles produced by a newspaper in a given year rather than using raw data which may obscure key trends. The *Mirror* and *Express* have been excluded from such quantitative comparisons due to questions about the reliability of optical character recognition technology used for the digitisation of these newspapers.

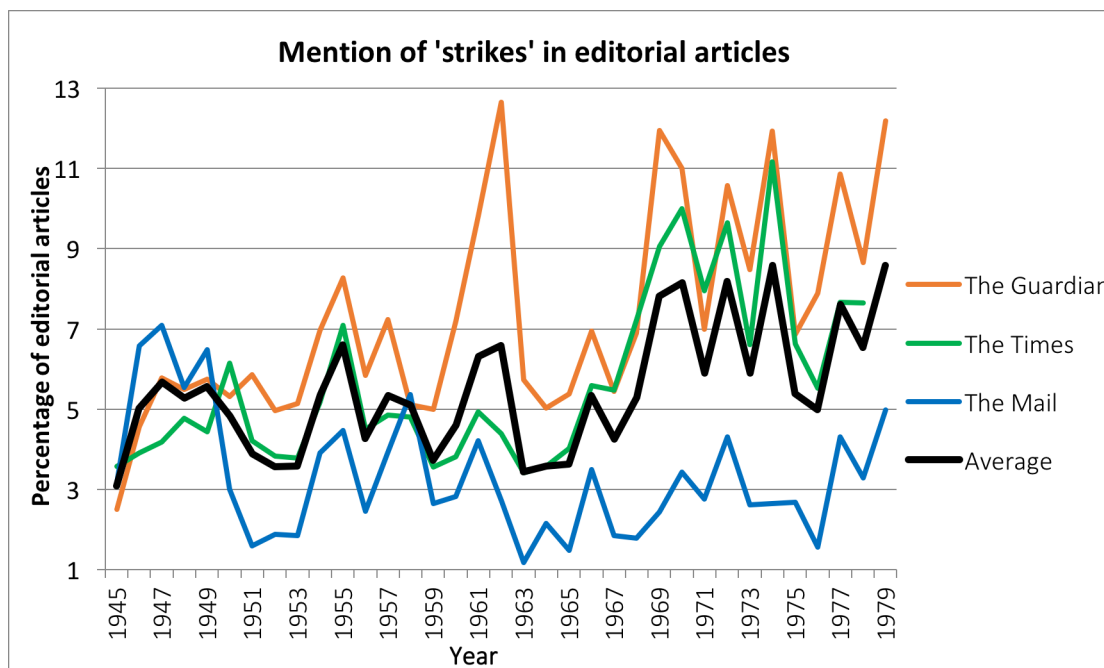


Figure 0.2: Editorial Mentions of Strikes in British Newspapers (1945-1979)

³⁴ Walton and Davis, 'Bad News for Trade Unionists', p. 132.

³⁵ Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, 2nd edition (Basingstoke, 2013), p. 23.

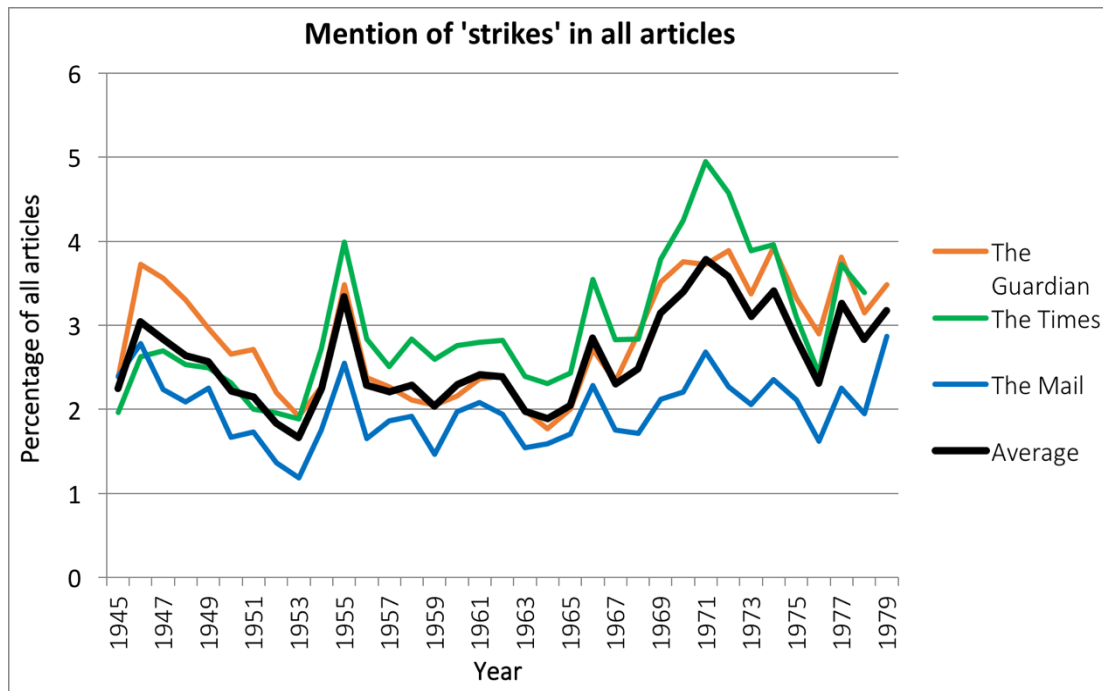


Figure 0.3: Article Mentions of Strikes in British Newspapers (1945-1979)

The episodic nature of this coverage, as represented in the prominent peaks and troughs, forms an important part of the rationale for the use of case studies. Strikes meant that confrontations over power were at specific moments, rather than constant issues on the media agenda. Significantly, all three newspapers show broadly similar patterns of overall coverage, reflecting a shared interest in certain strike events and suggesting even a media dialogue. In both the *Times* and the *Guardian*, in contrast to the *Mail*, editorial focus on strikes was significantly higher than attention across all articles. This suggests that the *Mail's* journalists blurred the line between editorial and news content, allowing front pages and other genres of article to provide platforms for their political opinions. Although editorial columns are a central interest to analysis, the patterns apparent in the *Mail's* coverage underline the importance of assessing a wide variety of articles.

Secondly, considering the historiographical preoccupation with the late 1970s and 1980s as a time of industrial chaos, the upturn in strike interest is not as dramatic or as consistent as might be expected. This is particularly remarkable as six million days were lost to strikes in 1969, dwarfed by the 1979 figures when almost five times the number, almost 30 million days, were lost to disputes.³⁶ There is little to no correlation with this kind of industry data. The late 1940s, mid 1950s and early 1960s all reflected upturns in the editorials dealing with strikes, almost to 1970s levels. The GMG's research has suggested that the frequency and duration of strikes does not necessarily determine

³⁶ Craig Lindsay, 'A Century of Labour Market Change, 1900-2000', *Labour Market Trends* 111 (2003), p. 139.

the level of coverage it receives, or its perceived 'newsworthiness'.³⁷ Why did these peaks happen and did they mark changes in media portrayals or public impressions of trade unionism? On this basis, it appears to be unlikely that the 1950s was the tranquil decade that many have portrayed it to be but this requires further scrutiny.

Production of Industrial Relations Coverage

The greatest challenge of this research, despite the problems associated with television analysis, is to understand the production and the reception of media content, in order to evaluate the popular impact of the media. This includes the rationale and motivations for changes in media behaviour and response, while the reception amongst unions adds a further element to this exploration. In assessing production, this research has employed both archival evidence, from the BBC Written Archives Centre, as well as the extensive collections of memoirs from news editors, proprietors, specialist journalists and some relevant politicians. These journalists include the likes of leading industrial journalists John Cole of the *Guardian* and Geoffrey Goodman of the *Daily Herald* and *Daily Mirror*. On the part of editors, the memoirs of Alistair Hetherington, the *Guardian's* editor from the mid-1950s; Hugh Cudlipp, Chairman of the *Mirror* Group who wrote extensively about his experiences on Fleet Street; and latterly Larry Lamb, the editor of the *Sun* newspaper in the 1970s, are some of the many that have informed this research. Assessing the experience of both journalists and editors has allowed this research to understand and explore the nature of the dialogues and processes behind the production of industrial relations coverage during the period.

Specialist journalism since the 1960s was affected by the polarization in the press landscape prompted by tabloidization. While specialism experienced great investment at 'upmarket' newspapers, their counterparts at 'downmarket' newspapers found themselves increasingly marginalised (apart from politics, sports and lifestyle areas) and specialists' autonomy on stories was 'very far from absolute', despite the increased personalisation of newspaper columns.³⁸ This trend, which took grip in the 1970s, was particularly problematic for labour specialists as industrial relations became more dominant on the media agenda. Therefore, discerning the control and autonomy of specific journalists is difficult and this is clear from the respective journalists' memoirs. The fact that both Alistair Hetherington and John Cole recall Cole having a determining influence on the editorial line of the *Guardian* on industrial relations issues demonstrates the power of specialists

³⁷ Glasgow Media Group, *Bad News*, p. 18.

³⁸ Tunstall, *Newspaper Power*, p. 159.

in the quality press, and thus makes Cole's account of such issues particularly interesting.³⁹ In contrast, for the likes of the *Mirror*, it has been necessary to balance Geoffrey Goodman's recollections against the likes of Hugh Cudlipp and, latterly, Mike Molloy, as they appear to have had greater influence on the line pursued by the paper on industrial relations, despite Goodman's short-lived personalised column. Goodman believed his role and status was gradually 'eroded at the margins', until 1979 when the importance of industrial correspondents 'sharply diminished' – a process which owed as much to the influence of 'spin doctors' as to the 'preferences of the editorial command'.⁴⁰

The TUC and BBC's archives offer the opportunity to see the thought processes and tensions behind both television production and union responses to such issues. At times, the TUC and BBC were in direct conversation, as the labour movement grew concerned with its developing image, and sought direction on how to improve its public relations, as well as ways the BBC might aid them in this pursuit. During some periods, however, there is a noteworthy lack of such dialogue, as well as an absence of broader discussion inside the trade union movement about media strategy. This research reflects on the impact of the TUC's mentality towards the media, in an attempt to establish unions as more than simply passive targets of media coverage. Writing in the late 1970s, Toni Griffiths, a former union press officer, argued that cynicism amongst trade unionists towards the media came from 'a feeling that what is read in the newspapers or seen on the television is often not like real life'.⁴¹ The archival evidence reveals the significant pressures placed by trade union members on the ailing *Herald* in the 1950s, as well as the TUC's demands of the BBC, for the news media to do more to represent trade union activity as more than simple strikes, despite the public demands for 'newsworthy' stories. This research draws upon meeting and conference minutes at both the BBC and TUC, on significant policy documents and their reception inside each organisation, as well as revealing internal and external trails of correspondence. The ebbs and flows of such dialogue, as well as the increasing antagonism between these organisations, is important to the research's pursuit for a greater understanding of the picture 'behind the scenes'.

³⁹ John Cole (1927-2013) was a journalist and broadcaster who became influential in the industrial relations field from the 1950s, while writing for the *Guardian*. He became a driving force at the paper during the 1960s as news editor, as he was given license to take strong editorial lines by his editor Alastair Hetherington.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Goodman, 'The Role of Industrial Correspondents' in John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Nina Fishman (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The Post-war Compromise, 1945-64* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 26. Geoffrey Goodman (1922-2013) was a journalist and writer who became one of the leading industrial journalists of the post-war period. He had spells at the *News Chronicle* and the *Daily Herald*, before taking a senior post at the *Daily Mirror* in 1969, when Murdoch took over at the *Sun*.

⁴¹ Toni Griffiths, 'The Production of Trade Union News', in Peter Beharrell and Greg Philo (eds), *Trade Unions and the Media* (London, 1977), p. 60.

Aside from the TUC's reaction to media coverage, this work assesses the attitudes, responses and anxieties of the general public to industrial relations stories. Particularly, this research draws upon specialist public opinion studies, such as those conducted or sponsored by particular newspapers and those conducted by social scientists such as Mark Abrams, as well as the extensive volumes of Gallup polls available at this time.⁴² The polling studies endorsed or sponsored by newspapers, and particularly the analysis that often accompanies their publication, have been treated with caution, as they are 'designed with the end-product in mind – a newsworthy story nearly always in line with editorial policy'.⁴³ These kinds of polls are particularly vulnerable to the 'bandwagon effect', which describes the respondents' impulse to align with a winning party or favoured cause.⁴⁴ This research seeks to understand how the construction of polling questions, as well as the publication of their results, might have shaped opinion, rather than purely reflecting public attitudes.

Where organised polling became more sophisticated and the demand for regular polling intensified in the latter part of the period, this research has been able to analyse trends in attitudes over a longer period and link such changes to newspaper coverage. Where this has not been possible, largely through irregular polling or absence altogether, this research has sought to understand public opinion at pivotal moments in industrial relations coverage. It was not uncommon for Gallup pollsters to ask about public attitudes to the government's handling of a particular industrial dispute or where their sympathies lay between strikers and employers. Gallup polls were largely responsive to the media agenda and thus the questions themselves alert us to the prevalence of certain attitudes. For example, as observed in Figure 0.4, it has not been possible to chart public perceptions of union power in any quantitative way because respondents were only asked if they felt unions were 'too powerful' from 1973 onwards.

⁴² Dr. Mark Abrams (1906-1994) was an influential social scientist who worked extensively on techniques for surveying public opinion. From 1946, he directed Research Services Ltd (RSL) which was a founding company in Ipsos MORI. From the early 1960s, he became an important influence within the Labour Party.

⁴³ Martin Roiser and Tim Little, 'Public opinion, trade unions and industrial relations', *Journal of Occupational Psychology* 59 (1986), p. 260.

⁴⁴ Catherine Marsh, 'Back on the Bandwagon: The Effect of Opinion Polls on Public Opinion', *British Journal of Political Science* 15 (1985).

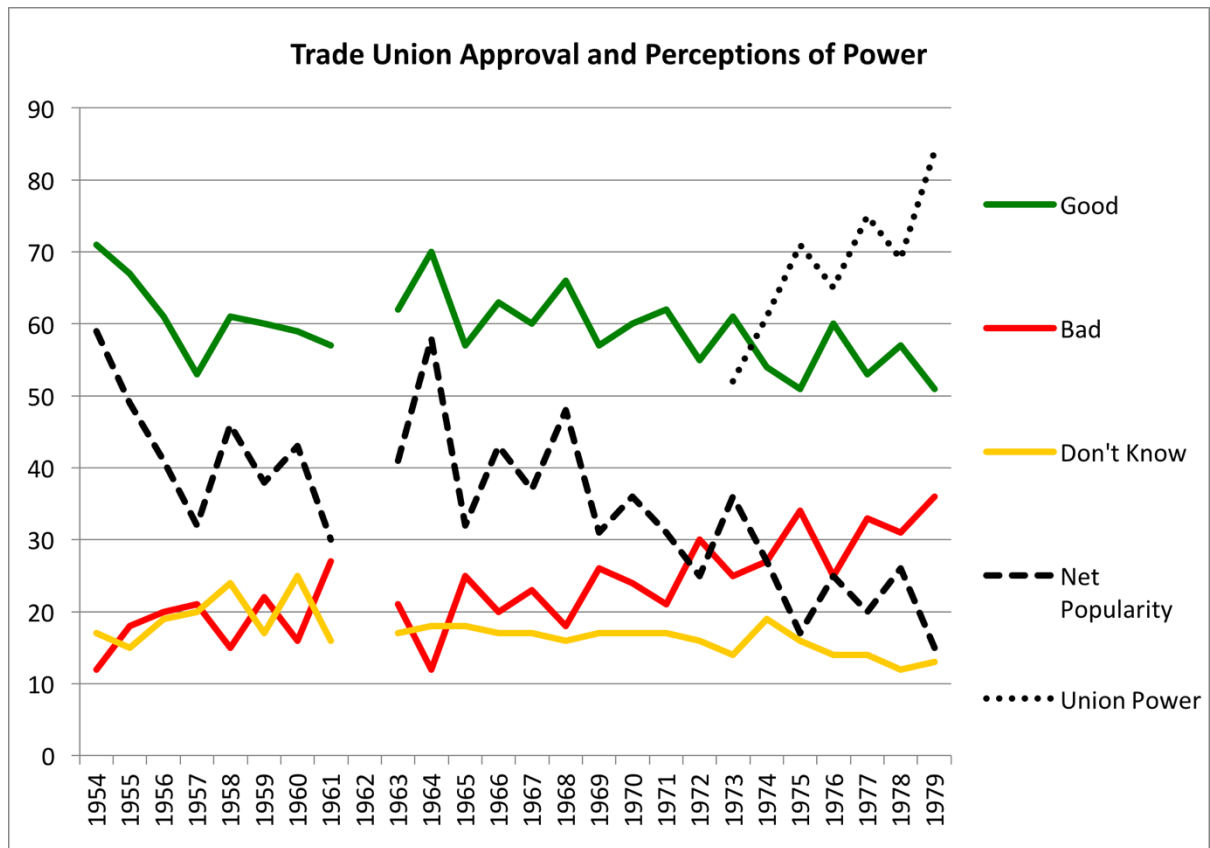


Figure 0.4: Gallup Poll Approval Ratings (1954-1979)

Source: David Marsh, 'Public Opinion, Trade Unions and Mrs Thatcher', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 28 (1990), pp. 58-59. Based on *Gallup* poll analysis where 'popularity' represents the deduction of the number of those who regard unions as a 'bad thing' from those who regard them as a 'good thing'.

Figure 0.4 provides a key insight into British attitudes that underpins this research. It is noteworthy for a few key reasons. Firstly, it confirms the expected slump in trade union perceptions over the period but suggests this did not evolve in an entirely uniform way, rather like the overview of media coverage. By 1964, popularity ratings had recovered to almost match 1954 levels, with just a one per cent change, which challenges the perception of terminal or inevitable decline in the popularity of trade unions. Secondly, despite the gradual fall in union popularity after 1964, there were fluctuations in approval which reflected the irregularity and volatility in attitudes to unions and alludes to the influence of media coverage. This inconsistency is an aspect which this research seeks to scrutinise further. Even at the peak of union tensions prior to Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979, it is notable that still more members of the public regarded unions as a 'good thing', as opposed to a 'bad thing', albeit by only 15 per cent. Moreover, approval numbers show relatively little change over the entirety of the period, with the decline in net popularity attributed predominantly to the decline in neutral responses, as the trade union issue became increasingly divisive. These patterns further query common understandings of the trade unions and suggests that the unions' problems stemmed from something more complex than merely public image. This

complexity will be further illuminated by this research's analysis of the language and themes of media coverage.

While such Gallup polls are useful in exploring public attitudes, it is important that this study is clear about what constitutes the public and elucidates the way the 'public' was discussed by newspapers across the period. In contemporary media studies, Stephen Coleman and Karen Ross have cited British trade unionists as an example of 'counterpublics', those social groups that have a 'dialectical relationship with the "general public"'.⁴⁵ The media have tended to respond to this separation by characterising such groups as blameworthy for particular social conditions, representing contentious events from the perspective of the social elite. This separation happened to such an extent that Martin Roiser and Tim Little criticised the tendency of pollsters during the 1980s to isolate trade unionists from 'the public' in opinion polling, through exclusive categorisation and questionnaires that were constructed in a 'partisan manner'.⁴⁶ Considering that the trade union movement, led by the TUC, was viewed as a partner in the post-war settlement and thus part of the political establishment, the historical process of separation of trade unionism from concepts of 'the public' is complex. This is a development which this research seeks to further illuminate.

Agenda Setting

The chosen methodological approach for this research is informed by a conceptual framework underpinned by the work of media theorists, in particular from the work stemming from 'agenda-setting theory' and the analysis of frame building processes. In their pioneering research of the 1968 US election, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw argued that editors and staff played an important part in 'shaping political reality', by determining what constituted important public issues or topics for debate, primarily as a result of a news story's salience.⁴⁷ They argued that, regardless of the news media's specific, sometimes extreme, biases, there were 'professional norms regarding major news stories from day to day', indicative of a shared agenda and dialogue about particular issues.⁴⁸ Before assessing the nature of language around given subjects, the fact those subjects were contestable is informative in itself. In his own research on the theme of agenda-setting, McCombs has highlighted the close relationship between agenda-setting and polling results. McCombs argues opinion polls

⁴⁵ Stephen Coleman and Karen Ross, *The Media and the Public: "Them" and "Us" in Media Discourse*, (Chichester, 2010), p. 74.

⁴⁶ Roiser and Little, 'Public opinion, trade unions and industrial relations', p. 260.

⁴⁷ Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media', *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (1972), p. 176.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

form primary 'measures' of agenda-setting, particularly in the case of open-ended questions.⁴⁹ This research uses both content analysis of newspapers and the results of such opinion polls in an attempt to make sense of the media's agenda-setting influence on public perceptions of trade unions, before scrutinising the more conventionally 'biased' linguistic content of media coverage. Although trade unionism in its own terms did not always feature prominently on the media agenda, other important topics, such as industrial productivity and economic inflation, played an important part in maintaining interest and shaping understanding of industrial relations.

In order to simplify and clarify analysis of such sources, the research is performed through the interrogation of particular media 'frames'. According to Robert Entman, 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' and in doing so, 'simultaneously direct attention away from other aspects'.⁵⁰ Problems with industrial productivity, competitiveness and industrial unrest could all have been explained by a multitude of factors, such as company mismanagement; government policy failure; the pressures of industrial modernization; foreign competition; and trade union militancy, amongst many others. This research seeks to understand the balance of these frames of explanation and pays close attention to the position of labour in explaining Britain's troubles.

As framing theorists have suggested, the *formation* of such frames, or 'frame building' is equally important. Dietram Scheufele highlighted three core aspects to frame building: journalistic-centred influences; 'organizational routines', such as the type or political orientation of the medium; and external sources of influence, such as politicians or interest groups.⁵¹ As far as journalistic-centred influences are concerned, in 1978 sociologist Mark Fishman highlighted the significance of the role of journalists as audiences themselves. A 'theme' or frame can 'spread throughout a community of news organizations', constructing large-scale 'media waves'.⁵² Organisations often decided what to print or broadcast and how to communicate it based on a wider media dialogue. More specifically to this research, journalists were also members of unions, while editors and proprietors often had to deal with the impact of industrial unrest amongst journalists and printers. This was a particularly

⁴⁹ McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Robert Entman, 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication* 43, (1993), pp. 52, 54.

⁵¹ Dietram Scheufele, 'Framing as a Theory of Media Effects', *Journal of Communication* 49 (1999), p. 115.

⁵² Mark Fishman, 'Crime Waves as Ideology', *Social Problems* 24 (June 1978), pp. 531-543.

divisive issue during the late 1970s. These 'frame-building' influences have been of particular interest in the exploration of the 'production' elements of the primary research, particularly the TUC and BBC archival evidence.

Periodisation and Chronology

Bingham and Conboy have reflected on the importance of the long view in media history, in order to appreciate the 'cumulative influence of the popular press', such as the subtle processes of framing, agenda-setting and marginalisation of certain groups or opinions.⁵³ The ambitious scope of this project, in its analysis of over thirty years of media history, allows the research to chart broad patterns of coverage, enhanced through the use of content analysis. Although a number of scholars have highlighted the pitfalls of 'narrative-driven decadology', the choice to broadly structure this work in ten year cycles - 1945-59, 1960-69 and 1970-79 - has been defined by critical events, across both media and industrial relations.⁵⁴ If the 1960s Labour Government had chosen to seriously address trade union policy earlier in its tenure, or the 'Winter of Discontent' label had been used as persuasively during the 1974 miners' strike as it was during the public sector strikes of 1978-79, the chronological structure would have been different. As Lawrence Black has highlighted, rather than 'debunking' the decadology of this period, particularly the 1970s, this research attempts to account for this tendency.⁵⁵

The late 1940s and 1950s forms the first of the chronological sections. This was a period that has been nostalgically typified as a time of reinvention and renewal, in which unions enjoyed the benefits of political consensus and conciliation. Nina Fishman characterises the latter half of the decade as the first time that the political establishment seriously considered union conduct and regulation.⁵⁶ According to Robert Taylor, it was during the mid-1950s that trade unions went from being perceived as 'essential and responsible partners in the creation of a more competitive economy' to 'obstacles to growth' that were 'incapable of modernizing themselves'.⁵⁷ The prosperity of this period and Labour's exile from government prompted serious questions about the party's relationship with the working classes and how it could adapt to concepts of affluence and

⁵³ Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century* (Oxford, 2015), p. 21.

⁵⁴ Joe Moran, "'Stand Up and Be Counted": Hughie Green, the 1970s and Popular Memory', *History Workshop Journal* 70, (2010), p. 195.

⁵⁵ Lawrence Black, 'An Enlightening Decade? New Histories of 1970s' Britain', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82, (2012), p. 175.

⁵⁶ Nina Fishman, "'Spearhead of the Movement"?: The 1958 London Busworkers' Strike, the TUC and Frank Cousins', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The Post-war Compromise, 1945-64* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 287.

⁵⁷ Robert Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics* (Oxford, 1993), p. 331.

consumerism. Colin Crouch, whose research was orientated around British trade unions' relationship with high politics, suggests that the post-war compromise came to an end in 1959.⁵⁸ This age of industrial relations, and public perceptions of it, is much more complex than the broader historiography has understood. Moreover, outside industrial relations, this period also accounts for political television's inauguration and adjustment, until 1959 provided a 'watershed' for the medium, as the pace of adaptation quickened.⁵⁹

The second chronological section charts industrial relations coverage of the 1960s, paying particular attention to the experiences of the Wilson government, which prompted a 'new era of state interventionism'.⁶⁰ Labour wrestled with the demands of a union movement eager to share in the economic benefits of the industrial revolution promised by Labour's 'white heat' rhetoric. Geoffrey Goodman, an influential journalistic figure for this research, has described 1969's 'In Place of Strife' proposals for trade union reform as the 'final lightning conductor' for a shift in the Labour government's policy and a clear indication of changing attitudes.⁶¹ In the media sphere, 1969 was the year that Rupert Murdoch took over the *Sun*, which sparked the rise of the revamped tabloid newspaper as it slowly abandoned its support of the Labour party to emerge as a principal supporter of Thatcherism.

1979 provides a clear conclusion for this research, as 'the Winter of Discontent' – a series of high profile and controversial public sector strikes – provided arguably 'the key moment in the pre-history of Thatcherism', thanks in large part to the media's manufactured crisis.⁶² This was a time when media organisations experienced the impact of industrial unrest in direct terms, after the BBC agreed to an expensive pay deal in the winter, while the *Times* was forced to close for a year due to a printing dispute. Other newspapers wrestled with the print unions, often at great expense, and strikes in other industries had an impact on newspapers' advertising revenue. John Cole, by the early 1970s, felt 'the Zeitgeist was turning against the unions' and 1979 provided a climax to such tensions.⁶³ These three periods of industrial relations coverage provide the foundation for thematic analysis of Britain's governance and its economic prosperity.

⁵⁸ Colin Crouch, *The Politics of Industrial Relations* (London, 1979).

⁵⁹ Colin Seymour-Ure, 'Political Television: Four Stages of Growth', *Contemporary Record* 4 (1990), p. 21.

⁶⁰ Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy 'The Post-War Compromise: Mapping Industrial Politics, 1945-64', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The Post-War Compromise, 1945-64* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 71.

⁶¹ Goodman, 'The Role of Industrial Correspondents', pp. 33, 35.

⁶² Hay, 'Narrating the Crisis', p. 253.

⁶³ John Cole, *As It Seemed to Me: Political Memoirs* (London, 1996), p. 100.

Thesis Outline

Along with this clear chronological structure, this thesis is underpinned by two key themes of research. The first of the themes is based on the intersection of trade unionism with British politics, while the second explores the perceived and portrayed impact of trade unionism on the British economy and its future prosperity. Such a combination of chronological and thematic approaches ensures that the research is both reflective of key changes but is also responsive to the clear continuities of the period and guards against the pitfalls associated with overtly narrative history which might lack analysis or evaluation.

Political power and issues of governance provide the first thematic strand to analysis. While both Lewis Minkin and Peter Dorey have sought to challenge such assumptions, the relationship between organised labour and party politics has been generally perceived as an antagonistic one, much like the relationship with the media. Labour's 'disputatious and controversial relationship' with the trade unions has become one of 'the most contentious in British political life' and some commentators have questioned why the formal ties between the two still exist.⁶⁴ The less formal association between the Conservative Party and trade unionism has 'often been a fraught one, characterised by mutual suspicion and sporadic open hostility', largely due to the difference in values between the two, and the majority of relevant historiography and social science literature has ignored the conciliatory beginnings to this relationship.⁶⁵ This research explores how these perceptions of increasing antagonism were managed and mediated by the media, and the subsequent impact this had on the position of trade unions, as newspapers sought to bolster the popular position of their political allies. As Britain was gradually perceived to be ungovernable, particularly in the 1970s, public anxiety grew about the power of trade unionism and its supposed threat against parliamentary democracy. By the mid 1970s, as initial polling data has illustrated, a significant proportion of the public regarded trade unions to be 'too powerful'. This research examines how public understanding of trade union power change and how media coverage contributed to this impression.

In order to produce a rounded and nuanced study, which is aware of the pitfalls of exploring purely sensationalised headline coverage, these two thematic threads are approached in very different ways. Although both have the analysis of media content at their heart, the first is intended to probe key moments of political tension between government and unions. As such, the chapters about

⁶⁴ Lewis Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labour Party* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 646.

⁶⁵ Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism and Trade Unionism, 1945-1964* (Abingdon, 2009), pp. 1-2.

politics are based on selected case studies, primarily industrial disputes. Geoffrey Goodman recalled that 'for a long time – far too long in my opinion – we remained, largely, strike and strife reporters'.⁶⁶ While, as many scholars have rightly attested, trade union activity in the post-war period was about more than strife, it is somewhat inevitable, given the focus of industrial specialists in the press, this research is drawn to issues of strife and industrial tension. This research attempts to contextualise this coverage with broader social trends and political developments. In order to do this, these cases of industrial strife are placed alongside moments of controversy in policy and the wider impact of strikes on politics, as seen in 1974's general election. Lastly, these chapters reflect on the influence of key personalities involved in the intersection of trade unionism and politics, such as Labour's Barbara Castle and union chief Frank Cousins. These chapters cover a range of different industries, from public transport to health services, selected on the basis of their political interest and media salience.

Media narratives of Britain's economic future are the focus of analysis for the research's second thematic strand. The management of the economy, a new feature of the post-war period, and the framing for its evolving problems had an important impact on the position of trade unions. State interventionism in the economy, demonstrated most clearly through nationalisation of key industries, drastically altered the connection between the state and British citizens. This interventionism applied not just to the management of vital aggregates of economic prosperity but also the 'economic understanding and behaviour of the populace', including the management of expectations around wages.⁶⁷ As the economy deteriorated and public anxiety grew, the government's interventionist attitude placed it under severe public pressure. Subsequently, the attempts to curb wages, to improve productivity and, in some cases, bail out struggling industries, often put significant pressure on the position and expectations of trade unions. This research explores the tensions between the demands on the state and the expectations of trade unionism.

The chapters which assess the trade union relationship with the economy are based primarily on two industries central to debate; the mining industry and the motor industry. Both of these sectors experienced the impact of government interventionism, of serious industrial discontent, and the intense scrutiny of the British media. The struggle of these industries became symbolic of Britain's changing place in the world and its increasing social and political disorder. Analysis of these industries tends less towards particular moments of controversy but explores the nature of the

⁶⁶ Goodman, 'The Role of Industrial Correspondents', p. 28.

⁶⁷ Jim Tomlinson, 'Re-inventing the "moral economy" in post-war Britain', *Historical Research* 84 (2011), p. 356.

industrial and economic agendas of the media and the impact these had on both the industries themselves and those working within them. The decline of Britain's mass manufacturing in the car industry was 'the key symbol of Britain's perceived industrial weakness in the post-war years', with an indisputable pattern of deterioration, and a large share of the culpability for this has traditionally been attributed to industrial strife.⁶⁸ While it is not the purpose of this research to interrogate the validity of this perception of blame, as there are already valuable studies in this field, this work examines how the media helped to create and sustain such a perception through the use of moralised frames and narratives. While Tim Claydon's work on the car industry is a valuable contribution to understandings of this sector, this research seeks to contextualise this coverage and broaden its scope, so as to tie it into broader themes of industrial relations coverage.

On the other hand, the National Union of Miners, the kind of unified trade union which the car industry could not boast, experienced industrial tension stirred by the emerging antagonism between pit and union politics. This process was exacerbated by public ownership, an issue which 'exploded' in response to the frustrations and anxieties caused by the industry's managed decline and the relationship with the 1964 Labour Government.⁶⁹ An industry once central to Britain's post-war economic recovery, and bound in narratives of tradition and nostalgia, its decline was addressed in different terms but often with a similar emphasis on the responsibility of the workforce. This research addresses how the industrial relations coverage of these two industries was influenced by the key trends in economic discourse, particularly regarding employment, productivity and inflation, and their attempts to bolster or undermine the economic policies of incumbent governments.

This research scrutinises how the supposed separation between 'political' and 'industrial' action by unions broke down over the period. Given the 1974 miners' strike had significant repercussions for the Heath government of the 1970s, and economic decline became increasingly central to the political agenda, this overlap in themes reflects the intense scrutiny on industrial relations by the 1970s. The Winter of Discontent was so decisive in shaping the political landscape due to the centrality of such issues to political and economic debate. Secondly, as this research is responsive to complexity and nuance, it explores changes beyond these narrow boundaries. The GMG's research suggested that the most important 'filter' through which news is chosen was 'the cultural air we breathe' or the 'ideological atmosphere of our society'.⁷⁰ This alludes to a certain deep-seated level

⁶⁸ Jim Tomlinson, 'The Government and the Car Industry, 1945-70', *The Journal of Transport History* 20:1 (1999), p. 17.

⁶⁹ Andrew Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics, Volume 1: 1944-1968* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 11.

⁷⁰ Glasgow Media Group, *Bad News*, p. x.

of popular opinion which was fundamental to the way the media communicated industrial relations coverage, as well as the way it was perceived and understood. Although this analysis is divided along political and economic boundaries, there is a sustained effort to ensure that the coverage is contextualised by important social and attitudinal changes.

Jean Seaton has highlighted the significance of British exceptionalism for understanding the relationship between media and public. Seaton argued that the Second World War, ‘the last national story that had a legitimate and satisfactory “us and them” in it’, progressively lost influence over ideas of Britishness, despite the powerful myths surrounding it.⁷¹ The period under scrutiny saw Britain’s position in the world change significantly, through a loss of empire and trade, and ideas of Britishness came under challenge from the Troubles in Northern Ireland and campaigns for independence in Wales and Scotland. This research seeks to understand the impact of these changes in self-perception on understandings of British industry and trade unionism. In the late 1950s, a combination of ‘general angst’ about the Suez Crisis and the decline of Empire, along with evidence of economic boom elsewhere in Europe, ‘combined to create a “What’s Wrong with Britain” furore that led to a culture of declinism that has persisted ever since’.⁷² This research examines how the media’s preoccupation with the nation’s economic problems, rooted in ideas British exceptionalism, exerted particular pressure on the image of trade unions and labour force.

The relationship between perceptions of class and media coverage of trade unionism is of particular interest for this research. Affluence more widely, beyond economic policy, had important repercussions for both the relationship between Labour and the TUC and for support for trade unions more generally, as frustration grew with the supposed ‘grab culture’ of persistent wage claims. While the latter half of the period is associated with economic decline, the vast majority of citizens experienced a significant upturn in living standards between 1945 and 1979, as conceptualisations of class evolved and adapted. In her exploration of twentieth century working-class history, Selina Todd suggested that the emerging class tensions of the late 1960s and 1970s existed between the economically powerful ‘capitalist’ minority and the supposedly powerless majority.⁷³ This perspective, while popular, does not align with the fact that the major trade unions frequently and often successfully challenged the establishment, as demonstrated by the experiences of Edward Heath’s government and the failures of Labour’s *In Place of Strife* policy reforms, and

⁷¹ Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, p. 298.

⁷² Jim Tomlinson, ‘Thrice Denied: “Declinism”, as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century’, *Twentieth Century British History* 20 (2009), p. 235.

⁷³ Selina Todd, *The People* (London, 2014), p. 314.

perceptions of excessive union power symbolised through the Winter of Discontent. Perhaps such a perception of minority capitalist power is partly accounted for by the view that, despite membership which peaked at around fourteen million, trade unionists were increasingly understood to be isolated from conceptualisations of the 'public', 'majority' or 'nation'.

This research explores the inconsistencies of perceived union power and social marginalisation and the media's hand in managing such perceptions. As James Curran has suggested, analysing class in the post-war media is an 'ambitious project' as the current scholarship lacks a coherent narrative that 'describes the distributional battles between social classes in terms of power, status and material rewards, and described the evolving role of the media in relation to these'.⁷⁴

Chapter Outline

The six chapters that follow alternate between the two central themes of research. The first chapter addresses issues of power and governance, based on coverage of the late 1940s and 1950s. This chapter explores the media's framing of the dynamics of power both within the labour movement and the evolution of the relationship between unions and government at a time of supposed political consensus. In doing so, it will utilise the cases of the 1955 dock strike, an inter-union dispute, and the 1958 London bus strike, led by Frank Cousins, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union.⁷⁵ These two case studies, as well as attitudes towards Cousins's leadership, provided important indications of public anxiety about the motivations of unions, as the media used politicised analysis to delegitimise claims. The second chapter is based on the same period but looks closely at the impact of Britain's evolving economic status on perceptions of trade unionism. As with all of the chapters focused on the economy, it analyses broad trends in both the mining industry and motor industry, where the cases of redundancy at the British Motor Company (BMC) and the Standard Motor Company, and the subsequent disputes, are of particular interest. This chapter will scrutinise the causal links drawn by the media between nationalisation and strife, and the implications of such a narrative.

The third and fourth chapters will assess the relationship between trade unionism and, firstly, British politics, and secondly, the economy, in the 1960s. Focussed primarily on the experiences of the

⁷⁴ James Curran, 'Narratives of Media History Revisited', in Michael Bailey (ed.), *Narrating Media History* (Abingdon, 2009), p. 19.

⁷⁵ Frank Cousins (1904-1986) was a trade unionist and labour politician. He is best known as the Transport and General Workers' Union General Secretary, a post he held between 1956 and 1969. Cousins later became a Labour MP and Harold Wilson's first Minister of Technology, before resigning due to differences over economic policy.

Labour Party in reconciling its close relationship with the labour movement with the increasing pressure for reform of trade union power, the third chapter will address how press and television sought to mediate these issues. Beyond Labour's controversial attempts to curb union power through the *In Place of Strife* proposals in 1969, the 1966 Seamen's strike prompted debate about the scale of union power, and will form another important case study. The fourth chapter will analyse the discussions provoked by recurring unofficial strikes in Britain's struggling car industry, the position of supposed militant shop stewards, and the impact of the government's moralised 'productivity' rhetoric on the reputation of unions and the dominant explanations for Britain's supposed decline. It will also provide evidence of how concepts of consensus on economic policy began to fracture in media debate, and the impact of this division on attitudes towards trade union claims.

The final two chapters, focus on the 1970s and the climax of tensions between the government and the trade unions, again with the same thematic division between them. The first reflects on the differences in attitudes and portrayals demonstrated by the media of the 1974 miners' strike, in the build up to February's general election, and 1978-79's Winter of Discontent. It will reflect on the influence of the *Sun* and tabloidisation in the contrasts in response, as well as increased anxiety about the Labour Party's ability to wrestle with the power of trade unionism. The final chapter seeks to establish the impact of increased government interventionism, exemplified by cases of nationalisation at British Leyland and interference in wage settlements at Ford, on media attitudes towards the labour force. It analyses the links made between Britain's spiralling inflation and the myths of 'the British disease' in industry, which implicated the labour force as a primary factor in Britain's decline. Finally, it assesses the impact of declinist rhetoric on concepts of social cohesion and class, focussing on the media's portrayal of trade union's contribution to social tension. Over the course of the thesis, the demarcation between the two central themes blurs and fades, as issues of industrial relations and economic development became gradually more central to the political agenda.

Ultimately, this research probes the dominant assumptions about the attitude of the mainstream news media towards trade unions, in order to uncover significant nuances and complexities in industrial relations coverage between the Second World War and the election of Margaret Thatcher. Despite the lack of comprehensive analysis of the media's role in the relationship between high politics and trade unions, relevant issues have been mythologised and bound in political symbolism. Rather than assuming the existence of crude neoliberal conspiracies against left-wing unions, this

work examines the cumulative impact of changes to society, the evolution of cultural attitudes, and shifts in journalistic values on the political position and the public perceptions of trade unions. The uses and changes to the framing, the shaping of political agendas and the use of moralised and politicised language were significant in media portrayals of the trade unions. Coverage of industrial action was not exclusively negative but sought to legitimise and delegitimise union activity in complex ways, depending on political allegiances, commercial pressures and issues of public concern. Unions were not passengers in these processes and sought to defend their interests, albeit with limited resources and widespread cynicism about their value. It was not until the mid-1970s that the cumulative effect of decades of coverage was apparent on the reputation of the unions. Years of media preoccupation with wage-stimulated inflation and industrial decline; frustration with the nature of state interventionism in industry; and moralised and politicised judgement on union activity was exploited for dramatic political effect. The *Sun* played an important part as a catalyst for such changes, exploiting its cultural capital and its appeal to those traditionally sympathetic to labour interests.

Chapter One – Political trade unionism and Cold War binaries *Power and Governance, 1945-59*

In 1952, in his study *The British Worker*, Ferdynand Zweig argued that the unions were ‘the bulwark of industrial peace and lawfulness’.¹ Yet, by 1958, British newspapers were providing front-page coverage of ‘the most critical strike threat for 30 years’.² While this change alludes to the period’s significance for the relationship between government and unions, the extent of this development has often been underestimated. In rejection of common historiographical perceptions of the decade as a ‘a tranquil, moderate interlude’ between the turbulent 1940s and 1960s, this piece illustrates how industrial action in the 1950s saw the emergence of many of the key media narratives which have typified industrial relations coverage in the post-war period.³ In this short six-year period increasing tensions between unions and government prompted the media to frame industrial action with new political significance, as concerns about labour militancy grew. Although the 1950s has been regarded as a period of media restraint, characterised by ‘a decline in press partisanship’, media commentary on industrial relations illustrates the maintenance and evolution of long-term trends in media language and framing.⁴ The ideas of precedent and tradition are important threads to the research, in order to establish the reasons for the influence of industrial coverage later in the period.

Primarily, this chapter analyses and illuminates a number of critical trends in media coverage of industrial relations during the 1950s. During a period known for its emerging affluence, an influential factor in portrayals of industrial tranquillity, this section explores the problem trade unions had in maintaining their ‘relevance’ in a society which became increasingly familiar with rising living standards and full employment. Tony Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism* wrestled with the challenges the Labour party experienced in ‘trying to choose an appropriate response to the age of affluence’ and such political problems filtered down to the wider labour movement, or at the very least perceptions of it.⁵ As improved living standards placed greater emphasis on individual consumers, this chapter assesses how understandings of collectivism and labour solidarity were shaped and redefined, including ideas of leadership and responsibility. This discussion helped to

¹ Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker* (1952), p. 181.

² *Daily Mail*, 11 April 1958, p. 1.

³ Fishman, “‘Spearhead of the Movement’?”, p. 287.

⁴ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 35.

⁵ Catherine Ellis, ‘Total Abstinence and a Good Filing-System? Anthony Crosland and the Affluent Society’, in Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton (eds), *An Affluent Society? Britain’s Post-war ‘Golden Age’ Revisited* (Aldershot, 2004), p. 69.

foster the atmosphere and conditions for the high-profile political debates of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Secondly, this chapter scrutinises the divisive framing constructed by the media in depicting the unions' battle for public support. In particular, it reflects on powerful political binaries constructed in relation to industrial militancy, as well as the boundaries between 'industrial' and 'political' strikes and the role of this demarcation in defining the limits of media support. Finally, it considers the depiction of the British public in media reports, both with regards to the framing of growing trade unionism in relation to a 'public' and the fluidity of public support. While the 1970s have often been portrayed as an era of public hostility towards industrial action, little is understood of the public's position in the decade that followed the Second World War. This is one of a number of shortcomings in historiographical understanding which this work begins to address. The selection of sources in this chronological section has been made in response to the relevant media trends during the 1940s and 1950s. This has meant that television coverage, during its formative years has played a supplementary role to core analysis of the then booming press.

Crisis in the docks: Inter-Union Disputes

Inter-union disputes, a common issue in 1950s industrial relations, posed important questions about the interests and responsibilities of trade unions, particularly in nationalised industries. The first case study of this chapter, the 1955 dock strike, took place in a year when industrial action was high on the media agenda even when the scale of industrial unrest in 1955 was not statistically noteworthy. In 1953, 1.3 million workers were involved in industrial disputes, more than twice the number of 1955, and in 1957 more than 8.4 million days were lost to disputes, compared to the 3.7 million days in 1955.⁶ This underlines the irregular relationship between coverage and strike propensity. This media attention was primarily inspired by significant strikes in nationalised industries, which coincided with the government's declaration of a State of Emergency. In this context, there was an upsurge in the level of newspaper articles addressing strikes in 1955 and, by 1957, public approval for trade unionism hit a record post-war low, as only 53 per cent deemed unions a 'good thing'. This figure which would not be rivalled until the early 1970s.⁷

Although it could reasonably be argued that the self-interest of media outlets contributed to a surge in coverage, at a time when industrial action had caused a month-long stoppage to press production

⁶ Lindsay, 'A Century of Labour Market Change', p. 139.

⁷ George Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain: Volume 1, 1937-1964* (New York, 1976), p. 418.

and rail strikes had halted distribution, the themes of industrial relations coverage during 1955 suggested something more complex. Media debate highlighted a number of emerging issues about the nature of power inside the trade union movement which extended beyond the short-term fortunes of the newspaper industry. Like the aforementioned rail strike, industrial action in the country's docks was motivated by an inter-union dispute, pitting two unions in the same industry against each other. The 1955 dock dispute, prompted by an official strike from National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers (NASD) union members from northern docks, over their rights to representation on boards in union-employer negotiations, provoked further interest and concern from a multitude of media sources. The opposition of the TGWU leadership to this action, along with the NASD's alleged 'poaching' of discontented members from the TGWU, intensified the dispute.

Across the political spectrum, newspapers were swift to emphasise the self-defeating nature of inter-union disputes, although the frames of explanation were diverse. According to the *Daily Mail*, 'continual strikes over paltry or personal issues corrupt and degrade the trade union movement', alluding to the strike's contribution to the declining reputation of the trade union movement amongst the wider public.⁸ As far as many of the Conservative-supporting newspapers were concerned, the dock strike was one built on 'trivialities and technicalities'.⁹ For many, such strikes were particularly concerning because so many inter-union disputes were perceived to be 'scarcely more than periodical eruptions of permanent – though often imaginary – grievances', which indicated an awareness of the possibility of a long-term upturn in industrial disputes. Almost universally, providing a point of consensus on industrial relations, the dock strike was rejected as legitimate industrial action, regardless of the support for the stated grievances.

The *Mail* linked such strikes to the threat of international trade competition through a direct comparison with the fortunes of Germany, the enemies of old, who were 'taking orders for ships, locomotives and steel-mills which should have come to us'. This was rhetoric which indicated a sense of national pride and privilege which industrial action sought to threaten and tapped into the tropes of war. The article concluded that such strikes were 'wilful sabotage on our commerce'.¹⁰ This type of framing, with futile dock strikes as a selfish threat to economic prosperity, rather than an indication of a failing organisational structure, has many connections with the popularised media frames of explanation for the faltering economy of the 1960s and 1970s. Although the affluent

⁸ *Daily Mail*, 8 November 1954, p. 1.

⁹ *Daily Mail*, 10 May 1955, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Daily Mail*, 1 July 1955, p. 1.

1950s lay in relative contrast to the later period, particularly with regards to public perception, media sources were already proposing that union militancy could be directly linked to the fortunes and failures of the economy.

Meanwhile, the *Daily Mirror*, while not essentially critical of the dockers' readiness to strike, was similarly concerned by the self-defeating nature of this particular dispute on the docks, reflecting a widespread discontent. It argued that it was 'farical that a union should be swiping or nudging the bosses with one hand and belting another union with the other hand'.¹¹ Consistently, the *Daily Mirror's* position was that union efforts were being misdirected at other unions, instead of 'protesting against injustice done to them by the employers', which upheld an adversarial, class-oriented framing of industrial relationships.¹² Industrial action, according to the *Mirror*, was a weapon to be reserved for clashes with employers, not fellow trade unionists. The *Mirror's* position was concerned with the solidarity within the movement, rather than the impact of inter-union disputes on the wider reputation of the organised labour movement. It framed the continuation of the strike in June as union indiscipline, with the headline 'Dock Strikers Defy TUC'.¹³ Regardless of the validity of the NASD's intention to seek representation in northern ports, it was not, 'by any interpretation of trade union principles', a legitimate reason for striking.¹⁴ In this case, there appeared to be little support of any kind for the dockworkers and the press were reluctant to encourage any. For left-wing editorial perspectives, inter-union disputes threatened ideas of solidarity and collectivism, concepts which members of the left-wing press were keen to buttress and celebrate.

Responsibility, as with many strikes during the period, was a popular theme to criticisms. The *Times* argued that such inter-union disputes were 'an abnegation both of the responsibilities upon which trade union rights are erected and of the nation's larger interests'.¹⁵ Although the *Times* recognised the rights for which the NASD workers were striking, it felt, as a priority, they should 'find a new sense of responsibility' through a return to work.¹⁶ This discussion of responsibility and duty was indicative of the way the press regularly used moral ideas to exert pressure on the trade union movement to reform from within. In response to these problems, many sources concluded that it

¹¹ *Daily Mirror*, 7 October 1954, p. 2.

¹² *Daily Mirror*, 19 May 1955, p. 2.

¹³ *Daily Mirror*, 30 June 1955, p. 20.

¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 19 May 1955, p. 2.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 4 November 1954, p. 5.

¹⁶ *The Times*, 2 July 1955, p. 7.

was the obligation of the TUC to re-establish a sense of public duty perceived to be lacking in the docklands through a reassertion of their own authority.

Collectivism and the individual

The influence of collectivist ideals was important in shaping media coverage. Following the conclusion of the rail and newspaper strikes and the death of Arthur Deakin, the *Daily Express* commended the TUC as they had 'bestowed normalcy on Britain', though felt many people would be 'grateful' but 'confused' by the TUC leaders' role as 'industrial peacemakers'.¹⁷ In this opinion piece, Trevor Evans suggested that the TUC General Council, despite criticism from inside the movement, had recognised its 'duty to the general public as well as a responsibility to its own members'.¹⁸ Similarly, although it was one of the few articles to suggest that the next government would need to take action against strikes, the *Mail* commended Jock Tiffin, then General Secretary of the powerful TGWU, as he tried to exercise his influence against the Stevedores and maintain discipline amongst London dockers.¹⁹ The *Times* even went so far as to suggest that it was 'natural', that the public eye should turn to the 'unprecedented influence' of the TUC to 'lead the unions concerned back to sanity', once again drawing on concepts of a moral responsibility and suggestive of misguided influences on individual trade unions.²⁰ The focus in these cases was not on the government's influence on industrial relations, which was frequently notable in its absence, but on the TUC to operate as industrial arbiters. The widespread approval of the demands of the TUC's disputes commission, in declaring that the discontented workers must be returned to the TGWU and all strikers must return to work, alludes to the general respect and enthusiasm for the TUC's intervention at a time when industrial action was becoming widespread, and concerns were emerging about the unions' sense of civic duty.

Indicative of the widespread acceptance of collectivism at that time it is notable that the individual rights and attitudes of the workers were largely peripheral in media debate, certainly in 'popular' newspapers. According to Jim Phillips, the dock strike was the consequence of Arthur Deakin's hostile attitude to port activism which had 'damaged hugely the credibility of the TGWU in the docks', in contrast to the NASD which was 'perceived as more responsive to workers and their

¹⁷ *Daily Express*, 2 May 1955, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Daily Express*, 2 May 1955, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Daily Mail*, 17 May 1955, p. 1.

²⁰ *The Times*, 2 June 1955, p. 7.

workplace concerns'.²¹ Very few contemporary media sources commented on the discontent amongst rank and file members, although the *Times* did highlight attitudes of 'suspicion and frustration' from dockworkers towards both representatives and employers, a trend that reached 'far beyond the docks.'²² Although the decision of the TUC disputes commission pointed to a welcome reassertion of the leadership's authority, it also alluded to the problems of representation and democracy for the rank and file. Democratic rights would simply be delivered through the implementation of secret ballots, according to the *Mail*, in order to prevent workers from being intimidated into supporting strikes where the reasoning was 'obscure or capricious'.²³ The idea that workers could be 'poached' from a union and then 'returned', as the TUC had ruled, was a generally accepted one, as unions were assumed to defend the rights of their workers.

Only the *Guardian* and *Times* queried the position of individual agency in this exchange. The *Times* suggested that the strike had prompted debate about 'the right of a worker to join the union of his choice' and subsequently lamented that the TUC made 'no provision' for discontented workers to transfer between unions or establish new means of representation.²⁴ The *Guardian* was the most impassioned in criticising 'labour monopolies' by the country's biggest unions, as it argued that there was 'far more oppression by trade unions than by any group of employers' and that, while the law had once sought to protect trade unionists against employers, now there was 'growing opinion which wants the law to give more protection against aggressive trade unionism'.²⁵ This indicated a gradually emerging change in attitude towards the protective responsibility of the law in industrial relations. It also reflected growing awareness of the unions' strength. The *Guardian* warned that if unions continued to 'prefer strikes to using common sense' then they would be 'simply inviting repressive legislation', such was the strength of public and political opinion against industrial action.²⁶ In the face of waning support for the union movement, such discussion illustrated an awareness of the possibility, or perhaps even a threat, that relatively minor strikes could have long-term and damaging implications for the future of the labour movement.

²¹ Jim Phillips, 'Anti-Communism and Trade Unionism: A Brief Response to Tom Sibley', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 29 (2010), p. 120.

²² *The Times*, 4 November 1954, p. 5.

²³ *Daily Mail*, 17 May 1955, p. 1.

²⁴ *The Times*, 18 May 1955, p. 11.

²⁵ *Guardian*, 21 May 1955, p. 6.

²⁶ *Guardian*, 17 May 1955, p. 6.

Media approaches and influences

The analysis of 'journalistic-centred influences' in the construction of media frames in 1950s industrial relations coverage is highly complex and the specific role of individuals and personalities is often concealed.²⁷ Hugh Cudlipp, then editor of the *Mirror*, referred to a prevalent journalistic approach that was directed but not inflexible, as individual columnists were 'free to differ from "the policy" and frequently enjoyed doing so'.²⁸ Similarly, Alistair Hetherington, the *Guardian's* editor from 1956, recalled staff were encouraged to write 'as individuals, being neither exploited as personalities nor cut and trimmed like robots' and were instead 'left to absorb the atmosphere' of the newsroom.²⁹ This indicated the same trend of journalistic autonomy during a period of diminished partisanship. Useful insights on the *Guardian's* industrial relations perspective during the 1950s comes from the memoirs of John Cole. Cole recalled that the journalists at the *Guardian* 'intended to be sympathetic to Labour, with or without a capital L', in response to the many pro-Conservative newspapers, but this intention was often 'tortured' or compromised by the newspaper's Liberal roots, its fairly conservative readership and the 'modern reality' of the strength of the Labour Party.³⁰

This conflict in representing the concerns of labour was apparent in the industrial relations coverage of the dock strike. While sympathetic to the demands and concerns of the strikers, the *Guardian's* editorial position was notably critical of the formal organisations at the top of the labour movement, the TUC's centralised leadership, which had created such a conflict inside the movement. In a June opinion piece, the *Guardian* continued the analogy with commodity monopolies, highlighting that as men were not commodities, 'attempts to force them to remain members of particular unions' were 'bound to fail' and the TUC should have turned its attention to 'devising ways of making trade unionism more liberal' and 'achieve stability without crippling arthritis'.³¹ This position argued that it was not the diversification of union representation which was problematic but the inability of the structures above it to respond to change. In 1957, Cole, then the *Guardian's* new industrial correspondent, continued to query the power and influence of the major trade unions, with criticism

²⁷ Scheufele, 'Framing as a Theory of Media Effects', p. 115.

²⁸ Hugh Cudlipp, *Walking on the Water* (London, 1976), p. 222. Hubert 'Hugh' Cudlipp (1913-1998) was a journalist and newspaper editor. He was an influential editorial director at the *Daily Mirror* during the paper's heyday, and later Chairman of the *Mirror Group*. He is often viewed as responsible for the paper's distinctive tabloid style and commercial success.

²⁹ Alistair Hetherington, *Guardian Years* (London 1981), pp. 29-30. Hector Alistair Hetherington (1919-1999) was known for his twenty-year spell from 1956 as editor of the *Manchester Guardian*. During that time, he oversaw the paper's establishment as a national newspaper and an important force in British journalism, despite ongoing financial pressures.

³⁰ Cole, *As it Seemed to Me*, p. 15.

³¹ *Guardian*, 30 June 1955, p. 6.

of the Labour party's system of block voting, though he concedes that this was a debate which did not become 'fashionable in Labour circles' until the 1980s.³² In many ways, the narratives of the *Guardian* in the 1950s signalled an emerging awareness of the vulnerabilities and inflexibilities of existing, centralised trade union structures which would come under further scrutiny thereafter.

In the world of visual media, and as a point of contrast, British Pathé's coverage had a rather different, lighter emphasis from these complex political arguments. As Scott Althaus has suggested, while newsreels became more "serious" in the post-war era, indicated by the intense coverage of strikes, the medium 'remained firmly bound to the tastes of audiences who sought escape and diversion in the cinemas'.³³ Although guided by the printed media agenda, as newsreel cameramen would frequently be simply handed a newspaper clipping to direct their visual coverage, newsreel commentary was less interested in the tangled political debates of the broadsheets.³⁴ Influenced by newspaper narratives, coverage of the dock strike focussed on the simple and popular narrative of a 'pointless and costly squabble' which paralysed 'export lifelines'.³⁵ However, six weeks into the strike, British Pathé lamented that the strike had provided 'astonished victims' in the form of the Russian rowing team that was due to compete at the Henley Regatta that summer. This connection was indicative of the editors' desire to maintain an association with entertainment and sport, to bring relief to a divisive issue. Such an angle was a common theme in newsreel strike coverage that had shown men reading women's magazines during the printers' strike, while chimpanzees read the newspapers on their return. As Althaus has argued, and as newsreel coverage of strikes suggests, the common assumption that visual "soft news" formats are a relatively recent development is a mistaken one. Although newsreel commentary was rarely apolitical and often tapped into the frames of explanation popularised by the press, in this case those present in the *Express* and the *Mail*, the commentary editors' preference to prioritise entertainment was evident and noteworthy.

Although there was almost unanimous condemnation of the 1955 dock strike, the motivations for media criticism were varied. The complex dialogue between different media sources suggested that public perceptions of the responsibilities of the TUC at this time were very much conflicted, placing the organisation in a difficult position. On the one hand, the likes of the *Express* and *Mail* were enthusiastic for the TUC to assert its authority for the sake of a swift resolution and public

³² Cole, *As it Seemed to Me*, p. 16.

³³ Scott Althaus, 'The Forgotten Role of the Global Newsreel Industry in the Long Transition from Text to Television', *International Journal of Press/Politics* 15 (2010), pp. 193-218.

³⁴ Nicholas Hiley and Luke McKernan, 'Reconstructing the News: British Newsreel Documentation and the British Universities Newsreel Project', *Film History* 13 (2001), p. 185.

³⁵ 'The Dock Strike Continues', *British Pathé*, 30 June 1955.

contentment, yet, on the other hand, the *Guardian* and *Times* hoped the TUC would adapt as an organisation in order to deliver on its responsibilities to democratic and representative trade unionism. In many ways, this conflict posed the primacy of the collective against the individual. This tension illustrated the problems for the trade union leadership of governing a rapidly evolving labour movement that departed from many organisational traditions, in a changing economy, while responding to the expectations of media outlets that were responding to change in different ways and thus exerting conflicting pressures. There were important balances to the BBC's commentary of union issues. While its journalists recognised that recent strikes had been controversial, it added a layer of nuance which permeated later coverage of strikes over redundancy, as it adjudged that 'conduct which is not altogether justifiable is often understandable'.³⁶

Frank Cousins: Moderate or militant?

In 1956, a change in leadership prompted new questions about the rights and responsibilities of trade unions, as Frank Cousins was elected as General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, the country's largest single union. His two most notable predecessors, Ernest Bevin (1922-1945) and Arthur Deakin (1945-1955) exhibited firm but conservative leadership. They advocated the government's restrictive wage policies, despite wider union opposition, and, in the case of Deakin, expressed forthright anti-communist feeling on the TUC General Council. Cousins's arrival on the industrial scene undoubtedly introduced a 'new stridency into relations between Whitehall and trade unions' and the media often highlighted problems with Cousins's style of leadership and oration.³⁷ These criticisms were unusually personalised for industrial relations content, which was indicative of the preoccupation with trade union leadership, as well as new trends in tabloid coverage. In their response to Cousins's speech at the 1956 TUC Annual Congress, the *Mail* emphasised Cousins's 'bad manners' and 'offensiveness towards Mr MacMillan' instead of his political message.³⁸ Randolph Churchill, in his 1957 opinion article entitled 'Mr Over-rated', argued that it was primarily Cousins's 'brashness' that had been a major problem for his relationship with the TUC, rather than the because of a difference in political attitudes.³⁹

The personalised criticism of Cousins routinely overlooked the similarities of his style with his predecessors. Trevor Evans, industrial correspondent writing for the *Express* prior to the TGWU

³⁶ *The Listener*, 4 August 1955, p. 175 (originally broadcast on the BBC's *Third Programme*).

³⁷ Geoffrey Goodman, *Awkward Warrior: Frank Cousins, His Life and Adventures* (London, 1979), p. 125.

³⁸ *Daily Mail*, 6 September 1956, p. 1.

³⁹ *Daily Express*, 7 October 1957, p. 8.

elections, had called for Deakin's successor to 'respect tradition'.⁴⁰ A respect for TGWU tradition from the *Express* was not unexpected, given their aging readership, and Trevor Evans's interest in the legacy of Ernest Bevin, evident in the extensive biography he wrote in 1946.⁴¹ Bevin's notoriety and influence was apparent in radio scheduling as, six years after his death, at the height of a national strike in the engineering industry led by Cousins, the BBC broadcasted a 'candid portrait'.⁴² However, there were only minor differences in personal style between Cousins and his widely respected predecessors, who were the consistent reference point for media assessment of Cousins's political outlook. When Jock Tiffin, Cousins's immediate predecessor, was elected, it was envisaged in the *Times* that he would be less 'aggressive and spectacular' in his methods than Deakin and Bevin, suggesting that, although their style had been framed more positively, they also had exhibited a certain personal forcefulness.⁴³ As Geoffrey Goodman, the prominent industrial journalist, observed, smoothness and diplomacy were 'not among the routine arts of trade union leadership', which Deakin and Cousins both reflected.⁴⁴ Therefore, the difference in their public image was largely influenced by the shifting political climate that Cousins entered into.

While the similarity in persona between Cousins and Deakin was overlooked, their difference in political outlook was undeniable. The media's expectations of the TGWU political leadership formed a challenging legacy for Cousins. Cousins followed staunch anti-communists in Deakin and Tiffin who had firmly rejected the influence of militant shop-stewards and sought to bolster the relationship between the TUC and government. On the national stage, at the Labour conference in October 1952, Deakin was quoted in the *Times* as he expressed his concern about the "vicious attacks" of "dissident elements" that created division and challenged the rightful and "responsible" leaders of the union movement.⁴⁵ He advocated a simplified popular narrative that framed the responsibility and moderation of the union establishment against the reckless militancy of some rank and file members, an agenda that the media undoubtedly absorbed. The Cold War context gave a new reality to such moderates versus militants rhetoric. Geoffrey Goodman lamented the 'casual, lazy assumption' that nearly all disputes at that time, certainly all unofficial ones, were 'some form of Communist conspiracy, if not worse – such as the hand of Moscow'.⁴⁶ With the exception of the

⁴⁰ *Daily Express*, 11 March 1955, p. 4.

⁴¹ Trevor Evans, *Bevin of Britain* (London, 1946).

⁴² M.G. Farquarson to Sir Lincoln Evans, 'A Selected List of Programmes Relating to Trade Unions (excluding Radio Newsreel)', 25 July 1958; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R51/1004/1).

⁴³ *The Times*, 16 June 1955, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Goodman, *Awkward Warrior*, p. 119.

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 2 October 1952, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Goodman, 'The Role of Industrial Correspondents', p. 29.

Express for a brief period, anti-Communism was rife amongst the press during the early stages of the Cold War, where the 'changing political atmosphere was making life difficult for those sympathetic with Communism' and newspapers, particularly national tabloids, found that anti-communism could be 'sensational, and profitable, too'.⁴⁷ The BBC, while declining to ban Communism from its airwaves, remained 'extremely touchy' on the subject, particularly with regards to balancing its commitments to freedom of speech with responsibility to national security.⁴⁸ The pervasiveness of such attitudes in media newsrooms, as an extension of wider social anxiety, made such binaries particularly powerful and thus problematic for those, like Cousins, who looked to escape such polarised conceptualisations of union politics.

In the *Daily Mail*, such themes endured Deakin's death, evidenced by regular articles on the conduct of 'a minority of militants, extremists and Communists' and the newspaper's desire that 'union leaders should repudiate them'.⁴⁹ These issues frequently constituted front page news. The concept of a spectrum of political views within the union was very rarely entertained by the press, where the popularity of Communist shop stewards was the result of a political 'apathy' because union members 'did not bother' to use their own democratic power to oppose Communist influence.⁵⁰ The *Mirror*, considering the TGWU elections in 1955, sought to buttress the leadership, arguing that the role of Deakin's successor would be to defend the anti-communist principles of 'Deakinism', as Communism threatened 'an all-out-attempt towards control of the biggest union in Britain'.⁵¹ The idea of impassioned and politically active local officials using their personal links to inspire enthusiasm and sympathy for industrial causes from those members with less well-defined political beliefs, supposed moderates, was rarely considered.

It was this binary framing of union politics, which reflected an attitude shared by the majority of the national media and the TGWU's national leadership, that created a problematic position for Frank Cousins's attempts to reunify the union. Cousins found that, in this kind of political atmosphere, 'the gulf between full-time officials and rank and file had widened dangerously' and that officials had been appointed because of their anti-Communism, leaving the TGWU's organisational structure with 'serious weaknesses'.⁵² The election of Cousins signalled a fresh attitude to political extremism

⁴⁷ John Jenks, *British Propaganda and News Media in the Cold War* (Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 45-46.

⁴⁸ Giora Goodman, 'The British Government and the Challenge of McCarthyism in the Early Cold War', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12 (2010), p. 84.

⁴⁹ *Daily Mail*, 26 July 1957, p. 1.

⁵⁰ *Daily Mail*, 25 May 1956, p. 1.

⁵¹ *Daily Mirror*, 25 February 1955, p. 7.

⁵² Goodman, *Awkward Warrior*, pp. 115-116.

within the trade union movement, in his rejection of such a dualistic political outlook. Although Cousins was 'forthright about having no time for Communism', his refusal to condemn Communism in the same way as Deakin meant that, as Nina Fishman analysed, 'the press could not get the measure of this new General Secretary'.⁵³

Through the assessment of industrial relations coverage from the TUC Congress of 1956 to June 1958, at the peak of the controversial London busmen's strike, the apprehension about Cousins's political position, and the tendency of popular newspapers to adopt binary oppositions was clear. It was difficult, at least as far as the media's depictions were concerned, for trade unionists to endorse industrial action without it being portrayed as something sinister or overtly politicised. In his rejection of the government's proposed wage restraint, Cousins led the TGWU in a more radical direction, though that alone would have hardly been noteworthy, given that the TGWU 'could scarcely have been less radical in the past'.⁵⁴ However, the speech was particularly significant because of its belligerent style and politicised message which complicated the established political binaries of Deakinism. Overtly politicised messages had been associated with Communist "dissidents" amongst the rank and file, in contrast to the moderation of union leadership, buttressing the status quo. The *Mail* was prompt to declare Cousins as a 'man of the Left' who was 'willing to hazard the solvency of Britain' to deliver a change in government.⁵⁵ Even the left-of-centre *Mirror* framed Cousins' rejection of government policy as a declaration of war, although it emphasised the failures of government that had provoked such a political speech.⁵⁶

Wage restraint and economic choices

In response to growing concerns about inflation, an important false dichotomy emerged in the press, which drew attention to widespread rises in wages. Cousins's decision to reject the government's proposed wage policies was particularly contentious because of its implications for these popular economic narratives. As far as papers like the *Express* were concerned, the choice for government was either to enforce wage caps, a confrontational act, or face the unsustainable prospect of wage 'leap-frogging' – the regular and cyclical increase in wages which would sentence the economy to inflation. It was in this context that Michael Cummings introduced the *Express* readers to the cartoon of 'Mr Rising Price' or occasionally the 'Right Honourable Rising Price, Minister for Inflation

⁵³ Nina Fishman, 'The Most Serious Crisis Since 1926': The Engineering and Shipbuilding Strikes of 1957', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The Post-war Compromise, 1945-64* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 245.

⁵⁴ Goodman, *Awkward Warrior*, pp. 115.

⁵⁵ *Daily Mail*, 6 September 1956, p. 1.

⁵⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 6 September 1956. p. 1.

Production', which offered recurring and potent satire of successive government's attempts to battle with prices. Evidence from the British Cartoon Archive provides evidence of the cartoon's popularity and endurance, as Cummings showed both Edward Heath, in 1971, and Margaret Thatcher, in 1988, struggling with this shadowy figure. Figure 1.1 depicts Mr Rising Price being freed from Macmillan's grip by 'Union Wage Demands', reflecting the way this relationship between unions and prices infiltrated political satire.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 1.1: 'Union Wage Demands', *Daily Express*, 28 May 1956, p. 6.

In 1955, the *Mail* declared that 'if wages go on unchecked we shall all be out of jobs because there won't be anything left'.⁵⁷ Arguments like this suggested that government intervention was required because there was little faith that the unions were able, or willing, to self-regulate. This support for government intervention applied pressure on the collaborative relationship between unions and government and rested the short-term responsibility on the side of the labour movement to curb its demands to avoid repercussions from the government. Wage policies were coming to be seen as the responsible way of managing the economy and it was an idea which Cousins's speech directly opposed.

Gallup polling by the middle of the decade reflected the false dichotomy of wage restraint or rampant inflation that had characterized the accounts of the right-wing press. Polling in January 1954, respondents were asked 'Which would you prefer: keep wages as they are and stop prices rising, or let prices and wages both go up?', to which 80 per cent agreed to wage restraint, a response which reflected the power of this framing.⁵⁸ Wage debates were seldom contextualized by the Conservative's broader and 'internally inconsistent' economic policy, which had used rising wages to justify the proposed removal of universal welfare, while the advantages of welfare were

⁵⁷ *Daily Mail*, 27 April 1955, p. 1.

⁵⁸ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 315.

used to justify proposals for wage restraint.⁵⁹ The majority of the media did not debate the implication of cuts to welfare on the atmosphere inside many unions and the importance these cuts placed on the maintenance of wage increases.

Only the left-wing press sought to interrogate the validity of the supposed economic choice between wage restraint or the acceptance of inflation. The *Daily Mirror* was in a clear minority in suggesting that the responsibility lay with government to manage the cost of living through price-controls, so as to deter demands for increased wages: ‘the blunt truth is that the Government have failed to keep down prices. And wages have chased the rising prices’, it argued a year prior to Cousins’s divisive speech.⁶⁰ As far as the *Mirror* was concerned, the confrontation over a proposed wage policy was not because of the irresponsibility of unions or workers but provoked by the failures of the Conservative government to assist working people with the rising cost of living. Sydney Jacobson’s front-page editorial column that followed Cousins’s TUC speech argued that Cousins had been provoked by the fact that the Government had ‘failed to convince them that it has any remedy for soaring prices, except to demand restraint and sacrifice from workers’.⁶¹ In this context, the language of sacrifice became pertinent, as it was felt that the burden of economic stability was being placed unfairly on the working population. According to Gallup polls, respondents considered the cost of living a priority and results from April 1957 suggested the vast majority of respondents, 80 per cent, favoured price management as a means of alleviating economic pressure, while only 53 per cent favoured wage management as a suitable alternative.⁶²

The allocation of economic responsibility for inflation was divisive, and arguably the mid-1950s saw the right-wing press establish the foundations for the rhetoric of ‘reckless unionism’ and economic irresponsibility that was to characterize the decades following. As this narrative had apparently taken grip the BBC held an ‘Any Questions?’ debate where the question was, ‘In view of the country’s economic situation, does the team think that the Trade Unions are acting irresponsibly in pressing pay claims at the present time?’⁶³ Although this question did not suggest BBC agreement with the rhetoric of irresponsibility, it showed the how press attitudes could permeate the walls of

⁵⁹ Noel Whiteside, ‘The Politics of the “Social” and the “Industrial” Wage, 1945-60’, in Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah (eds), *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-1964* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 132.

⁶⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 6 September, 1955, p. 1.

⁶¹ *Daily Mirror*, 6 September 1956, p. 1.

⁶² Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 419.

⁶³ M.G. Farquarson to Sir Lincoln Evans, ‘A Selected List of Programmes Relating to Trade Unions (excluding Radio Newsreel)’, 25 July 1958; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R51/1004/1).

BBC neutrality, illustrated through the question's framing. While the narratives of both sides of the press were about the allocation of responsibility, it is important to note that the press utilised framing which was often orientated around the abdication of economic and political responsibility, emphasizing the obligations of the opposing side, rather than the grasping of their own opportunities. This kind of framing had the potential to deliver a detrimental blow to the government-union relationship, as well as to public understanding of the problems with trade unionism, framed as the concern of 'another'.

Of the national press, only the *Guardian* seriously considered the notion that the political message of Cousins's speech may have been hastily judged, as it highlighted his desire to 'give an impression of reasonable moderation' in an ITV interview and rejected the idea that union leaders 'had any such reckless purpose seriously in mind' as to challenge the authority of government.⁶⁴ In recognising this complexity, the *Guardian* was exceptional in the national press for its rejection of the conventions of a moderates versus militants binary framework. In a later opinion piece during the bus strike, entitled 'The Perplexing Mr Cousins', the *Guardian* argued that the image of 'a militant Mr Cousins dragging a mass of reluctant busmen into a strike' had been created by the nation's media because of 'the public's craving for a personality cult'.⁶⁵ That public interest had, much to the disgust of the *Mirror*, prompted *Express* reporters to monitor Cousins very closely. This included his holiday during the bus strike, after which a sun-tanned Cousins was described as 'perturbed about the growing public picture of him as the union Big Boss'.⁶⁶ This was an impression that the *Express* had frequently demonstrated to its political advantage by emphasising the gap between Cousins's supposedly privileged position as a union leader, 'the Big Boss' and the plight of striking workers. Moreover, the right-wing press was repeatedly irked by Cousins's apparent personal ambition and drew attention to his allegedly divided interests. The *Express* was concerned with Cousins's 'embarrassing selfishness', exhibited in his 'unseemly haste in coveting a juicy plum', as he failed in his attempt to claim the *Daily Herald's* directorship.⁶⁷ In comparison with the *Express's* industrial relations coverage against the paper's broader approach, it was conspicuously partisan, as multiple historians have highlighted the *Express's* moderate political approach during the 1950s. James Thomas's analysis of the *Express's* political coverage suggested that, while its limited election coverage 'contained vestiges of earlier partisanship', as this coverage of Cousins exemplifies, broadly

⁶⁴ *Guardian*, 9 September 1956, p. 8

⁶⁵ *Guardian*, 11 June 1958, p. 6.

⁶⁶ *Daily Express*, 12 August 1957, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Daily Express*, 13 May 1957, p. 6. Frank Cousins lost to conservative rival Tom O'Brien in the election for the *Herald's* directorship in 1957 and subsequently withdrew his support for O'Brien's re-election to the TGWU general council.

speaking the *Express* showed little of its anti-socialism and in 1959 it was ‘particularly sympathetic’ to Labour’s manifesto.⁶⁸

The BBC were anxious to maintain their relationships with the trade union movement in a more unpredictable political environment. At the same congress as Cousins’s speech, Jack Ashley, then working as a producer and organiser for the BBC, noted that a motion had been proposed criticising the BBC for its interference in the conduct of trade union elections. This was largely rebuffed by leaders, including Cousins, but supported by many rank and file members. It was a ‘dangerous’ trend, according to Ashley, ‘because Trade union leaders will inevitably follow, to a greater or lesser extent, popular feeling among the rank and file’ and he urged caution in BBC coverage of elections to prevent ‘hostility and organised opposition of the trade union movement’.⁶⁹ This desire to keep unions on side is particularly interesting, given the tensions at the time between the government and the BBC regarding the Suez crisis. Moreover, it gives further indication that Cousins’s increasingly belligerent attitude, so heavily criticised by the press, was influenced by the political atmosphere amongst the rank and file.

Cousins’s problems were only intensified by the involvement of unions’ traditional media ally, the *Mirror*, where editorials repeatedly emphasised the importance of Cousins’s political role. At the end of 1956, the *Mirror* gave Cousins the title of ‘The Politician of the Year’, describing him as ‘clearly a political force that no politician – least of all the Labour Party leaders – can afford to ignore’, despite the fact it noted Cousins’ lack of interest in personal political status (Figure 1.2). While Cousins had clearly attempted to cool the political heat surrounding his speech, his media supporters revelled in his readiness to confront government policies that had irked elements of the British labour force, the core of the *Mirror*’s conventional, though increasingly diverse, readership. Three months on from the TUC Congress, the article reiterated the existence of ‘open conflict’ between Cousins and government as he apparently ‘swung his massive union behind more aggressive Left-wing policies for the Labour Party’, and, once again, reminded readers of the political legacy of his predecessors. In this summary, Cousins’s regular attempts to emphasise the responsibility required in accompanying “aggressive” unionism were not recognised, as he was described as the ‘new boy about to challenge the old guard’ through his ‘combination of working-class leadership and political socialism’, in order to emphasise the social and political disparities between Cousins and the

⁶⁸ James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 37.

⁶⁹ Jack Ashley, ‘Trade Union Elections’, BBC Report, 18 September 1956; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R51/1004/1).

Conservative government.⁷⁰ In contrast, a similarly personalised article from the *Herald*, written by Goodman, preferred to emphasise Cousins's interest in 'democracy' and 'solidarity', the intricacies of his approach to the strike, and his positive impact inside the union movement, rather than outside it.⁷¹

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 1.2: 'The Politician of the Year', *Daily Mirror*, 19 December 1956, p. 9.

⁷⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 19 December 1956, p. 9.

⁷¹ *Daily Herald*, 21 June 1958, p. 4.

Frank Cousins's public profile provided the *Mirror* with the purpose it had so often lacked in its attempt to remind readers of the continued relevance of class identity and political choice. In his analysis of the *Express* and *Mirror*, A.C.H Smith argued that in many instances, the *Mirror* of the 1950s had struggled 'to discern the persistence of a class structure below the glitter of affluence', despite the fact that many working-class Labour voters, often *Mirror* readers, 'tended overwhelmingly to describe the two main parties as differing in class interest'.⁷² Undoubtedly, under the chairmanship of Cecil King, the political intent of the newspaper became less predictable than under his predecessor as, according to his editor Hugh Cudlipp, King 'privately exchanged ideas with all factions of all parties' to ensure that his top executives were 'inoculated against pressure from any one source'.⁷³ Rather, according to Cudlipp, the *Mirror's* popularity during the 1950s was derived from 'its forthright attitudes', rather than a particular political intent.⁷⁴ Although this portrayal of Cousins was advantageous for the *Mirror* in impressing its political agenda, the lack of emphasis on Cousins's moderating influence on negotiations did little to alleviate tensions within the trade union movement.

While the *Mirror* was fast to adapt to the changing times the *Herald* faced the constant challenge of making industrial news commercially appealing, in order to arrest its decline in readership without angering its traditional audience. Hugh Cudlipp, then editor of the *Mirror*, the *Herald's* commercial rival, believed, for many pro-Labour readers, 'the pudding appeared in the Herald and the sauce in the *Daily Mirror*'.⁷⁵ Roy Greenslade has even gone as far as to describe the *Herald* as a 'dull relic of prewar Britain', with a predominantly male, poor and aging readership, compared to the youthful appeal of the *Mirror*.⁷⁶ An illustration of their problems was found in the correspondence of Vincent Tewson, TUC General Secretary. In 1953, Mr Daines, Secretary of the London Labour Party, wrote to Tewson to ask that 'some latitude might be encouraged in the presentation of industrial and political news items and features' in the *Herald* so that issues 'were open to a variety of viewpoints and expressed in a more lively manner'.⁷⁷ Tewson's reply recognised the problem with the 'brightness of the paper' but complained that 'instead, of taking what I think is a very sensible line in your criticism,

⁷² A.C.H. Smith, *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935-1965* (London, 1975), pp. 144, 149.

⁷³ Hugh Cudlipp, *Publish and be Damned* (London, 1953), p. 284.

⁷⁴ Hugh Cudlipp, *At Your Peril* (London, 1962), p. 348.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

⁷⁶ Roy Greenslade, *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits from Propaganda* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 113.

⁷⁷ DS Daines to Vincent Tewson, 17 September 1953; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292/790.2).

most people seem to want a six-page paper full of reports of speeches, something like a copy of “Hansard”, which reflected the important conflict the editors were faced with negotiating.⁷⁸

Throughout the 1950s, the General Secretary regularly received letters from trade unionists who, despite ‘full knowledge of the problems facing the *Herald* in the matter of improving circulation’, were concerned by the ‘lack of industrial news and the misreporting of disputes’, particularly the ‘stress on inter-union differences’, in line with the editorial agenda of other popular newspapers.⁷⁹ However, Tewson continued to support the *Herald*, knowing that its endorsement for the labour movement was a ‘tremendous factor at election times’ and it was thus ‘entitled to expect some loyalty in all its difficulties from the most loyal supporters of the Movement’.⁸⁰ Such a position from Tewson illustrated anxiety about the damage of division inside the movement, as well as the importance of maintaining as much support as possible from the national dailies. However, despite TUC patience, these the *Herald’s* tensions were poorly managed, under pressure from trade unionism, and the example here was emblematic of the ‘identity crisis’ which ultimately led to its demise.⁸¹ Meanwhile, Cudlipp believed the *Mirror* to be developing its political edge, where its ‘forthright attitudes’, rather than the *Herald’s* ‘entirely uncritical manner’, formed a key factor in its commercial popularity.⁸²

The London Bus Strike and ‘political’ trade unionism

The London bus strike, a lengthy dispute from May 1958, led by Cousins, was important in influencing media understanding of the motives and aims of industrial action in nationalised industries. The bus strike, in comparison to other strikes in nationalised industries, illustrated the complex boundaries of support from those media outlets usually associated with anti-union messages. Over the course of the decade, in response to the rise in industrial disputes, discussion arose over the political legitimacy of decisions to strike. In December 1954, the *Mail* suggested that those involved in the threatened rail strike, had a ‘genuine’ case for a strike over pay, which should have legitimised its escalation to an official strike.⁸³ In contrast, in June 1955, the *Mail* felt that recent stoppages, including the dock strike, had not been ‘genuine’ because they had either been

⁷⁸ Vincent Tewson to DS Daines, 21 September 1953; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292/790.2).

⁷⁹ JH Dunning to Vincent Tewson, 12 August 1955; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292/790.3).

⁸⁰ Vincent Tewson to W.D Stansfield, August 20 1954 TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292/790.3).

⁸¹ Greenslade, *Press Gang*, p. 113.

⁸² Cudlipp, *At Your Peril*, pp. 348-349.

⁸³ *Daily Mail*, 23 December 1954, p. 7.

‘worked up by agitators’ or happened because unions ‘ceased to be loyal to one another’.⁸⁴ This value-laden but ill-defined language was not unique to the *Mail*, as the *Express* drew a distinction between the ‘real’ and ‘worked-up’ grievances that were being exploited by Communist trade unionists (Figure 1.3).⁸⁵ In both of these newspapers, the differences in the motivations for strikes defined their legitimacy and created limits for their support, where the perceived influence of militants and agitators played an influential role. Those strikes that were seen to be about pay and conditions, industrial in nature, were considered legitimate, whereas those that were disputes about the dynamics of power both within the union movement and outside, particularly those over union policy, were not. This illustrated a strong binary distinction between the industrial and the supposedly political strike. The 1957 national shipbuilding and engineering strikes had already threatened to complicate this demarcation, as the dispute ‘which was thought to be purely industrial, was found to be partly political ... shown by the remarks of Socialist and Labour leaders’.⁸⁶ However, the bus strike in the following year forged new ground in eroding such simplistic conceptualisations of industrial action and provoked further questions about the political significance of major strikes in nationalised industries.

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Figure 1.3: ‘The Reds in Britain’, *Daily Express*, 21 May 1955, p. 6.

⁸⁴ *Daily Mail*, 2 June 1955, p. 1.

⁸⁵ *Daily Express*, 21 May 1955, p. 6.

⁸⁶ *Daily Mail*, 3 April 1957, p. 1.

The London bus strike lasted for six weeks, following a dispute over the levels of pay for Central and Country area London busmen. An arbitration award, decided by the Industrial Court and accepted by London Transport, concluded that because of the difference in skills, only those working in the Central area should be given a wage increase, at a lower rate than had originally been demanded by the unions. In response, the strike leadership argued for an all-round wage increase that would redistribute the arbitration offer across both districts. This was firmly rejected by London Transport. It was the convoluted nature of this dispute that makes this case particularly interesting for research, as it threatened to complicate the simplicity of the demarcation of the 'industrial' from the 'political'.

Predictably, the media were divided in pinpointing the cause for the deadlock in negotiations that prolonged the strike. The *Express* argued that the problem lay with the busmen's refusal to accept the award, which reflected Cousins's 'desire to prove that a powerful trade union means what it says when it submits a claim' and broke with the traditions of union leadership, as 'for generations, trade union negotiators who got more than fifty per cent of what they asked for assumed they won'.⁸⁷ Meanwhile the *Mirror* disputed such a depiction of the union's position, pointing to Cousin's willingness to make 'big concessions', despite a tough negotiating committee, and highlighted the apparently 'narrow gap between the two sides' which the government, rather than the unions, appeared unwilling to close.⁸⁸ This kind of dialogue reflected an expectation throughout media circles, and indeed more widely, that the two sides should come to some kind of compromise. As far as the *Guardian* was concerned, this expectation was a symptom of a 'bad tradition' that had developed within industrial relations where 'conciliation means splitting the difference' as if the process of industrial arbitration was 'another form of bargaining'.⁸⁹ The government's unwillingness to split the difference, to compromise on the distribution of the wage award as the busmen had hoped, suggested a break with tradition and highlighted new tensions between more militant unions and government. This lengthy dispute clearly had wider ramifications and, as London fought on, politically orientated debates erupted.

The *Mirror's* main objection was that the government appeared to be using the strike to demonstrate their commitment to transforming attitudes towards wage increases. As the strike came to a climax, a front-page article declared that it was 'ridiculous to pretend' that the strike was

⁸⁷ *Daily Express*, 28 May 1958, p. 6.

⁸⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 6 June 1958, p. 2.

⁸⁹ *Guardian*, 1 May 1958, p. 8.

a 'straight fight between the London Transport Executive and the Transport Workers' when the government was 'plainly using the nationalised industries to enforce its policy of wage restraint'.⁹⁰ While debate rumbled on about the propensity of workers in nationalised industries to strike, the *Mirror's* position on the bus strike suggested that the pattern was caused by those industries' vulnerability to the government's provocative policy changes. By the nature of their ownership, the wage policies of nationalised industries were those most easily shaped by government. Only a couple of days after the publication of the *Mirror's* article, an opinion piece in the *Guardian* suggested that 'in the sort of free enterprise economy that the Government is trying to run, strikes and industrial disputes are part of the order of things' where 'firm and sometimes aggressive bargaining may be necessary'. Although it advocated acceptance of the Industrial Court's offer, it suggested that, in return, the government should 'be willing to allow glimmers of light to appear at the end of the tunnel of restrictionism'.⁹¹ Clearly, according to this perspective, a shift in the government's economic and political approach, as shall be illuminated in the second chapter, had provoked an aggressive response from unions. Proponents of this position framed government, rather than unions, as the initiators of lengthy strikes.

In arguing the government's position, the *Mail* made the strike a matter of Cousins's personal politics, as they suggested that Cousins's 'real quarrel' was with the government's economic policy rather than the London Transport Executive, and 'his real purpose' was to achieve 'his political ends'.⁹² This explanation of the strike suggested that the acceptable 'industrial' terms on which the strike appeared to be fought, were a mask for other interests, and explicitly Cousins's, political motivations. Even the *Guardian* was highly critical of the Labour Party's attempts to 'score party points by exploiting the London bus strike as a political issue', in an article which recognised that the strike has 'political aspects but were not 'party political'.⁹³ This was a further indication of the strike's ability to challenge the established expectations and boundaries of political discussion. It also reflected the widespread concern, not just from the right-wing press, about the intentions of left-wing supporters towards public sector strikes. The Labour Party was 'storing up trouble for itself' by allowing trade unionists to assume that it would have behaved any differently to the current Conservative government. This illustrated concern about the, arguably inevitable, readiness of the Labour Party to criticise government policy in order to remain popular with their trade unionist allies, and, secondly, discomfort with the close links between Labour and the unions.

⁹⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 30 May 1958, p. 1.

⁹¹ *Guardian*, 1 June 1958, p. 12.

⁹² *Daily Mail*, 5 April 1958, p. 1.

⁹³ *Guardian*, 7 May 1958, p. 6.

In contrast, the *Mail* concluded that the rejection of the busmen's negotiated claim was a 'fundamental' matter of 'principle', as if they had done otherwise, they would have had to 'flout the findings of the court' and 'admit the anti-inflation policy was nonsense'.⁹⁴ In arguing the government's case, a language of politics was notably absent. The rejection of the union's claim was not openly recognised as a political matter. The upholding of government policy was recognised as primarily an issue of defending the sanctity of court judgements, rather than expressing a political conviction in the management of inflation. By framing industrial relations as an issue of the unions' political hostility to the fulfilment of government 'principle', the increased militancy of industrial relations could be considered a fault with trade unionism, rather than an inevitable response to changes initiated by government.

The jarring of political perspectives was very apparent in the *Express's* response to articles published in the *Herald* at the beginning of the strike, which described the *Herald's* argument that the Government were 'waging industrial war to impose pay cuts' as an 'incredible conclusion' from 'addled argument and muddled thinking'. This kind of open media dialogue was one which the *Herald*, then TUC-affiliated, appeared reluctant to engage with, reflective of generalised TUC attitudes to the press. The lack of action against such coverage was a frustration for a number of unionists, including Len Murray.⁹⁵ When, later that year, prominent *Express* columnist Trevor Evans wrote an article about the TUC's allegedly favourable encounter with the Conservative Chancellor, Murray wrote to George Woodcock, then Assistant General Secretary of the TUC.⁹⁶ Murray suggested that the TUC depart from their 'normal aloofness' to 'keep the record straight' by writing a letter to the *Express* or by asking the *Herald* to respond.⁹⁷ This was a request that Woodcock steadfastly denied. While a response may have had little effect on the views of the *Express's* typical readership, this apparent disregard from the TUC allowed the *Express* to put forward its pro-government agenda to its readers without opposition or scrutiny. This 'aloofness' described by Murray typified much of the TUC's approach at this early stage, with little evidence of a wider strategy towards tackling prejudicial coverage.

⁹⁴ *Daily Mail*, 30 April 1958, p. 1.

⁹⁵ Lionel 'Len' Murray (1922-2004) was a leading trade unionist. He began at the TUC in 1947 before eventually becoming its General Secretary in 1973 to 1984. Not regarded as a natural leader, Murray oversaw the peak and decline of trade union influence in difficult political circumstances.

⁹⁶ George Woodcock (1904-1979) was a trade unionist and the TUC's General Secretary between 1960 and 1969. A political moderate, Woodcock was charged with modernising the unions during a time of transition.

⁹⁷ Len Murray to George Woodcock, 'Article in the Daily Express', 15 August 1958; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292/782.4).

As far as involvement in this emerging political debate was concerned, the BBC, constrained by its commitments to neutrality and objectivity, made a limited contribution to discussion, indicative of the corporation's wider concern about covering politics at this time. Some BBC staff were initially wary about developing the corporation's coverage of industrial disputes. In response to criticism by the Director General for being 'too timid' in its treatment of strikes, the Controller of the Light Programme urged that producers should be 'extremely cautious' about expanding the coverage, and suggested that radio news was the best route for implementing a change in policy.⁹⁸ A 1956 internal report had voiced problems in 'getting the issues fairly explained in a broadcast' while making sure 'not to do anything that might make a settlement more difficult' or 'prejudice negotiations' in both the 'national interest' and in 'light of the efforts of Government to impose restrictions on the BBC's news services'.⁹⁹ In 1958, Harman Grisewood, then Chief Assistant to the BBC Director General, was concerned that the BBC's trade union coverage seemed 'merely an agglomeration of various producers' wishes and to lack point, purpose or depth, that could desirably be given it by an element of general planning'.¹⁰⁰ To a certain extent this implies that media strategy had been exposed by the abrupt rise in industrial action, particularly in nationalised industries. However, it also presents evidence of critical self-awareness of the problems with such an approach and the requirement for some kind of reform of policy, particularly as the nature of television coverage began to change rapidly during the latter part of the decade. The changing face of industrial relations necessitated large media bodies like the BBC adapting their strategies for trade union coverage through centralised control.

The political significance of the strike, as far as the press was concerned, was best summarised in a concluding opinion article in the *Times*. Although the bus strike ultimately failed and the arbitration award was upheld, the promise of a review of Country pay reflected that 'the principle of the sanctity of arbitration awards' had 'been sacrificed in the end' and left London Transport to 'split very fine hairs to maintain the argument'.¹⁰¹ With the intensity of media debate surrounding the bus strike, and the divided political opinions that came with it, this commentary suggests that the bus strike's conclusion was about the government saving public face, rather than the sound execution of important political principles. In this regard, the 'newsworthiness' of the strike played an important part in its resolution, as any apparent compromise would have been heavily scrutinised by the press.

⁹⁸ H. Rooney Pelletier to Mr Camacho, 'Light Programme: Strikes', 11 November 1955; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R34/881/4).

⁹⁹ Dr Morey, 'Treatment of Strikes in BBC Programmes', BBC report, July 1956; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R34/881/4), pp. 6, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Harman Grisewood to John Brunner, 24 April 1958; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R51/1004/1)

¹⁰¹ *The Times*, 21 June 1958, p. 7.

It appears that some commentators were quite aware of the political intentions behind the resolution, as well as its long-term implications, particularly as they felt such issues were 'liable to reappear unless some more sensible way of dealing with the situation is devised', suggestive of an inevitability to industrial conflict at this time. It was the bus strike that, according to former industrial correspondent Geoffrey Goodman, ushered a 'turning point' and 'change in emphasis' for this 'fuzzy and unrealistic demarcation' between the industrial dispute and the political strike.¹⁰² This is apparent in the strained and continued debate amongst the print media over the legitimacy of the strike. The lengthy stoppage revealed the political power of a major strike in a national industry, even when the dispute was officially endorsed by the union leadership and 'industrial' in nature, a matter of pay and conditions. The economic context and incoherent government policy had 'encouraged the union movement to see political strategies as a supplement, not a replacement for industrial ones', forging new ground and confusing the media's established understandings of industrial relations.¹⁰³

The language of solidarity

Traditionally, it was unofficial strikes which were most likely to be deemed political by the press. The bus strike's status as a union-sanctioned, official dispute, prevented its critics from using the powerful labels like 'wildcat', latterly widely popularised by the media as a method for delegitimising action. However, the media did not just popularise its own critical language for trade unionism but also drew on the language and principles of those within the trade union movement. No other example demonstrated this more clearly than media discussions of the motives of the bus strike. Initially, the mid-decade inter-union disputes had prompted the *Mail* to adjudge these disputes as 'a corruption and degradation of the ideals of brotherhood'.¹⁰⁴ This emphasis on the increasingly fractious state of union relations, allowed the press to pick apart union ideals. In the case of the victimisation of non-strikers during and after disputes, a growing concern amongst the right-wing and centrist press, the *Express* argued that their plight reflected that 'the rigorous morality of solidarity [had] been affronted: the god of loyalty is a jealous god'.¹⁰⁵ Not only was this evocative of trade union's proud history of solidarity but also referenced concepts of virtue and immorality which would become an increasing feature of industrial relations coverage more broadly. Similarly, even the *Mirror* said cases of victimisation were a 'spit in the face for the spirit of fraternity'.¹⁰⁶ In such

¹⁰² Geoffrey Goodman, *Awkward Warrior*, p. 183.

¹⁰³ Whiteside, 'The Politics of the "Social" and the "Industrial" Wage', p. 132.

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Mail*, 2 June 1955, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ *Daily Express*, 30 June 1955, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 18 October 1955, p. 4.

examples, the solidarity of strikers uniting against non-strikers, or “scabs”, was not recognised as a legitimate expression of union ideals and, on numerous occasions, the press sought to question union members’ adherence to core union principles by reflecting division within key unions. Amongst its blow by blow accounts, the *Herald* expressed support for the busmen’s ‘comradeship’, even in defeat, but this commendation was relatively unusual.¹⁰⁷

As demonstrated in the case of the bus strike, unified demonstrations of union solidarity, ones which did not reflect internal fractures, also experienced intense criticism. On the one hand, the *Express*, one of the dispute’s harshest media critics, had argued that Cousins was ‘entitled to take pride in the solidarity of his members’, in view of the longevity and intensity of the strike, rather than in the upholding of certain principles.¹⁰⁸ However, there were concerns that the union’s desire for a wage increase for all members, rather than the most skilled, was not a legitimate expression of union solidarity. The *Guardian*, often sympathetic to the concerns of the labour movement, was the main critic of such a principle. It regarded the demand for an all-round wage increase, as ‘vital in the present politics of bus trade unionism’ but one that had ‘done great harm’ to industry and trade unionism.¹⁰⁹ In this case, the expression of virtuous principles of unionism was framed as a problem with union politics, which, as this chapter has already explored, was a framing burdened with social disapproval. In a later article, the *Guardian* suggested that the argument for the collective pay increase was ‘superficial justice’ which ‘diminished what should be the rewards for real skill’.¹¹⁰ This argument reflected a belief that such demonstrations of solidarity and equality, in their broadest terms, could have damaging effects on the fortunes of those individuals in skilled jobs. In a multitude of ways, the media constructed a nuanced and complex understanding of solidarity which proved to be difficult for striking unions to negotiate.

This inconsistent application of camaraderie and solidarity, used primarily as a means of delegitimising union action, connected with wider concerns about the rights of the individual, both inside and outside trade unions. Soon after the bus strike, Trevor Evans’s column in the *Express* was keen to emphasise that extraordinary influence of unions, given that ‘fewer than half employees belong to any union at all’. As it ‘paid to organise’, this was, according to Evans, ‘the day when the individual who is heard is exceptional’, despite being in the majority.¹¹¹ This kind of article reflected

¹⁰⁷ *Daily Herald*, 21 June 1958, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ *Daily Express*, 17 June 1958, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ *Guardian*, 1 May 1958, p. 8.

¹¹⁰ *Guardian*, 5 May 1958, p. 6.

¹¹¹ *Daily Express*, 2 July 1958, p. 6.

the perception that it was increasingly attractive to join a union as a means of furthering political aims; such was the strength of collectivism and collective action in the mid-1950s. The concern, sometimes verging on hysteria, about the bus strike was a key example of this. Similarly, the extent to which supposedly militant strike leaders represented the views of the rank and file was a highly contentious issue. The wishes of members were often conflated with those of particularly Frank Cousins, and vice versa, to the point where it became no longer clear where intentions lay. The *Mail* was confident that the bus strike was 'unwanted by the union' and 'by most of the men dragged into it'.¹¹² Likewise, the *Times* was concerned that the taking of votes at branch meetings to continue the strike 'strengthened the hand of extremists because nobody likes to appear faint-hearted'.¹¹³ This was indicative of a concern that union members were voting for strikes because a public vote pressured them into doing so, not because they felt a personal commitment to its motivations or aims.

This type of anxiety about the bus strike was symptomatic of wider concern about the effect of organised labour on the rights and independence of the individual. Shortly after the bus strike, the BBC broadcast an edition of 'It's My Opinion' on the subject of secret ballots.¹¹⁴ Throughout the decade there was heated debate about the pressures of public ballots, where the *Mail* felt that a secret ballot would help to control strikes and negate the need for 'repressive legislation', which was still an unpopular prospect for the vast majority.¹¹⁵ Liability for implementing this 'simple reform' lay with 'responsible trade unions', reflecting a preference for the unions to self-regulate than require a more interventionist role from the government, which might damage a delicately balanced relationship. Much like the dispute over inflation control, this was a debate focussed on responsibility and morality.

The dynamics of public support

For Nina Fishman, the TGWU's inability to mobilise public support was a key reason for the strike's failure as, had there been support, 'more moderate members' of the General Council 'might have swung behind Cousins'.¹¹⁶ In the case of public support, the political arguments of the press were undoubtedly influential, which Fishman said had 'ranged from unsympathetic to implacably

¹¹² *Daily Mail*, 30 April 1958, p. 1.

¹¹³ *The Times*, 18 June 1958, p. 11.

¹¹⁴ M.G. Farquarson to Sir Lincoln Evans, 'A Selected List of Programmes Relating to Trade Unions (excluding Radio Newsreel)', 25 July 1958; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R51/1004/1)

¹¹⁵ *Daily Mail*, 17 May 1955, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Fishman, "'Spearhead of the Movement'?", p. 280.

hostile'.¹¹⁷ However, the media's communication and portrayal of public sympathy and support was also significant. The "us" and "them" narrative of economic and political responsibility was also relevant to nuanced understandings of 'the public' and its collective opinion. By the middle of the decade, almost 10 million members of Britain's workforce belonged to a trade union.¹¹⁸ Yet, on a consistent basis, the press suggested a degree of separation between the public and trade unionists, an 'other'. Although the inter-war press hostility towards the labour force, described by Ross McKibbin, had eroded by the 1945 election, by the 1950s, once again under a Conservative government, this work suggests there was a re-emergence of the dislocation of organised labour from the British conservative 'public'.¹¹⁹ For example, following the TUC's intervention in a number of strikes in 1955, the *Express* distinguished the TUC's 'duty to the general public' from its 'responsibility to its own members'.¹²⁰ This impression was clearly felt within the trade union movement. Although George Woodcock, Assistant General Secretary of the TUC, did not 'look upon the bulk of ordinary trade unionists as people separated from the general public but as a part of it', he recognised the modern tendency to make a 'sharp distinction between trade union members and the rest of the population'.¹²¹

In the 1950s, the "distance" between the public and trade unionists was less stark than typically assumed. The media regularly acknowledged the shared opinions of trade unionists and non-trade unionists in response to militancy. When a strike at BEA erupted over the sacking of a shop steward who 'stood for anarchy', the *Express* announced that customers were 'tired of the constant inconvenience inflicted on them by unjustified strikes' and trade unionists were 'tired of the damage done to their hard-won bargaining position'.¹²² Tim Claydon's work on media coverage of industrial relations in the post-war car industry has highlighted the tendency of the British press to assume clear divisions between supposed "moderates" and "militants", and it was extremists, rather than wider trade unionism, that the press of the 1950s sought to isolate from 'public opinion'.¹²³ Moreover, these militants were depicted as a minority of a silent majority, just as had been the case

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹¹⁸ Lindsay, 'A Century of Labour Market Change', p. 139.

¹¹⁹ McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class*, p. 292-293.

¹²⁰ *Daily Express*, 2 May 1955, p. 7.

¹²¹ *The Listener*, 23 July 1959.

¹²² *Daily Express*, 31 December 1954, p. 4.

¹²³ Tim Claydon, 'Tales of Disorder: The Press and the Narrative Construction of Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry, 1950-1979', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 9 (2000), p. 35.

in the 1926 General Strike, where coverage had 'detached workers from their class backgrounds and obscured the causes of the conflict'.¹²⁴

Therefore, few assumptions could be made about broader public support for industrial action at this time. First posed as an issue in 1952, polling data across the decade reflected a gradual decline in approval for unions. However, the majority of media outlets considered public sympathy as open to persuasion, as patient but not unequivocal in its support for strikes. Trade union academic Ben Roberts, speaking on BBC radio, said that the public had 'regarded the rail strike with tolerance' and 'sympathy' in 1955 and, as a result, the government felt it had no need to contemplate 'any legislation to curb the power of trade unions'.¹²⁵ Despite public scrutiny of wage rises, the majority of those polled in November 1957 thought that unions striking for wage increases were at least 'partly' justified in their demands, with a quarter of respondents against them.¹²⁶ The public, in general, were believed to be 'ready to sympathise with a genuine labour grievance', where the inclusion of 'genuine' was used to qualify opposition in the case of "political" strikes and militancy.¹²⁷ There was a public atmosphere of compromise in the majority of cases, where 53 per cent of respondents felt that in cases where agreement could not be reached, employers should meet unions half way.¹²⁸ In the case of the bus strike, the *Mirror* felt that public sympathy would be decisive in shaping its conclusion, as 'no strike' could succeed without it.¹²⁹ Although the strike was ultimately unsuccessful this kind of commentary suggested that the *Mirror* perceived public support to be attainable, even during a contentious dispute. However, as Woodcock noted, 'the attention and criticism that is now being direct towards trade unions is not against the general idea of trade unionism but against particular trade union activities'.¹³⁰ This was where, on a number of press platforms, the bus strike fell foul.

Conclusions

The media's expectations of trade unions had a dramatic impact on coverage of the changes within the trade union movement in the mid-1950s. Anxiety about the lack of strong centralised leadership, following the legacy of a prominent and forceful personality like Arthur Deakin, attracted criticism from the media, long before Frank Cousins offered a controversial alternative. Across the press

¹²⁴ Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, p. 47.

¹²⁵ Ben Roberts, 'Industrial Relations in Britain', BBC Radio, 27 June, 1955; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T86).

¹²⁶ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 435.

¹²⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 24 May 1954, p. 1.

¹²⁸ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 435.

¹²⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 30 May 1958, p. 1.

¹³⁰ *The Listener*, 23 July 1959.

spectrum, in the case of the *Guardian* in the dock strike and the *Express* following the bus strike, the power of trade union leadership and organisation and its implications for the position of the individual became a pertinent issue. Notions of collectivism, while nevertheless pervasive in media discussion, began to erode and change. By this time, they were increasingly used as a tool to delegitimise inter-union disputes and buttress the central leadership of the TUC. With this rapidly changing political landscape in mind, it seems difficult to justify the perception of the 1950s as a tranquil decade typified by political consensus.

Although by the end of 1958 the likes of the *Express* felt that there had been a 'decisive shift in power' in the TUC which signalled a 'return to the era of Right Wing responsibility', the events of the mid-1950s had provoked a series of questions about the state of the relationship between unions and the establishment.¹³¹ As the introduction to this chapter discussed, public trade union approval reflected a notable slump, dropping by eighteen per cent between 1953 and 1957. Public uncertainty about the contribution of trade unions showed a notable increase during this interlude, rather than turning deliberately against the movement, and, it is notable that, to a certain extent, the drop in public approval begun to recover by the end of the decade.¹³²

Unions were clearly well aware of the negative public impression that had been created and TUC General Council minutes show that, by 1960, prominent trade unionists like Anne Godwin were already 'very concerned about the image of the trade union movement projected in the press' and felt that 'attention should be given to methods of combatting the false image'.¹³³ The events of the 1950s undoubtedly placed new emphasis on the requirement for positive publicity for the trade unions, although there was a clear lack of strategy on the part of trade unions. Debate remains about the electoral impact of the industrial disputes of the mid-1950s but they established important precedents for media coverage of strikes. Firstly, and most significantly, the crumbling of the fabricated demarcation between the 'industrial' and the 'political' ensured that strikes after 1958 in nationalised industries were increasingly seen as challenges to government, a perception which was intensified by the impassioned rally calls of newspapers like the *Mirror*. In this context, it became more difficult for unions to win the support of right wing, Conservative-supporting newspapers, as the divisions between competing frames and narratives of explanation and responsibility became more starkly drawn.

¹³¹ *Daily Express*, 6 September 1958, p. 1.

¹³² Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, pp. 332, 350, 418.

¹³³ 'Item 78: Publicity for Trade Union Purposes and Activities', TUC General Council Minutes, 23 May 1960; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292/782.4).

However, as much as the 1950s sparked something new in the reporting of industrial relations, it also reflected the resilience of established norms to change. Frank Cousins's complex and frequently negative public image was largely due to the determination of the right-wing and centrist press to engage the "moderates versus militants" binary that had been established by Deakin after the war, to pigeonhole Cousins, who broke with tradition. Public concern about the influence of communism promoted the separation of a minority of trade unionists from concepts of 'public', in an attempt to isolate union extremism and evoke inter-war attitudes towards class. This fabricated division deepened and engulfed wider trade unionism in the following years, allowing media criticism of union activity to be more starkly defined, as the relationship between the organised labour movement and government began to break down.

Chapter Two – Affluence, Anxiety and ‘the Robot Age’ *Economic Futures, 1945-59*

Impressions of Britain’s economic future altered significantly between 1945 and 1959. During the optimism which broadly characterised the British economic outlook of the Attlee government, despite continued austerity, Jim Tomlinson has argued that there was an absence of the economic narrative of a ‘British disease’ of self-inflicted terminal decline which typified, on the one hand, the inter-war period that preceded it and, on the other hand, rhetoric of the years that followed it. Instead, social problems, particularly in relation to housing shortages and rising living costs, were seen not as a result of a ‘social malaise’ but as a legacy of war, ‘reversible by sensible policy design’.¹ The *Mail* declared that industrial action was ‘the worm in the rose of prosperity’ as workers went on strike ‘over matters which would once have seem trivial’ and did not ‘resist the temptation to be selfish’.² The successes of the economy during the 1950s brought into sharp focus the right-wing press’s belief that strikes should be reserved for desperation in hard times, for depression and poverty. Bernard Hollowood, economist and editor of *Punch* magazine, writing for the *Daily Mail* in 1957, expressed the confident belief that within the next twenty years there would be ‘no strikes’ and insisted that, thanks to the welfare state, class struggle was ‘dead’, as union in-fighting suggested the conflict was now ‘worker against worker’.³ This chapter studies the relationship between Britain’s emerging affluence and the persistence of industrial action. David Kynaston suggested that, by 1956, a narrative of British ‘declinism’ seemed to be ‘well under way’.⁴ Amongst other issues, this chapter begins to uncover the contribution of industrial relations coverage to this shift in economic narrative and the outlook for Britain’s industrial future.

This chapter explores the challenges to government in the management of expectations, as Britain found a new place in the world economy and dealt with the challenges of declining industries through nationalisation. As a result, international comparison and competition became increasingly significant across this early post-war period. The study of the motor industry allows this chapter to explore media attitudes towards modernisation and automation. Mass industrial action in 1956 at the British Motor Corporation (BMC, latterly the nationalised British Leyland) and the Standard Motor Company (Standards), highlighted the tensions that arose from increased mechanisation. Widespread redundancy, allegedly provoked by the introduction of new technologies, and indicative

¹ Tomlinson, ‘Thrice Denied’, p. 235.

² *Daily Mail*, 8 November 1954, p. 1.

³ *Daily Mail*, 6 April 1957, p. 4.

⁴ David Kynaston, *Family Britain: 1951-57* (London, 2009), p. 616.

of difficult relationships between employers and unions in the motor industry, left many concerned by the state of industrial relations in modernising industries, particularly the automotive industry, perceived to be one of the pillars of Britain's export market. Tim Claydon's study has illustrated that the number of press reports of disputes in the motor industry showed a notable rise from 1956 onwards.⁵

Union tensions were far from isolated to privatised industries, as the coal industry contended with pit strikes which raised questions over the wisdom of widespread nationalisation. Despite a notable downturn in strike levels following nationalisation, an infrequently recognised long-term trend, the persistent militancy of the miners prompted many to make links between nationalisation policies and strike disruption.⁶ This chapter assesses the media's framing of industrial relations in these very differing contexts, reflecting on its ability to educate or advise the public about Britain's rapidly evolving economic future, where public knowledge was limited. Moreover, this chapter reflects on the media's response to a perceived lack of trade union accountability, and its implications for Britain's economy. In doing so, it scrutinises the ways newspapers sought to redefine the boundaries of acceptable industrial action and challenged the conventions of trade union activity by looking to the American example.

Nationalisation: Unions against the national interest?

Geoffrey Goodman recalled that the Attlee government's programme of nationalisation left the country 'buzzing with movement and political argument', a vibrancy of debate which drew him to industrial journalism.⁷ However, it is important that the media coverage of nationalisation is firstly situated in the broader political and economic context. The Labour Party's 1945 forward-looking and successful election manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, concluded by suggesting that the 'fundamental' choice for Britain's voters was between the Conservative 'protection of the rights of private economic interest' and Labour's 'wise organisation and protection of economic assets of the nation for the public good'.⁸ Inevitably, that manifesto focus placed a particular emphasis on both the party's aims, working for the shared public good, and their means, economic policy led by nationalisation.

⁵ Claydon, 'Tales of Disorder', p. 9.

⁶ Jim Tomlinson, 'A "Failed Experiment"? Public Ownership and the Narrative of Post-war Britain', *Labour History Review* 73 (2008), p. 235.

⁷ Geoffrey Goodman, *From Bevan to Blair: Fifty Years Reporting from the Political Frontline* (Brighton, 2010), p. 67.

⁸ The Labour Party, *Let Us Face the Future* (1945), p. 12.

The pattern of large-scale nationalisation included a number of 'highly labour-intensive, declining industries, responding to adverse shifts in demand'.⁹ The management of decline had not been part of the 'original remit' of nationalised industries but pre-war expectations for Britain's economic future had been radically different to the reality presented to the government in 1945.¹⁰ However, there was initially a strong public belief that, particularly for coal, nationalisation was 'the only road forward', as wartime mining output had fallen year on year.¹¹ According to the *Daily Herald*, Labour had been given a mandate 'to replan the economy of the country, not to tinker with it'.¹² Nationalisation was enacted, despite the Conservatives' 'feeble contentions', so that these industries could be 'made more efficient', necessary if the nation was to 'prosper'.¹³ This was indicative of a change in attitude towards economic management, as the 1940s 'inaugurated a public policy concern with productivity that was to become a constant feature of Britain in the second half of the century', partly triggered by emerging perceptions of 'American superior efficiency' and concerns about foreign competition.¹⁴

Initially met with optimism, it was hoped that for many sectors, particularly the notoriously militant coal industry, the transfer to public ownership would instil a new sense of 'civic responsibility' amongst unions, motivated by the sake of public gain, while modernising industry and increasing productivity. Initially, nationalisation seemed to deliver on such promise, as the *Mirror* reported on an increase in productivity and a 'new spirit' amongst mine workers, all allegedly prompted by nationalisation.¹⁵ Issues of public interest and industrial decline underpinned much discussion of nationalisation in the period following 1945, placing particular pressure on the essentially sectional interests of trade unions. However, according to Catherine Ellis, while union officials often 'welcomed' nationalisation, workers 'seemed indifferent' to its introduction, contributing to the 'increasingly lukewarm' attitude of the electorate at the turn of the decade.¹⁶ While this suggested a discrepancy between general opinion and Goodman's portrayal of media and political debate, widespread scepticism was clear from the polling data. As early as 1950, although 71 per cent of

⁹ Tomlinson, 'A "Failed Experiment"?', p. 238.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

¹¹ David Greasley, 'The coal industry: images and realities on the road to nationalisation', in Robert Millward and John Singleton (eds), *The Political Economy of Nationalisation in Britain, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 39.

¹² *Daily Herald*, 21 January 1946, p. 2.

¹³ *Daily Herald*, 19 December 1946, p. 2.

¹⁴ Tomlinson, 'Thrice Denied', p. 234.

¹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 16 January 1947, p. 2.

¹⁶ Catherine Ellis, 'Letting it Slip: The Labour Party and the 'Mystical Halo' of Nationalization, 1951-1964', *Contemporary British History* 26 (2012), p. 50.

those polled deemed the nationalisation of medical services to have been 'good', indicative of the popularity of NHS services and the foundations of Labour's popularity, only 45 per cent felt similarly about the nationalisation of coal and 49 per cent felt the nationalisation of the railways was simply 'bad'.¹⁷ Indeed, Labour's persistence with nationalisation policies in face of such public disapproval supports Laura Beers's suggestion that it was not until at least the late 1950s that opinion polls took an active role in shaping 'political strategy'.¹⁸ The first part of this chapter assessing Britain's mid-century economic outlook seeks to explain the relationship between the media coverage of trade unions and the waning popularity of nationalisation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many business owners did not encounter the introduction of nationalisation positively and they mobilised against the policy to powerful effect. The 1942 establishment of lobby group *Aims of Industry*, backed by the likes of Rolls Royce and Tate & Lyle saw anti-nationalisation propaganda intensify after the war with a great deal of financial clout. Although predominantly targeted at provincial newspapers, the *Aims of Industry* press division instigated BBC features, where, in the first 6 months of 1949, *Aims* speakers gave forty-one broadcasts on Home and Light programmes for the BBC.¹⁹ In the January prior to the 1950 general election, 362 magazines and newspapers gave 11,269 column inches to '*Aims of Industry* inspired stories' which addressed issues such as the steel industry, profits, bureaucracy and 'free enterprise achievements', while over a million signatures were obtained in petition for the government to abandon plans to nationalise sugar refinement.²⁰ In H.H Wilson's contemporaneous assessment of this campaign, he suggested that although this kind of propaganda had not single-handedly turned public opinion against the Labour Party's domestic policy, problems elsewhere, particularly housing and the cost of living, were allowing such propaganda to gain traction. The popularity of such campaigns provides a greater insight into nationalisation's visibility in media outlets, even if this was not necessarily at the instigation of newspaper editors. Moreover, the ability of such campaigns to mobilise public support in favour of sectional interests, in opposition to a popular government, lay in stark contrast to the trade union movement which, as this chapter explores, failed to organise effectively and was divided on how to promote its cause. Moreover, the success of *Aims of Industry* illustrated the vulnerability of Labour policies and provided important political context for the press's response to

¹⁷ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 232.

¹⁸ Laura Beers, 'Whose Opinion?: Changing Attitudes Towards Opinion Polling in British politics, 1937-1964', *Twentieth Century British History* 17 (2006), p. 178.

¹⁹ H.H. Wilson, 'Techniques of Pressure – Anti-nationalization Propaganda in Britain', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 15 (1951), p. 231.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237.

nationalisation, as scrutiny of trade unionism's involvement in public ownership gave further reason to question the wisdom of pursuing further projects.

A measure of the strong feeling behind nationalisation was the large number of complaints the *Daily Herald* received for publishing anti-nationalisation advertising. In a copied letter sent to all complainants, often local union branches, the editor, Percy Cudlipp, argued that 'there can not be the slightest question of the advertisement doing any harm to the Labour cause', appearing in a strongly pro-Labour newspaper, 'nor is any question of financial profit to the newspaper involved' owing to the number of adverts offered to the *Daily Herald* at that time. For those editing the *Herald*, 'the issue is simply whether we should suppress an advertisement from the other side because we disagree with the political opinion which it expresses; and our decision, after consideration, was to publish it.'²¹ The editorial director of Odham's Press, John Dunbar, expressed his incredulity towards such complaints, lamenting those who 'prate about "freedom of speech" and who are convinced apparently that it should apply only to themselves and not to the other fellow.'²² Perhaps this was further evidence of the *Herald* being caught behind the times, as coverage of nationalisation became increasingly reactionary and antagonistic as public support waned, often with little regard for 'balance' or freedom of speech. By disappointing those loyal to nationalisation, particularly trade union members, it jeopardised the loyalty of its dwindling readership. On an issue where nationalisation-supporting trade unionists were increasingly marginalised, in favour of rising scepticism, the alleged detachment of the *Daily Herald* (although of course their opinion columns suggested otherwise) was particularly alarming for its readers.

Although the *Mirror* seemed most concerned about the impact of nationalisation's disappointments on relationships within the parliamentary Labour Party, for many other media outlets such failures raised questions about the role of trade unions in these industries. 'What has happened to the sense of common purpose that it was hoped nationalisation would bring?' asked the *Times* in a 1953 report on another round of negotiations over miners' wages.²³ The adopted form of public ownership in the coal and rail industries was seen to irreparably and detrimentally alter the dynamics of trade unionism, at the expense of national economic recovery. According to the *Daily Mail*, unions were 'weakened' by a nationalised system where union leaders 'take on boss status

²¹ Daily Herald Editor to Complainants, 21 November 1946; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (M55.292/790.3/3).

²² John Dunbar to Vincent Tewson, 21 November 1946; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (M55.292/790.3/3).

²³ *The Times*, 8 January 1953, p. 7.

and – unlike good bosses – get out of touch with their followers’ which was ‘bad for industrial discipline and economic recovery’.²⁴ Although the change of ownership had removed the ‘traditional hatred’ between workers and employers, there was frustration that this had not been replaced by ‘love or even affection for their new masters’ and those managing nationalised industries were treated ‘not precisely as enemies, but as “hostile witnesses”’ by workers.²⁵ The changes to management had meant a degradation of union solidarity and detracted from worker focus on the wider national economic picture. Nationalisation’s alleged erosion of trade union authority had contributed to the loss of the “old spirit” amongst workers to a ‘cumbrous, unwieldy and inhuman’ system.²⁶ Without the traditional structures of authority and a sense of shared responsibility, once again referencing collectivist ideals, it was apparently inevitable that British industry would lag behind its international competitors, particularly as nationalisation had been such an expensive exercise for government.

Simplistic links between strikes and nationalisation were consistently made by opponents of state intervention. As far as the *Mail’s* commentary was concerned, the relative peaceful existence of iron and steel industries in contrast to the allegedly turbulent coalmining industry came down to the ‘one factor’ of nationalisation, rather than managers or workers, a situation which would render the nationalisation of iron and steel as an ‘unforgiveable crime’.²⁷ This choice of framing made strikes an issue of the government’s economic policy, rather than the agency or decision-making of the labour force or its managers. However, strikes in nationalised industries, particularly the mining industry and in the hotly-disputed public transport industries, were particularly divisive because of their perceived intent. Assessments of the rank and file’s attitude to nationalisation ranged from a matter of frustration to a deliberate manipulation of state-managed industry. Fundamentally, as a letter to the *Times* in 1958 argued, the transfer to public ownership meant that ‘the immediate target is the public itself’, as ‘hitting the public’ was no longer ‘incidental’ and had replaced the previous ‘strategy of hitting the employer’.²⁸ This framing of the relationship between the general public and the unions did not always result in negative coverage for workers. During the 1954 railway strike, the *Mail* regarded those who worked in the nationalised industry as ‘our employees’ and thus the public was ‘responsible for seeing that they get a fair crack of the whip’, particularly as the prosperous

²⁴ *Daily Mail*, 13 June 1949, p. 1.

²⁵ *Daily Express*, 31 August 1954, p. 4.

²⁶ *Daily Mail*, 20 August 1949, p. 1.

²⁷ *Daily Mail*, 2 January 1957, p. 1.

²⁸ *The Times*, 15 May 1958, p. 13.

economy made it unreasonable for Britain to plead otherwise.²⁹ Despite its support for the government, the *Herald* sided with rail workers to suggest that there had been ‘wasted years of increasing strife, bitterness and frustration’ on the railways because the state had failed to be the ‘model employer’ through the provision of ‘fair and adequate wages’.³⁰

In its assessment of the bus strike, the *Times* placed linked issues of wage policies and the government’s authority over nationalised industries with industrial unrest, which suggested that the problems of strikes in nationalised industries were always ‘liable to reappear’ as long as those industries bore the brunt of government pay policies.³¹ This issue of government interventionism in nationalised industries became something of an ongoing theme, as it wrestled with the problems of legislating on wages in the private sector. *The Guardian*, as it placed greater emphasis on the responsibility of unions, felt that the most ‘realistic comment’ on the nationalisation ‘question’ had come from Arthur Deakin, Frank Cousins’s predecessor, who had suggested that many of the rank and file had regarded nationalisation ‘merely from the point of view of how, in the shortest possible time, they can get better wages and conditions’.³² This was indicative of the frustrations felt by both conservative leaders of major trade unions and those commentators traditionally sympathetic to labour concerns, with the perceived willingness of unions to abuse nationalisation for financial gain at a time when post-war Britain was grappling with its recovery.

Frustration with the alleged manipulation of nationalised industry was phrased much more starkly in another *Guardian* article in the following year. An editorial piece lamented that if repeated concessions for miners were merely to avoid further strikes, ‘it means that the whole framework of nationalisation is simply a convenient administrative form for the payment of blackmail’, which, by its very nature, would soon have ‘diminishing effect’.³³ This was indicative of the feeling that, in its current state and with labour relations seemingly unimproved, the management of nationalised industry was becoming wholly unsustainable. It also suggested that there had been a manipulative intent behind initial support from the labour movement for nationalisation, rather than as a means to make an active contribution to a revitalised British economy. According to a 1957 Gallup Poll, 24 per cent of Labour supporters believed that the workers of a nationalised industry felt the benefits, above all else, while 26 per cent felt no one benefitted from nationalised industry. Such polling was

²⁹ *Daily Mail*, 30 December 1954, p. 1.

³⁰ *Daily Herald*, 6 January 1955, p. 4.

³¹ *The Times*, 21 June 1958, p. 7.

³² *Guardian*, 1 October 1953, p. 6.

³³ *Guardian*, 21 May 1954, p. 8.

indicative of the disillusionment with nationalisation, even by supporters of the party that introduced it.³⁴ As far as popular opinion was concerned nationalisation had failed to serve the public interest, largely due to workers' willingness to demand so much from it. Geoffrey Goodman summarised left-wing frustration, in an article for the *Herald*, that in this battle for support the Labour Party had not 'shouted loud enough' about nationalisation's 'immense successes', and had instead communicated ideas 'defensively'.³⁵

Public Ownership and Patriotism

According to Eric Hobsbawm, 1945 saw the 'remarkable marriage of patriotism and social transformation' and this thread of patriotism, a legacy of war, was ever-present in debates surrounding nationalisation and the union question.³⁶ For the *Mail*, striking for wages that were 'paid by the people' was simply 'unpatriotic', an inevitable outcome of the changes brought about by nationalisation.³⁷ Nationalisation meant that the strike 'was more an act of political coercion than an industrial dispute'.³⁸ This sort of coverage combined anxieties about industrial action's politicisation with its relationship to patriotism and the nation, to powerful effect. The article was one of a series of articles *Mail* wrote on issues in the nationalised rail industry which drove at the impact 'Socialism' had on the status of industrial action, implicating both the tactics of government and unions. Even in newspapers which accepted the government's interventionism in industry, the rail strike was 'a strike against the nation', according to the *Mirror's* front page headlines.³⁹ The *Express* was keen to impress that labour discontent in nationalised industries was so significant that it was beginning to attract attention from their American allies and competitors. As part of a series of published extracts from a US 'Report on Britain', 'to let readers share the fascination of knowing what other people are saying about them', the *Express* revealed concern from across the pond that 'neither the Labour Government nor labour unions have found a way to get along with labour in its third role – that of employer in the big nationalised industries', contributing to Britain's 'greatest domestic problem': labour relations.⁴⁰ Such reporting was indicative of a concern with Britain's image and the contrasts that lay between successful American industry and ailing British industry. *The Times* drew on the German example as a point of comparison suggesting that German's relative economic success in the period since the war had been contributed to by a labour force which had

³⁴ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 413.

³⁵ *Daily Herald*, 21 January 1958, p. 7.

³⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Identity Politics and the Left', *New Left Review* 217 (Spring 1996), p. 46.

³⁷ *Daily Mail*, 2 June 1949, p. 1.

³⁸ *Daily Mail*, 2 June 1949, p. 1.

³⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 31 May 1955, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Daily Express*, 17 August 1949, p. 3.

not 'pressed for outright nationalisation', but instead had 'striven first and foremost for joint direction of privately owned industry'.⁴¹ This focus on the international stage was symptomatic of anxiety about Britain's relative decline and such framing suggested that it was trade unionism's alleged manipulation of the nationalisation project which was hindering Britain's effort to be competitive.

Overall, the failure of private ownership had forced many to accept the prospect of nationalisation but the change had offered limited improvement, shifting the dynamics of negotiations within industry. Nationalisation, via the currents of its 'socialist' support and its impact on conciliatory machinery, inevitably led many to scrutinise the position of trade unions, as the spirit of the rank and file became even more significant for Britain's industrial future. Labour's rhetoric around public interest and national prosperity, defeating 'One Nation' Conservatism, had been hugely successful in winning public support and, to a certain extent, the legacy of this is clear in media discussions. In the spirit of national unity lay a point of apparent political consensus, even as the Conservatives remained critical of nationalisation. However, the popularity of such language inevitably placed pressure on those with divided economic interests, including Labour's traditional allies, the trade unions. Trade unions were perceived as eager to exploit nationalisation for their own purposes, despite evidence which suggests there was a great deal of apathy and scepticism amongst the rank and file. Without a clear media campaign and dependent on nationalised industries for their livelihoods, unlike the pro-business *Aims for Industry*, as well as facing criticism from conservative union leaders, Arthur Deakin being a clear example, nationalisation became part of the 'union question'.

⁴¹ *The Times*, 29 January 1951, p. 5.

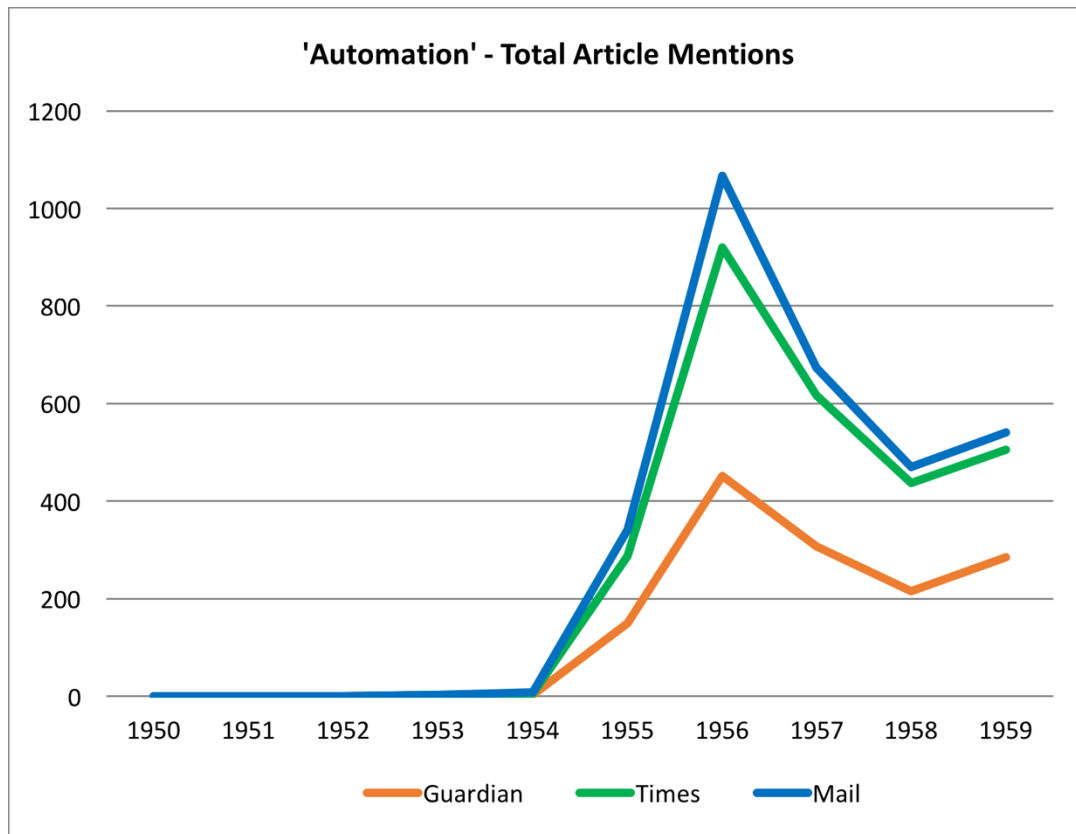


Figure 2.1: Mentions of 'Automation' in British Dailies

Promise of Progress: Automation and The Second Industrial Revolution

While the period immediately following the war had raised questions about the sustainability of nationalisation projects for Britain's future, it also prompted a great deal of public anxiety about Britain's long-term technological development and its impact on both industry and the individual. Strikes at both BMC and Standards factories over unexpected and swiftly announced mass redundancy brought these issues clearly into light. Automation, the mechanisation of production, rose to prominence on the media agenda, as the chief cause for such redundancies and the promise of a new 'Robot Age'.

The media framing of technological innovation for their audiences was hugely significant for debates about Britain's economic future, particularly in cases of union discontent. Although the term's roots lay in 1940s America, the word 'automation' was rarely used in the early 1950s in British media spheres. Quantitative content analysis suggests that it was only after 1955 that discussion of the issue took off (Figure 2.1). 1956, of particular interest to this discussion, saw the number of article mentions of 'automation' treble on the previous year, across press outlets. Although 1956 is perhaps better recognised by British historians for the emergence of the Suez crisis, significant in damaging both the economy and national confidence, the large quantity of coverage given to automation,

despite this climax in foreign affairs, reflects the degree of concern it inspired. This sudden up-turn in discussion meant that, although the issue of automation soared to the top of the media agenda, according to a Gallup poll in early 1956, only 48 per cent of the public understood the meaning of 'automation', almost a decade after the word had first been used. Of that knowledgeable proportion, as much as 27 per cent did not have an opinion as to whether such developments in industry were beneficial, which further illustrated the lack of public understanding.⁴² *The Times*, in a 1955 column, observed public 'alarm and despondency at the sudden peppering of scientific and popular pages alike with the queer word automation', lamenting that 'the trouble with automation is that it attaches the Greek prefix to a Latin word which is quite imaginary', although one doubts that this was the primary reason behind public confusion.⁴³ It is also notable that, while it would be unrealistic to expect such a specific issue to maintain such a prominence on the media agenda, latent discussion of automation was maintained beyond 1956-7, indicating that the issue had a permanent impact on media debate.

Dennis Chong and James Druckman's work suggests that, in light of the complexity of 1950s industrial relations and the lack of public knowledge of technological development, media framing of automation had the potential to be particularly powerful. They argue that readers who are better informed are less likely to be swayed by how others 'frame the issues for them' and, as part of public 'learning' through media frames, citizens are typically more susceptible to the effects of framing when they are newly exposed to a particular issue, as they are unaware of its effects; 'public opinion ought to be more malleable at this stage'.⁴⁴ In a rapidly changing post-war world, where the social satisfaction of full employment was threatened with the technological development triggered by investment, the media could have acted as an important guide for understanding such economic transformation.

It is important to appreciate the relationship between discussions of automation and wider media interests, outside the industrial relations field. Although the early 1960s are typically identified as the period for intense technological optimism, important social issues of the 1950s underpinned the media's interest in modernisation. As Martin Bauer and Jane Gregory analysed, citing examples from the *Daily Telegraph*, the saliency of science and technology on the media agenda rose from 1956

⁴² Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 377.

⁴³ *The Times*, 27 July 1955, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Dennis Chong and James Druckman, 'Framing Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007), pp. 116, 121.

onwards, peaking in the early 1960s.⁴⁵ The period between 1954 and 1967 is also noteworthy for its relative optimism, according to this quantitative research, a factor which again declined in the 1960s. Bauer and Gregory have also highlighted the government-centred nature of such debates as investment in nuclear power and Britain's contribution to the space race were government-funded ventures, 'public technologies', connecting party policy and the interests of the taxpayer with technological modernisation. Although Bauer and Gregory found the space race and nuclear power were the dominant themes of such discussions, it is clear that there were commonalities in these discussions and those surrounding automation, particularly with regards to its relationship with government policy.

Outside the fields of science and technology, Woodrow Wyatt's frustration that to the public it was 'the curves of Diana Dors that matter, not the down curves of British-motor exports', suggested that public disengagement with the specifics of economic forecasts, contented by rising living standards, may have further increased the scope for the media to shape impressions of 'automation'.⁴⁶ Although a long way from the days of Page Three, media content was becoming increasingly entertainment-focussed in order to respond to the evolving demands of its readership, arguably at the expense of educating readers about the intricacies of industrial modernisation. These tastes encouraged more simplistic explanation and greater interest in crisis coverage.

An important aspect of this framing was reference to Britain's history. This meant not only framing through public understandings of war and nationalism, in face of foreign competition, but also, perhaps less predictably, reference to Britain's industrial past. In the case of automation, Britain's proud industrial heritage, namely the Industrial Revolution, became a common reference point for both sides of the debate. The post-war changes to industry constituted 'the Second Industrial Revolution', despite the historical contention that there had already been multiple revolutions in industry. Explaining its American etymology, automation was applied directly to this new frame: 'Automation (it's a word from America) stands for a second industrial revolution. It is as vitally important as that.'⁴⁷ This analogy linked the peak of Britain's historical achievement to hope for its industrial future. According to D.C. Coleman, the 1950s saw the diffusion of the idea of the Industrial Revolution as a symbol of 'heroic technical achievement', moving into popular media as 'a portent of

⁴⁵ Martin W. Bauer and Jane Gregory, 'From Journalism to Corporate Communication in Post-War Britain', in Martin W. Bauer and Massimiano Bucchi (eds), *Journalism, Science and Society: Communication Between News and Public Relations*, (Oxford, 2007), p. 35.

⁴⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 24 July 1956, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 20 December 1954, p. 7.

social change for the better'.⁴⁸ This kind of rhetoric was rich in media anticipation of the new age: 'automation will mean a stupendous rise in standards of living'.⁴⁹ It was the popularisation of the Industrial Revolution 'myth' which, according to Coleman, underpinned the 'white heat' rhetoric of the 1960s as politicians capitalised on this symbol.⁵⁰ Industrial action at major factories, as witnessed most prominently in the car industry during 1956, threatened to complicate this popular rhetoric of seamless development and technological optimism.

Significantly for this research, public acceptance of what John Agar describes as a utopian 'futurological fad', was not universal and the new industrial revolution was allied to social anxiety.⁵¹ Intentionally or otherwise, the industrial revolution conceptualisation did not just evoke the national historical memory of progress but also, in the face of industrial discontent, undercurrents of social turmoil and rebellion. Across the political spectrum, the press was frustrated by the resonances between the current strikes at Standards and BMC and historical unrest. *The Express* asked 'must the machines of the new Industrial Revolution cause the same bitter strife as did those of the first?'⁵² This position was symptomatic of the frustration felt by those eager for the modernisation of industry. Similarly, on a centre-page spread, indicative of the attention paid to such issues, the *Mirror* pleaded for lessons to be learnt from the experience of 'the loom-smashers of a century and a half ago'.⁵³ Even the *Herald*, urged the nation to avoid the 'days of the Luddites'.⁵⁴ Considering that 1950s discontent was a long way from those historical experiences, the widespread adoption by tabloids of this hyperbolised parallel acted as more of a 'slippery slope' warning, rather than realistic analysis of the current situation.

In recognition of these disturbing historical parallels, the press was often critical of the decision to take strike action against the redundancies. The *Times* described the position taken by strikers as 'morally weak', where public opinion was, although respectful of 'trade union loyalty', 'sympathetic with those who have refused to strike'.⁵⁵ Once again, the press demonstrated a willingness to use morality as a way of delegitimising industrial action. Prior to these strikes, public opinion was in the balance as 38 per cent of those polled in 1955 believed that unions were 'justified in opposing the

⁴⁸ D.C. Coleman, *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1992), p. 31.

⁴⁹ *Daily Mail*, 3 May 1956, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Coleman, *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution*, p. 31.

⁵¹ John Agar, 'Science and Information Technology', in Jonathan Hollowell (ed.) *Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, 2003), p. 353.

⁵² *Daily Express*, 3 May 1956, p. 6.

⁵³ *Daily Mirror*, 29 June 1955, p. 10-11.

⁵⁴ *Daily Herald*, 2 May 1956, p. 6.

⁵⁵ *The Times*, 30 July 1956, p. 9.

introduction' of machines, while the same number opposed such action.⁵⁶ The attempts to enforce 'no redundancy' at the Standards picket line were portrayed by the *Times* as a 'Communist slogan' which had 'pre-occupied' leadership, as they 'failed to perform their proper trade union function' in pressing for compensation and protection.⁵⁷ Such frames of explanation for the strike suggested that the left-wing had successfully driven unions into making unrealistic demands, at the expense of individual rights. Striking about an inevitability of economic change was framed as futile and unsustainable, as the *Mail* declared that 'striking against such hard economic facts would be midsummer madness'.⁵⁸ As Tim Claydon has highlighted, even the *Mirror* would only support the strike if it was in opposition to the manner of redundancy, rather than the reality of redundancy itself. The strikers were clearly well aware of the media's negative depiction of their battle against redundancy. This awareness and cynicism was demonstrated in the answer an employee gave in ITV interviews outside the Austin factory: 'Are you an engineer? Well then you mind your own business. When you're an engineer, you can talk to me!', which was met by cheers from those crowded around him at the picket line.⁵⁹ While interviews were generally non-confrontational, lines of enquiry followed the frame of reference provided by the press.

The *Daily Mirror's* response to industrial action over automation was driven by the same intent which had brought them so much success during and immediately after the war. James Thomas suggested the refusal of the *Mirror* to explicitly support Labour in the 1945 general election was driven by the belief that such political sectionalism had 'long been identified as the enemy to national and progressive renewal'.⁶⁰ Although the automotive strikes over redundancy had little to do with the *Mirror's* electoral support of the Labour party, which was once again subdued in the 1955 election, its refusal to support strikers at the BMC and Standards factories demonstrated a similar hesitancy about partisanship. The *Mirror's* rhetoric in the late 1950s aimed to be more 'inclusive', a case of 'the modern against the traditional', rather than the class-based rhetoric of the 1940s.⁶¹ Targeting young and upwardly mobile audiences as part of a successful post-war marketing strategy, in contrast to the struggling *Daily Herald*, meant the *Mirror's* support for unions could not extend to rejection of automation and the supposed promise of progress for British industry. The *Mirror's* response to the strikes against automation thus gives further credence to James Thomas's

⁵⁶ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 351.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 16 June 1956, p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Daily Mail*, 5 June 1956, p. 1.

⁵⁹ *ITV Evening News*, 24 July 1956.

⁶⁰ James Thomas, "A Cloak of Apathy": political disengagement, popular politics and the Daily Mirror 1940-45', *Journalism Studies* 5 (2004), p. 480.

⁶¹ Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, p. 87.

claim that the ‘over-riding priority of the paper in the age of affluence was not so much “Forward with the People” ... as “Forward with the Shareholders”’.⁶²

The Complexities of Media Support

That is not to say that criticism of strike action was devoid of sympathy for those threatened by unemployment. Across the political spectrum there was a recognition of the social anxiety surrounding automation’s threat to the full employment that Britain’s post-war consensus had been built around. According to an article in the *Mail*, redundancy was ‘the topic of the year’ in 1956, discussion of which had ‘turned the industrial world upside down’.⁶³ The links drawn by the media between redundancy and automation are clear from more than analysis of the headlines. The quantitative data, Figure 2.2, reflects an upsurge in discussion of redundancy from 1956 onwards, much like discussions of ‘automation’.

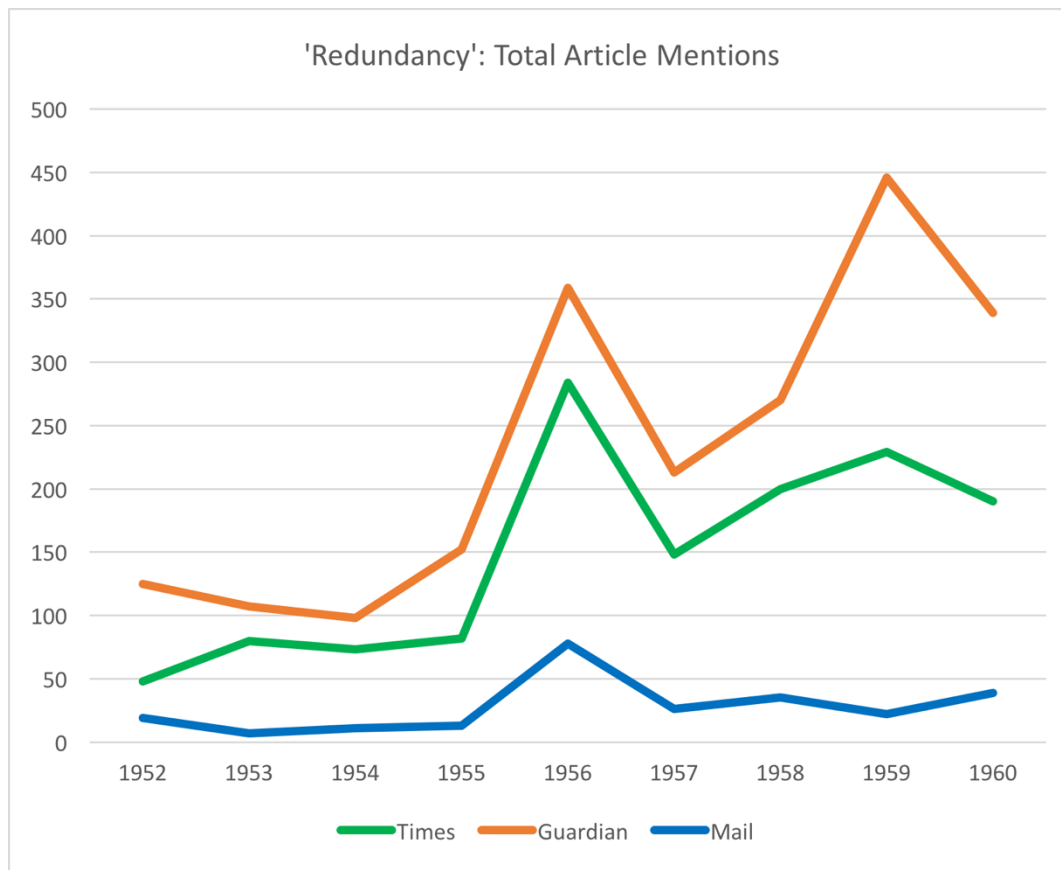


Figure 2.2: Mentions of ‘Redundancy’ in British Dailies

⁶² James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 36

⁶³ *Daily Mail*, 22 August 1956, p. 1.

In a front-page article entitled 'A Stupid Strike', indicative of the views on the strike itself, the *Mail* conceded that post-war Britain had entered an age of social welfare where no longer 'men could be thrown on the scrap-heap with nothing to tide them over'.⁶⁴ In agreement, the *Times* felt that the public would have found it 'morally disturbing that a man who has given 15 or 20 years good service to a firm should be liable to dismissal on a weeks' notice', indicative of the broad criticism for the implementation of redundancy by the BMC and Standards management.⁶⁵ ITV News were prompt to ask management if they felt the problem of decreased automotive demand had been 'badly handled' by the firm.⁶⁶ Although none of this could be said to support industrial action, there was evidence, in an age of increased welfare spending, that greater care should be taken to support and protect workers.

However, challenging corporate attitudes towards mass redundancy was difficult for the media. The BBC on multiple occasions described frustration with finding management representatives who were willing to speak for its programmes on the strike. The head of regional programming, Denis Morris, expressed concern that the absence of management viewpoints from coverage might mean the BBC was not 'reporting as objectively as we would wish' but the management was keen to 'reserve some shots in their locker to fire at those conducting any subsequent enquiry'. Morris attempted to convince BMC management that they had a 'far better case than has been made public' and their silence on the issue had been 'politically inept', in an effort to persuade them to appear but he was left dissatisfied.⁶⁷ This case exemplified the broadcast media's continued difficulty to find management representatives willing to contribute to programmes, in contrast to the frank responses provided by shop floor representatives.

It is clear where the lines of media support for redundant workers were drawn. The likes of Jon Murden have sought to establish the significance of 1956 for the establishment of new employment rights in response to redundancy and, certainly, there is evidence of broad support for such measures from the contemporary media.⁶⁸ Politicians were similarly critical and Iain Macleod, the Conservative Labour minister, went to great lengths to disassociate himself from the conduct of

⁶⁴ *Daily Mail*, 23 July 1956, p. 1.

⁶⁵ *The Times*, 22 May 1956, p. 3.

⁶⁶ *ITV London Evening News*, 23 July 1956.

⁶⁷ Denis Morris to Mr Harman Grisewood, 'Report of Interview with Mr Edwards', 11 July 1956; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R34/881/4).

⁶⁸ Jon Murden, "'All Those in Favour Say Aye": Responses to Redundancy in the British Motor Industry, 1956', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 17 (2004), pp. 75-110.

management.⁶⁹ It seems likely without such widespread support for the rights of individual workers in the wake of the BMC redundancies, the strikes' historical significance would have been muted. However, as Tim Claydon argues, across the political spectrum, the press were 'upholding managerial prerogative' to enforce such redundancies, even if they disagreed with the approach of management.⁷⁰ Media disagreed with the conduct of management but not the final decision to enforce such extensive redundancies and rejected the moves by unions to oppose such a decision. The mistreatment of workers had not undermined the media's support for the management's decision to enforce redundancies. This nuance in media support is indicative of broader trends which supported the 'rights' of the individual, seen as a threatened political entity, rather than the growing power of the collective trade union movement, based largely on legal immunities rather than rights. The examples at BMC and Standards saw a similar delineation in media support as was at the docks, in that media concern with the rights of the individual did not drive them to support strikes. Moreover, in a time of affluence and improved living standards, this orientation of press coverage illustrated the increasing prioritisation of national economic performance over the concerns and pressures on workers, no longer seen to be under the same threats.

Redundancy: A 'reality of the market' and US competition

The *Express* reports of the strikes over redundancy demonstrated a clear tension in industrial relations coverage in an evolving media landscape. On the one hand, it was well aware of the genuine public anxiety about the implications of automation on employment. In view of this, it printed front-page headlines like 'Automation – 2640 sacked' accompanied by suggestions that 'automation now means the sack – permanently – for 2,640 workers', drawing a direct causal link between redundancy and automation.⁷¹ On the other hand, in direct opposition to this frame of explanation, the paper's editorial columns suggested that automation was 'the wrong bogey'. Instead, it suggested that those made redundant at Standards were 'victims not of the machines but the market', where strikes merely compromised attempts to increase efficiency.⁷² According to this perspective, as the *Express* attempted to promote the advantages of technological innovation, automation would not have been seen as an issue if 'business were better', in the face of dwindling demand. Such a contradiction between front-page news and editorial coverage illustrated the tensions in making the newspaper commercially appealing to its audience, engaging with an issue prominent on the wider media agenda, and a political desire to drive home the benefits of private

⁶⁹ Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p. 650.

⁷⁰ Claydon, 'Tales of Disorder', p. 15.

⁷¹ *Daily Express*, 31 May 1956, p. 1.

⁷² *The Express*, 9 June 1956, p. 4.

investment in order to arrest a threatened slump. The commercial pressures on newspapers blunted the political persuasiveness of its editorial narrative of a divisive issue. Although Trevor Evans may have questioned why the public was so 'frightened of a little word' like automation (Figure 2.3), the conflicting messages in his paper's own coverage appeared to provide the answer.⁷³

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 2.3: 'Why be frightened of a little word?', *Daily Express*, 16 May 1956, p. 6.

Similarly to the *Express* editorials, *British Pathé* devoted time to addressing the issue of a stuttering economy, as it reported on the 'saturation' of the car industry, 'the spectre that stands at the elbow of every boom', indicative of the belief that Britain's current economic success would be a short-term one, at least without significant structural change – which included the contribution of trade unions.⁷⁴ This 'boom and bust' narrative was becoming increasingly popular and *Pathé's* coverage was indicative of such a trend. The swift success of automation's introduction, according to the *Express*, 'may mean the difference between unprecedented prosperity or virtual extinction as a trading nation'.⁷⁵ As Jim Tomlinson has underlined, there was a certain inconsistency between popular perceptions of Britain's status as a world trader and its trading successes. Despite this concern with Britain's declining share in the world manufacturing market, a 'striking feature' of the post-war years was the rapid expansion of manufactured exports, delivering the first account

⁷³ *Daily Express*, 16 May 1956, p. 6.

⁷⁴ 'Too Many Cars', *British Pathé*, 15 March 1956.

⁷⁵ *Daily Express*, 30 September 1957, p. 10.

surpluses in 140 years.⁷⁶ However, the focus on Britain's share of the international manufacturing market meant such achievements largely went unrecognised.

German economic successes became particularly concerning for the media in 1956 as West German vehicle exports had finally overtaken Britain's, and newspapers rarely shared in Macmillan's 'sneaking admiration' for German ingenuity.⁷⁷ Notably, there was a fatalism creeping into descriptions of Britain's economic future, where unions were seen to be a major contributor to such a demise. In a front page article on redundancies at Standards, or merely 'sackings', the *Mail* was keen to impress that consistent rises in living standards were 'not a law of nature, or of man either' and that, as the country enjoyed economic boom, 'bust lurks just around the corner'.⁷⁸ The industrial action taken by unions would 'merely make *real* unemployment more certain', drawing a distinction between redundancy in an economy rich with alternative employment from permanent and systemic unemployment.⁷⁹ According to this frame, futile industrial action was acting as a catalyst for Britain's economic demise and it appeared to be gain traction with the electorate. David Kynaston's analysis of a BBC poll in the winter of 1955-56 has found that an increasing minority of respondents who perceived Britain to be in a state of economic decline were 'mainly blaming the trade unions'.⁸⁰

The focus on automation as a means for meeting the demands of a newly global market, particularly in reference to its German competitors is an interesting one, seemingly bound up in the language of 'technological optimism'. A focus on efficient, mechanised production, although attractive to both nationalistic and modernising rhetoric, may have rather missed the point. Tony Judt's work on the dual economies of Britain and Germany suggested that the struggle of the 1950s British car industry was driven by a focus on the quantity of output, bound in the emerging preoccupation with 'productivity', rather than the quality of product. Although the 'shoddy quality of British cars mattered little' in the immediate post-war years, thanks to a captive market, once such an unfortunate reputation had been established 'it proved impossible to shake', as overseas consumers

⁷⁶ Jim Tomlinson, 'Balanced Accounts? Constructing the Balance of Payments Problem in Post-War Britain', *English Historical Review* 104 (2009), p. 872-873.

⁷⁷ Richard Weight, 'Losing the Peace: Germany, Japan, America and the Shaping of British National Identity in the Age of Affluence', in Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton (eds), *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-war 'Golden Age' Revisited* (Aldershot, 2004), p. 205.

⁷⁸ *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1956, p. 1.

⁷⁹ *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1956, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p. 617.

turned to domestic alternatives.⁸¹ The relationship with such failures and the issue of automation was rarely made clear, perhaps as the media were unwilling or unable to recognise the inferiority of British products to their European counterparts, such was the strength of post-war patriotic rhetoric.

Perhaps, feeling the pace on the world market and not much more than a decade after the war, the creation of parallels with Britain's wartime experience of international rivalry was inevitable. The *Express* were keen to impress that automation was the economic 'weapon' with which to 'beat the Germans and the Japanese in world markets'.⁸² This provided an explicit indication of the media's willingness to play on the nationalist legacies of wartime rhetoric. Discussions of economic competition with Britain's wartime enemies tapped into the 'existing schemata' of individual and collective 'belief systems' – a key element of successful media framing.⁸³ However, in the case of the 'trade union question', identification and fascination with the example of a foreign 'other' was less one-dimensional, although that it should be the American model was not entirely surprising. The example of Walter Reuther's reforms in American industrial relations, as leader of the United Automobile Workers, was not only referenced but almost universally praised by the national newspapers, encouraged by US economic success. American labour's supposed acceptance of the role of automation was driven by the knowledge that such changes meant 'less drudgery, more prestige for labour, better pay and more goods'.⁸⁴ To the British press, this indicated a difference in priorities, towards a greater level of education and a better understanding of welfare, rather than trade unionism's traditional drive for wages. Under Reuther, the American trade unions had 'forestalled extremist trouble-making' by creating redundancy packages as a 'shock-absorber when machines oust them'.⁸⁵ This was indicative of the belief that British trade unionism could likewise be reformed from within, campaigning for alternative security in order to soothe the concerns of a threatened workforce and slow down the drive for higher wages. Significantly, using the case of Ford in the US as an exemplar, such financial 'burdens' could be 'borne mainly by industry and not the State', 'rather than methods which dam the wellsprings of enterprise'; a language that suggested that the primacy of private profit was a natural and healthy part of an economy to be safeguarded.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London, 2007), p. 356.

⁸² *Daily Express*, 30 September 1957, p. 10.

⁸³ Entman, 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', p. 53.

⁸⁴ *Daily Mail*, 8 May 1956, p. 6.

⁸⁵ *Daily Express*, 3 May 1956, p. 6.

⁸⁶ *Daily Mail*, 13 June 1955, p. 4.

British media's enthusiasm for Reuther's measures neglected to recognise that American automotive workers' wages were far higher than those in Europe and Reuther was under pressure from Ford for pushing for them to internationally uncompetitive levels, contrary to the supposedly 'statesmanlike' British and German leaders.⁸⁷ Although not publicly recognised by either party involved, the relationship between Reuther and the British media was mutually beneficial: Reuther's influence, particularly at major conferences, could soften British trade unionism's critical response to automation, while such a drive for improved standards in Britain, including increased job security, would alleviate the pressure on Reuther's expensive American labour force. Even before Reuther's appearance, there was evidence that public belief in trade union priorities was finely balanced, as the same number of people believed long-term contracts were a priority for unions, as those who believed higher wages to be important, according to a Gallup poll from August 1956.⁸⁸ Focus on Reuther as a particular individual was also symptomatic of the increasing personalisation of politics by the media, as industrial relations was coming to be recognised as a core element of the British political scene. As far as the conservative wing of the nation's dailies were concerned, a strong personality like Reuther was the perfect antidote to other strong, and supposedly militant personalities that were beginning to emerge from the British labour movement, principally Frank Cousins.

Reuther's role was not just significant in media coverage for soothing public anxieties around modernisation and advancement of British industry. Coverage of Reuther's speeches also offered encouragement for those anxious about their individual personal fortunes beyond job security. According to Richard Crossman's column in the *Mirror*, Reuther had earned the title of TUC Man of the Year in 1957 because he had illuminated 'new-style militant trade unionism' which did not 'merely' seek high wages but 'security against sickness, redundancy and old age; for a share in management and, above all, for more leisure'.⁸⁹ Although this was not the pro-automation line that many of the conservative newspapers had emphasised in coverage of Reuther's speeches, it was indicative of a broad shift in understandings of trade unions' responsibilities for the security of their members in industry. The *Mail* was particularly concerned that the unions' demand for wages to keep pace with the cost of living illustrated belief in 'an inalienable right to high and constantly rising standards', despite the fact this was not extended to the 'professional classes', whose standards had been 'seriously reduced'.⁹⁰ This provided the first indication of an 'equality of sacrifice' narrative in

⁸⁷ Anthony Carew, *Walter Reuther* (Manchester, 1993), p. 119

⁸⁸ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 385.

⁸⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 6 September 1957, p. 4.

⁹⁰ *Daily Mail*, 3 December 1953, p. 1.

the union context, language which linked to wartime and rationing, and confirmed earlier fears about a squeeze on the middle classes. An emphasis on job security and leisure time offered the opportunity to address middle class interests while providing a modified platform for trade unionism.

Like Crossman, Anthony Crosland argued for trade unions to pay 'greater attention to non-wage privileges', going as far as to declare the expansion of trade union interests as 'one of the most important reforms now needed in British industry'.⁹¹ Crossman and Crosland's contribution to the debate illustrated that this shift permeated the Labour Party's political outlook and was thus far from isolated to the daily newspapers. The *Times* reflected a discomfort with a long-established 'national tendency to regard the security of the worker as a matter for the Government rather than for the industry to which he belongs', where the unions had 'curiously neglected' the issue of redundancy.⁹² With the future of the British economy at stake and further upheaval seemingly inevitable, it was this wider issue which came under scrutiny following the industrial strife of 1956.

The burden of responsibility

Social anxiety about both the strength of unions in forcing supposedly unreasonable strikes and the long-term impact of industrial modernisation on employment required remedy. It is notable that, at this point, concepts of reform were widely accepted and discussed, indicative of the situation's perceived fluidity and adaptability during flourishing economic times. The divisive issue, however, was based on who should lead such change. The primary emphasis from the *Mirror* was the government's plans for 'the Robot age', a legacy of the strong relationship between unions and government that had existed under Labour before 1950. It felt that it was imperative that Macleod got 'rid of the idea that the Government can stand aloof and let employers and unions muddle through', suggesting that government accountability for labour relations was problematic and the dynamics between employers and unions required responsible mediation.⁹³ In the case of events at Standards, the *Herald* argued that the 'chief blame' rested not on workers or 'ham-fisted' employers but government, who had 'no plan to meet the age of automation'.⁹⁴ Deflecting the tide of pressure on the unions, the *Mirror* argued on a centre-page spread (Figure 2.4) that politicians had to 'ensure that workers in factories and office understand the Robot Revolution, are prepared for it, and are

⁹¹ Anthony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London, 1956), p. 349.

⁹² *The Times*, 22 May 1956, p. 3.

⁹³ *Daily Mirror*, 8 May 1956, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁴ *Daily Herald*, 2 May 1956, p. 6.

convinced that they will benefit from it'.⁹⁵ This broke the responsibility of government broadly into three sections, all of which were a point of media debate – education, preparation and persuasion. In September 1956, 49 per cent of those polled by Gallup felt that, in line with TUC demands, British industry required a 'greater measure of planning on the part of Government', while only 21 per cent disagreed with this proposition.⁹⁶ Editorial columns, from both the *Mirror* and the *Herald*, worked hard to exert pressure on the government, including making demands on public funds to help invest in infrastructure and redistribute wealth.⁹⁷ The *Mirror* also argued that, given Labour's roots in campaigning for employment rights, where 'workers' interests may be threatened', 'the intelligent introduction of automation' could provide an important point of Labour in opposition.⁹⁸ This was indicative of the belief that all politicians shared some responsibility in the future of Britain's industry.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 2.4: 'Political Planning or Chaos?', *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1955, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1955, p. 10-11.

⁹⁶ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 392.

⁹⁷ *Daily Herald*, 1 March 1956, p. 4.

⁹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1955, p. 10-11.

The three aspects that the *Mirror* alluded to – education, preparation and persuasion – were issues which other newspapers, particularly the *Mail* and the *Express*, felt extended beyond the remit of government responsibility. The *Times* argued that there was a need for ‘employers generally to get together with the trade unions generally, if necessary with the good office of Government, to find a means whereby the transfer of labour can take place with a minimum of friction’.⁹⁹ Forging a new collective policy on redundancies was of primary concern, though it would require the unions to accept their inevitability. Whilst the broadsheets set about encouraging a degree of cooperation between interested parties – government, employers and unions - in tackling such problems, other newspapers placed a greater degree of emphasis on the responsibility and duty of trade unions. The problems with redundancy and a lack of security for workers, signified, according to the *Mail*, ‘the failure of the governing body of the great trade union movement to give a lead to its constituent members’. A failure of leadership at the top of the union hierarchy was an increasingly prevalent narrative to explain the unexpected levels of industrial strife at a time of emerging prosperity, as was observed in the previous chapter. Trade unions had either been caught out by contemporary industrial changes or had been neglectful of their duties, and should have ‘foreseen and forestalled’ the problems at Standard Motors and the ‘initiative should have sprung’ from collective union policy.¹⁰⁰ The *Times* felt that ‘little local Canutes’, shop stewards, had distracted the unions from providing a clear policy in acceptance of redundancy, indicative of a perceived erosion of the leadership’s authority.¹⁰¹ In this sense, a lack of leadership regarding automation in union policy had meant that the unions had hampered the nation’s economic progress, much like they had in nationalised industries. Redundancy through industrial modernisation had long been an inevitability of industrial change which unions had failed to prepare for.

The BBC’s preparation of programmes on trade unionism also demonstrated concern for the educative role of the trade union movement, to reshape the perceptions of their membership and its attitudes towards the economy. Despite the BBC’s commitment to impartiality, this was indicative of the broader media agenda informing and influencing broadcast journalism. Programmes were supposedly devised to be ‘as much about’ the ‘friendly and amicable routine’ of a hundred industries ‘which never finds its way into the news’, as the ‘more sensational aspects of its theme’.¹⁰² However, staff preparing a BBC ‘Special Enquiry’ programme on trade unions in 1956, suggested that they would ask George Woodcock a set of probing questions, for which his co-

⁹⁹ *The Times*, 11 August 1956, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Mail*, 8 May 1956, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ *The Times*, 11 August 1956, p. 7.

¹⁰² Norman Swallow to ‘Television Publicity’, February 21 1956; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T32/1630/1)

operation was assumed. The first of these was ‘Have trade union leaders a thorough grasp of the general economic set-up of the country?’, indicative of a scepticism towards the economic awareness of union leadership, perhaps prompted by the supposed lack of foresight regarding job security. Secondly, it was suggested that Woodcock might face the issue of ‘to what extent are the trade unions trying to educate their members about the broader industrial and economic issues?’, implying that, at the very least, the BBC considered that this might be part of the concern of trade unions. Finally, it was proposed that the question of ‘now that the trade unions have by and large achieved their main objectives – better wages and conditions – what are their future objectives?’ should be posed to Woodcock and other trade unionists appearing on the programme.¹⁰³ This aligned strongly with the conservative media’s suggestion that there should be a change of emphasis in the priorities of trade unions, to move beyond an emphasis on financial settlements. BBC coverage of trade unions, particularly in high profile ‘Special Enquiry’ programmes, was thus far from impervious to the frames and emphases of the press in criticising the role of trade unions in Britain’s economic present and future.

Reflecting on both the *Mirror*’s emphasis on governmental intervention and the *Express*’s frustration with trade union leadership, it is notable the way responsibility for Britain’s economic future was framed invariably in negative terms. Determining the direction of Britain’s long-term industrial policy was continually treated by all parties as a burden to be deflected to other stake-holders, rather than an opportunity to be the driving force behind Britain’s development. The *Mirror*’s position provided potential opportunities for their Conservative opponents, even if it did require a change in attitudes towards industrial interventionism. Conversely, the attitude of the government’s press allies invited further union influence over industrial reform. However, the discussion of responsibility was rarely understood in such terms. This appears to be symptomatic of increasing public anxiety about the complexity of Britain’s post-war industrial outlook and the pressures of adapting to a new world economy, where Britain could no longer assume the same supremacy. Moreover, although many have challenged perceptions of economic or political consensus, the discussion is a further indication of the apparent convergence of politics at that time, between a relatively conservative trade union leadership and a Conservative government considerate of public concern about full employment. Although debate and discussion about the position of trade unions in Britain’s economic future was increasingly antagonistic, as has been explored, it is apparent that neither side saw a transfer of responsibility as dangerous or threatening to their political ideals. The disharmony between unions

¹⁰³ BBC to George Woodcock, February 7 1956; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T32/1630/1)

and employers, as seen at Standards and the BMC, were understood to be temporary and could be answered, through planning and reform.

The outcomes and impressions of debate on public opinion were complex. In May 1956, 48 per cent of those polled by Gallup understood automation to mean ‘machines taking over jobs’.¹⁰⁴ At first sight, this would seem to suggest that criticisms of automation had been successfully communicated to the public, aware of the threat to social welfare. However, in the same poll, 48 per cent understood automation to be a ‘good thing’, compared to just 11 per cent who considered it as simply a ‘bad thing’.¹⁰⁵ By August, after the turmoil of repeated strikes over redundancy, the figure showed little change, as 50 per cent believed automation to be ‘a good thing’.¹⁰⁶ Jim Tomlinson’s work on the post-war economy has indicated a clear transition in priorities during the mid-1950s which represented a ‘major shift in political calculation and culture’ as economic performance, rather than social equality, became increasingly dominant in the rhetoric of electoral politics.¹⁰⁷ Evidently, debate surrounding the role of trade unions in the national economy was no exception and it appears that the conservative dailies were winning the argument. Although the public were well aware of the potential employment displacement created by automation, impressions of the modernisation process remained positive, with the nation’s economic future in mind. Here, the choices provided by Gallup polling epitomised the binaries and false dichotomies of media debate, while the topic’s pervasiveness in polling reflected its prominence on the media agenda. Given this, the conflict in conclusions provided by polling suggests that public opinion, while positive about automation, was far less one-dimensional than the narratives presented to readers of national dailies.

¹⁰⁴ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 377-78.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

¹⁰⁷ Tomlinson, ‘Thrice Denied’, p. 248.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 2.5: 'Vicky Cartoon', *Daily Mirror*, 14 May 1956, p. 3.

Just as the 'automation' debate underpinned changes to media rhetoric and dialogue, there is evidence of the issue reflecting change in the media's visual culture. Figure 2.5 depicts a cartoon by Victor 'Vicky' Weisz from the centre pages of the *Mirror* which reveals important trends in the function of cartoons in 1950s media culture. Jon Agar, in his reflections on the significance of machines for political cartoonists, noted how cartoonists consistently utilised technology 'as a metaphor for human relationships and values', including popular understanding of 'automata as heartless and unemotional to accuse government of the same faults'.¹⁰⁸ This 'Vicky' cartoon, with a tall and foreboding robot standing over a shadowed worker, the latter labelled as 'the human problem of redundancy', certainly alludes to such criticisms of government policy. More broadly,

¹⁰⁸ Jon Agar, 'Technology and British Cartoonists in the Twentieth Century', *Transactions of the Necomen Society* 74 (2004), p. 191.

Agar highlighted the impact of a change in social attitudes during the 1960s, as portrayals of science and technology became increasingly hostile and satirical.¹⁰⁹ With the proliferation of technology in media debate and increasing scrutiny of its social impact, this change seems unsurprising. However, this cartoon, along with others from the 'automation' debate, indicates that this transition in the depiction of technology may have had deeper roots, particularly from left-wing cartoonists sharing in the *Mirror's* social concerns about automation.

In sum, the future of Britain's industrial economy after the Second World War was depicted as one intrinsically entwined with the behaviour of trade unions. This chapter has analysed a number of complex and divisive issues in the media's depiction of trade unions' involvement in Britain's post-war economic future. Concepts of decline, as observed in analysis of the automotive industry and dwindling enthusiasm for nationalisation, slowly permeated the media agenda and public consciousness, particularly in relation to Britain's position on the world stage. Trade union involvement in obstructing moves to modernise industry and their failure to invest in the ideals of nationalisation were progressively framed as chief causes for Britain's declining influence in world markets, despite the many other expenses associated with the nationalisation project. Inevitably, this gave way to comparisons with German and American competitors, particularly their conciliatory machinery and the priorities of their trade unions. According to the British media, the American example provided a blueprint for its own unions, despite much higher wages in the American automotive industry and similar disquiet about the behaviour of their unions.

As living standards and wages improved, it was increasingly suggested that unions should demand less in financial terms from both state and private employers. In the case of the mining industry, wage increases were portrayed as becoming habitual, despite relatively high pay. Instead, trade union leadership, which was consistently found lacking in authority in both industries, should seek to educate workers about the benefits of changes to industry, particularly in the case of automation, where job security and long-term contracts should be the focus of their campaigns and policies. Although pro-Labour newspapers such as the *Mirror* sought to address this emphasis on unions, as opposed to government policy, the dominant rhetoric placed responsibility at the feet of the unions. Such a change of emphasis was indicative of an increasing prioritisation of national economic performance over increasing working class living standards, as trade unions were encouraged to tackle issues that business could afford to make concessions on. It was in these narrowing terms that

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

trade union activism and power were deemed legitimate, alongside the increased anxiety about 'politicised' industrial action, as analysed in the first chapter.

The media did recognise the difficulties in adapting to change for the unions, both in the structural changes to negotiation mechanisms in nationalised industries and in the abrupt redundancies provoked by automation, but in neither case did this legitimise the decision by leaders to take industrial action. It was not unusual for the media to be sympathetic to the problems presented in cases of industrial unrest but there were clear limitations. Concern about the treatment of workers rarely translated into outright support, as observed in coverage of the 1955 dock strikes, for fear of jeopardising national prosperity.

Chapter Three – Cracks in Labour’s ‘jerry-built façade of unity’ *Governance and Power, 1960-69*

The early 1960s marked further frustration for the Labour Party and its trade union allies. Mark Abrams’s polling analysis, published periodically in *Socialist Commentary* throughout 1960, scrutinised why Labour had lost the 1959 General Election to the Conservatives. It concluded that Labour’s image was ‘increasingly obsolete’ because both supporters and non-supporters identified Labour with ‘the working class’.¹ This was problematic because ‘many workers, irrespective of their politics, no longer regard themselves as working class’.² Abrams’s work suggested that Labour’s image was becoming increasingly dated and ‘out-of-touch’ with modern society. Abrams felt that Labour had lacked sufficient ‘machinery’ to fully utilise survey findings in order ‘shape effective political propaganda’ during the 1950s.³ In contrast, those that felt unions were doing a good job did so because they ‘equated the unions with the protection of the interests of the working class’.⁴ There was a real risk by 1960 of Labour maintaining its traditional ties at the cost of keeping pace with the upwardly mobile British electorate. Abrams’s polling was discussed by Labour’s National Executive Committee and Abrams’s polling had an increasing influence on Labour policy, as he was recruited to an official post in 1962.⁵ The impact of Labour’s subsequent attempts to reinvent its public image on the position of trade unionism in British politics is of particular interest in this chapter.

Indicative of the rehabilitation of the Labour Party’s image, the 1964 general election returned a narrow parliamentary majority, following highly partisan support from the *Mirror*. In contrast, traditional Conservative press support had been far more muted, following a period of intense criticism during the Vassall and Profumo affairs. Response to these scandals demonstrated ‘the transformation of the political, cultural, intellectual and social climate’ of the early 1960s and ‘contributed to the lack of enthusiasm for a discredited Conservative old-guard’, during emerging economic problems.⁶ As 1964 ended thirteen years of Conservative rule, albeit narrowly, and Fleet Street enthused about Wilson’s promise of industrial modernisation, it would be reasonable to

¹ Mark Abrams, ‘Why Labour Has lost Elections, Part One: Party Images’, *Socialist Commentary* (May 1960), p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³ Mark Abrams, Public Opinion Polls and Political Parties, *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 27:1 (1963), p. 17.

⁴ Mark Abrams, ‘Why Labour Has lost Elections, Part Seven: Trade Unions and Politics’, *Socialist Commentary* (August 1960), p. 9.

⁵ Peter Gurney, *The Making of Consumer Culture in Modern Britain* (London, 2017), p. 177.

⁶ James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 59.

assume Labour's victory signalled a positive change for trade unionism. However, the picture was much more complex for the wider labour movement. The key findings from a special enquiry by Gallup on behalf of the *Telegraph* in 1964 found that the unions' traditional allegiance to the Labour Party had started to erode, while Labour enjoyed successes with other social groups conventionally allied to the Conservative Party.⁷ This suggested that, in light of the evidence presented by Abrams, amongst others, Labour had actively attempted to distance the party from the wider labour movement between 1960 and 1964, in order to appeal to floating voters, as popular disenchantment with the Conservative party grew.

The first case study of this chapter assesses media coverage of a major strike by the National Union of Seamen (NUS) in 1966 which provoked the first declaration of a national State of Emergency in over a decade. In such dramatic circumstances, the responsibility for communicating the scale of the NUS's threat to national prosperity lay with the national press, while Harold Wilson used television and newspaper coverage to mixed effect. This chapter explores the effect of the media's attitudes towards the incumbent government on the portrayal of union disputes, as Harold Wilson attempted to enforce strict measures to quell industrial action, through emergency action in 1966 and legislative proposals in 1969. During the NUS strike, the media's party-political bias produced coverage which defied convention, as unions roused sympathy from the Conservative press. In January 1969, piloted by Barbara Castle, Labour published its controversial *In Place of Strife* White Paper – the debate of which forms the second of this chapter's case studies.⁸ Although unsuccessful, this ill-fated publication formed the most serious legislative attempt by any government in the post-war period to remodel industrial relations in Britain. Castle was adjudged to have 'seriously underestimated' the proposals' impact, as Labour MPs concluded that 'a rupture in the relationship between the industrial and political wings of the Labour Party was a completely unacceptable price to pay' for the Bill's success.⁹ Unsurprisingly, this Bill provoked a great deal of media debate surrounding the relationship between Labour and the trade unions, as well as the extent of trade unionism's political power in Britain. Near-universal media support for government legislation proved to be problematic when negotiations with the TUC began to falter.

⁷ The Gallup Poll Group, *Trade Unions and the Public in 1964: An Enquiry Made for the Sunday Telegraph* (London, 1964), p. 2.

⁸ Barbara Castle (1910-2002) was a prominent Labour politician and one of Harold Wilson's key allies. A member of parliament for the entirety of the period studied, she held a number of significant cabinet posts, including the Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity between 1968 and 1970.

⁹ Gerald Dorfman, *Government Versus Trade Unionism in British Politics Since 1968* (Basingstoke, 1979), p. 23.

This chapter reflects on the ways newspapers sought to define the boundaries between ‘political’ and ‘industrial’ trade union activity, as an extension of 1950s debate, and how this shaped perceptions of legitimacy and acceptability. Throughout, this chapter analyses how journalists negotiated the way these two supposedly distinct ideas interrelated and overlapped. While during the 1966 strike politicians and politics encroached on the traditionally ‘industrial’ sphere of union action, concerted political pressure from the unions played an important part in determining the fate of *In Place of Strife*. Union involvement in British policy direction also provided challenging questions about Britain’s governability, across the media spectrum, as Labour managed the tensions between its traditional labour-based support and the expectations of the disgruntled wider public. This tension was often framed as a dilemma for Wilson’s loyalties, a matter of country versus party. These strains on Labour politics and the media verdict on their management is a further aspect of analysis. Looking ahead to the following chapter on coverage of Britain’s economic future, this section of the thesis reflects on the media’s operation of specific frames of explanation for Britain’s emerging economic troubles. As British industry came under increasing scrutiny over the period, prompted by a rash of unofficial strikes in the early 1960s as well as concerns about industrial productivity, multiple frames of explanation were provided by the media. They competed for credibility during the decade and their deployment slowly evolved. Ultimately, analysis of 1969’s industrial debates illustrates the success and proliferation of labour-oriented frames of explanation.

Politicised Industrial Relations: The Seamen’s Strike, 1966

Under Labour, the politicisation of industrial relations continued to inspire public concern, despite an improvement in trade unionism’s public image since 1958. The *Telegraph*’s polling analysis found that although unions and strikers enjoyed ‘considerable support’ when their claims were deemed ‘justified’, union ‘involvement in politics tended to be deprecated’ by both the general public and union members.¹⁰ According to this survey there was damage to union reputation whenever there was ‘weakness in pursuing the legitimate aims of the union members’ or ‘squabbling over political issues’.¹¹ Thus the relationship between unions and politics remained on the public agenda and indicated the enduring perception that unions could operate successfully without involving themselves in the political sphere. This was an essential component of media attempts to define ‘the political’ from ‘the industrial’, in order to determine the legitimacy of union activity. Moreover, there was mounting media pressure on Labour’s relationship with trade unionism between 1964 and 1966. These attitudes provided important social context for the 1966 strike by the NUS.

¹⁰ Gallup Poll Group, *Trade Unions and the Public in 1964*, p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Although Labour extended their parliamentary majority in that year's general election, the enthusiasm of the British media had begun to wane, as the *Mirror's* support of a Labour vote 'could hardly have been more grudging'.¹² According to an article by John Grigg in the *Guardian* in late 1965, as doubts about Labour's economic plan grew, 'appeasement' and 'political cowardice' by both Conservative and Labour politicians in negotiations with unions had threatened the national economy. If Wilson failed to tackle the 'unpopular' unions, he may have to 'say goodbye to the floating voters – not to mention the pound'.¹³ A 'day of reckoning' was imminent and media patience appeared to be wearing thin with a conciliatory approach to industrial relations that had failed to alleviate industrial strife or address shortcomings in productivity. The latter of these themes is analysed more closely in Chapter Four. Long before the NUS went on a strike that threatened to cripple British exports, the media that had been so important for Labour's electoral successes, established demand for a showdown with the unions. Media support for 1965's Board for Prices and Incomes only intensified pressure on Labour's relationship with trade unions, as the *Mirror* demanded that 'if persuasion fails – and it nearly has failed – there must be coercion', where coercion was defined as 'the new nice word for compulsion'.¹⁴

In May 1966, the NUS announced industrial action, primarily motivated by a demand for a reduction in compulsory hours from 56 hours per week to 40 hours, thereby assuming increased pay for regular weekly hours and greater overtime payment for those weeks spent at sea. From the outset, coverage of the strike was acutely politicised, as ITV commentators identified the determination of 'internal union politics' where 'even if by some miracle the executive called off the strike an unofficial strike would almost be bound to follow'.¹⁵ This highlighted the influence of the left wing of the union and tapped into continued public concern about the kind of unofficial strikes which had plagued the previous Conservative government. According to the *Mail*, seen in Figure 3.1, this was a 'fight to the finish', as it evoked the political significance of 1926 in its front page article.¹⁶

Although this episode in British industry is rarely emphasised by modern historians, dwarfed by the industrial events of 1968 and 1969, the strike was important in shaping the relationship between Labour and the unions, as well as the dynamics of media support. For Paul Foot, the 1966 Seamen's

¹² Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 62.

¹³ *Guardian*, 20 December 1965, p. 14

¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 28 October 1966, p. 3.

¹⁵ *ITV Evening News*, 12 May 1966.

¹⁶ *Daily Mail*, 14 May 1966, p. 1.

strike dispelled 'the fashionable euphoria about a classless, affluent society', the kind of society which Wilson's Labour had tried to appeal to, and 'removed once and for all the idea that industrial relations in British society are a polite, friendly affair', indicative of the bitterness surrounding the episode.¹⁷ The strike also had a profound impact on the media sphere. For newspapers sympathetic to the labour movement, the 1966 NUS strike represented a dilemma. Industrial relations of the late 1950s had represented a clear dichotomy between the Conservative government and the rebellious trade unions – a scenario which was relatively simple for such newspapers to negotiate. A national strike stirred by the policies of a largely popular Labour government was a much more complex situation to mediate. Having made demands for determined and steadfast governance of industrial relations and the new incomes board, support of Labour in this strike was not entirely surprising. However, the consistency of this support, even as Wilson employed controversial political tactics against the strikers, was particularly noteworthy and the conventional strategies of conservative newspapers became more widespread.

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Figure 3.1: 'A fight to the finish', *Daily Mail*, 14 May 1956, p. 1.

The relationship between government and media in the negotiation of the strike was more complex than a simple media demand for confrontation with the unions. As Keir Thorpe's valuable article on the strike identifies, it was 'unsurprising' that Wilson 'wished to shape media coverage'.¹⁸ This was

¹⁷ Paul Foot, 'The Seamen's Struggle', in Robin Blackburn and Alexander Cockburn (eds), *The Incompatibles: Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus* (London, 1967), pp. 169, 206.

¹⁸ Keir Thorpe, 'The "Juggernaut Method": The 1966 State of Emergency and the Wilson Government's Response to the Seamen's Strike', *Twentieth Century British History* 12 (2001), p. 475.

indicative of an increasingly transactional relationship between government and media, in response to the media's increasingly politicised motives. Wilson was well aware that a close relationship with the Labour-supporting media was vital to the continued prosperity of his Labour government. Geoffrey Goodman, after he had written a critical article for the newly-established *Sun* newspaper, was called by Wilson's press secretary 'to explain the error of [Goodman's] ways and how [his] critical words had upset Wilson'.¹⁹ Wilson's sensitivity to criticism from then Labour-supporting *Sun* was unsurprising but his attempts to apply pressure on influential journalists suggested that Wilson was well aware of the need to improve his public standing in an increasingly critical atmosphere. Such an approach was ineffective, given that Goodman left Lloyd-Hughes in 'no doubt what he should do with his – and the Prime Minister's – opinions', providing further evidence of Wilson's fragile position amongst labour journalists.²⁰

The *Mirror's* criticism of the NUS strike shared a number of similar traits to the conservative press coverage of the 1958 bus strike, indicative of the way certain frames and narratives had begun to permeate the media sphere more widely. The headline editorial from the *Mirror's* 16 May edition, entitled 'Calling All Seamen', provides a clear insight into these kinds of patterns of coverage.²¹ In the same style as appeals made during the bus strike, aware of its core union readership, this article made a much more aggressive attempt to isolate the seamen from the public more generally and openly criticize their actions. The confrontational attitude of the NUS was a clear target for criticism, as the seamen had allegedly told both the employers and the Minister of Labour, Ray Gunter, to 'go to hell' and treated Wilson's intervention with 'similar contempt'. It was clear the *Mirror* would not celebrate the labour movement's disdain for governmental authority in the same tone it had celebrated Cousins's rebellion in 1958. Throughout coverage of the strike, the portrayal of the NUS position as unreasonable or irrational was particularly popular in the *Mirror's* editorial columns. From the same article, subheadings of 'blackmail' and 'archaic' gave a clear indication of the frames employed, with seamen allegedly 'demanding feather-bedding for their industry' from the Government, 'which means YOU'.²² Undoubtedly, support for the government's incomes policy was important in motivating this narrative of blackmail and extortion as a threat to public life, where the parallels with the 1950s conservative press were clear. The kind of discussions that had been seen in the late 1950s, which impressed the importance of the right to strike or the strength of legal

¹⁹ Goodman, *Bevan to Blair*, p. 121.

²⁰ Goodman, *Bevan to Blair*, p. 121.

²¹ *Daily Mirror*, 16 May 1966, pp. 1-2.

²² *Daily Mirror*, 16 May 1966, pp. 1-2.

immunities enshrined in the traditions of trade unionism, were notably absent from coverage. The tone and framing of coverage had radically altered.

Moreover, the emphasis on the impact of a potential settlement on the taxpayer's purse was indicative of the *Mirror's* attempts to involve the readership directly in the strike and provoke outright public opposition. This bore many parallels with previous right-wing criticism of strikes in nationalised industries during the 1950s. It was partly motivated by continued frustration with the apparent pervasiveness of public apathy towards industrial relations, despite Britain's dwindling economic record. Six weeks later, Cassandra's column lamented that 'on the face of it, the public couldn't care less' about the NUS strike, despite the paper's earlier promises of holiday disruption and rising food prices. It appeared that politics and industrial action only became meaningful to the public when it intersected their every day life and it was thus critical that the media highlighted such junctures in order to mobilise public opinion.

Although *British Pathé* contended that the effects of the strike were 'felt all over the country with soaring food prices', it was soon clear that the reality of the general public's experience was very different.²³ Nevertheless, the *Guardian* impressed that 'the illusion that the British economy can function without a shipping industry cannot, however, be sustained indefinitely'.²⁴ Such predictions of bleak outcomes, in the absence of immediate public crisis, paralleled the coverage of the conservative tabloids during the bus strike.²⁵ As a further indication of frustration with public apathy, the Cassandra article impressed 'foreigners' were 'amazed' that Britain, 'the sick man of Europe', 'whistles while he works – or doesn't work'.²⁶ Such concern with Britain's international reputation was increasingly widespread, across the media spectrum. In the weeks following the strike's conclusion, just as the *Express* had in 1958, the *Mirror* published extracts from the *New York Times* on its front page because it was 'important for people of Britain to know just how our economic crisis is viewed in other countries'.²⁷ With growing American influence in the Cold War geopolitical context, media analysis of views from across the Atlantic only further increased scrutiny of the British industrial scene, and offered the opportunity to impress the strike's importance on the disengaged British public. Moreover, as the seamen's strike had hit British exports in particular, concern with international trade during the NUS strike was even more acute.

²³ 'Strike Blockades Britain', *British Pathé*, May 19 1966.

²⁴ *Guardian*, 21 June 1966, p. 8.

²⁵ *Guardian*, 21 June 1966, p. 8.

²⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 24 June 1966, p. 6.

²⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 13 July 1966, p. 1.

The most controversial aspect of the strike was Harold Wilson's Commons speech on 20 June 1966, which attempted to expose 'a tightly knit group of *politically motivated men*' within the NUS.²⁸ For a Prime Minister to publicly condemn internal trade union politics was exceptional and underlined the significance of the strike for the Labour government, impatient to bring the episode to a close. There were concerns amongst Labour MPs that Wilson's speech had made 'the anti-Communist smear a weapon that every Tory could use'.²⁹ In media spheres, the speech served to solidify and entrench the political divisions that had already emerged, as a number of left-of-centre publications followed Wilson's lead. Wilson knew, although he had not used the word 'Communist', no one in the House or the press 'had any doubts whom [he] had in mind'.³⁰ Although Cassandra's column in the *Mirror* may well have feigned bewilderment at Wilson's decision to 'be so delicate' in specifying the political influences on the NUS, Cassandra's willingness to 'put two and two together and make four – or any multiple of four Communists who may be twisting the seamen to their own ends' illustrated Wilson's confidence in the media to assist him.³¹

The *Observer* also supported Wilson's attempts to expose so-called extremism. As Wilson's backbenchers expressed disgust with such tactics, it rejected claims that such public exposure was 'witch-hunting', and instead argued that Britain's 'best defence' against extremist politics was 'not restrictions on the activities of Communists but publicity', as Wilson had exemplified.³² In this spirit, the *Observer* and *Guardian* both published a number of investigation articles which claimed to contain evidence of Communist infiltration of the NUS and 'secret deals', although such claims seem to have predominantly been based on the contents of *Morning Star* editorials.³³ Regardless of such investigations' validity, these articles reaffirmed the papers' commitment to supporting Wilson's political intervention to condemn both the strike and the unions more broadly.

In such a context, the 'moderates versus militants' binary of the conservative tabloids, notable during the 1956 BMC strike, began to permeate the narratives of liberal broadsheets. An opinion column from the *Guardian* declared that there was 'clear evidence that extremists have been active' in the strike, despite a lack of concrete evidence presented in the article, which was 'the result of a

²⁸ HC Deb, 20 June 1966, vol. 730, cols 38-54.

²⁹ Tony Benn, *The Benn Diaries: 1940-1990* (London, 1995), p. 157.

³⁰ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-1970: a personal record* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 236.

³¹ *Daily Mirror*, 22 June 1966, p. 6.

³² *Observer*, 3 July 1966, p. 8.

³³ *Observer*, 26 June 1966, p. 11.

deliberate and organized campaign', indicating the paper's acceptance of some kind of Communist plot to influence the seamen's executive. However, more significantly, the article sought to isolate subversive 'militants' from the moderate majority.³⁴ According to this article, 'the unanswered question so far, is why the more moderate officials and executive members have, apparently, failed to put up any really effective stand against the militants'.³⁵ This suggested, firstly, political intent was a binary dynamic rather than a spectrum of views and, secondly, the more conservative elements of the union had been culpable in allowing Communism to prosper inside the union.

Wilson's relationship with the press

The *Guardian's* support of Wilson's stern response to the strike was important, given the deterioration of the relationship between Wilson and Cecil King, chairman of the *Mirror*, at that time. In the March before the strike, King described his intention 'to break loose from any close connection with the Labour Party', although he recognised that the *Mirror* could not support the Conservatives, given that it was 'hysterically pro-Labour at the election'.³⁶ Hugh Cudlipp, chairman of the *Mirror* and close confidante of King, described the relationship between King and Wilson as a 'duel'. Between 1966 and 1968, King was the 'deathwatch beetle in Wilson's powerhouse, ceaselessly expressing misgivings to Wilson's own cabinet members, overtly encouraging disloyalty and disillusion'.³⁷ In such a climate, Cudlipp felt that his self-appointed role during this period was 'above all to prevent an overt and acrimonious disassociation between the *Mirror* and the Labour movement'.³⁸ This provides some insight into the tense media climate that Wilson had to manage after 1966. Similarly, Thorpe noted that the *Observer's* contribution to the 'brief phase of "red scare"' ran contrary to the 'frosty relations' between Wilson and many of the newspaper's leading journalists.³⁹ Although the *Observer's* coverage pulled behind Wilson's cause in this 1966 case, Wilson was known to have a fractious relationship with Nora Beloff, the paper's political correspondent.⁴⁰ This context makes the consistency of the *Guardian* and *Mirror's* coverage all the more significant. Despite clear disharmony between key personalities, industrial relations represented a key area where, despite the union sympathy of many readers, Wilson's line was broadly followed.

³⁴ *Guardian*, 25 June 1966, p. 1.

³⁵ *Guardian*, 25 June 1966, p. 1.

³⁶ Cecil Harmsworth King, *The Cecil King Diary: 1970-1974* (Chatham, 1972), p. 61.

³⁷ Cudlipp, *Walking on the Water*, p. 294.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

³⁹ Thorpe, 'The "Juggernaut Method"', p. 478.

⁴⁰ Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992), p. 448.

The media's framing of the NUS leadership gave a very clear indication of attitudes towards the broader political context and the strike more generally. Where the *Observer* found fault in the contemporary NUS leadership, the *Daily Mail* found promise. The lifestyle of previous NUS leaders, driving luxury cars and smoking cigars, was recognized by both papers but with very different tone and framing to suit their judgment of the contemporary leadership. The *Observer* reflected on an NUS tradition of 'some of the strongest leaders in trade union history', who 'could be driven to fury at the very suggestion of Communist activity', nostalgic about the Deakin era of union control. Such an important legacy had been undermined by the 'increased democratization' and the lack of 'strong men among the unwieldy 48-man executive'.⁴¹ This negative framing of increased representation in trade union governance had much in common with the demands for strong leadership found in the conservative papers during the bus strike, using the same language to criticize Frank Cousins. In contrast, the *Daily Mail* portrayed Bill Hogarth, the NUS general secretary, as a well-intentioned but failed reformer, who had successfully overturned the 'enormous gulf between the top and bottom echelons' that had existed in the 1950s.⁴² Rather, according to the *Mail*, Hogarth's failures were a matter of unrealistic expectations, as he was asked to simultaneously democratize the union, 'modernize an industry still mentally in some respects in the windjammer era', and win pay and conditions concessions of such a scale that they might have taken 20 years to achieve.⁴³

The contrasts in portrayals and understandings of the NUS leadership's role in the strike, at least until Wilson's speech on Communist pressures, underlines the way in which many of the established norms of 1950s reporting were turned on their head by the mid-1960s. The expectations of leadership and democracy inside unions, across the media spectrum, had radically altered, in order to serve the political agenda of the newspapers. The increased democratization and the decline of conservative union leadership had complicated the task for any government trying to maintain control over Britain's industrial scene. With the Wilson government seeking to address immense economic pressure, the media support of the new Prices and Incomes policy meant abandoning some of the principles of previous industrial relations coverage.

Of course, while many traditions of industrial relations coverage were inverted, that did not mean the conservative press explicitly supported the strike. Although the likes of the *Times* 'painted a more sympathetic picture of the seamen than Wilson probably would have liked' unlike the events

⁴¹ *Observer*, 22 May 1966, p. 5.

⁴² *Daily Mail*, 17 May 1966, p. 8.

⁴³ *Daily Mail*, 17 May 1966, p. 8.

of the mid-1950s, the strikers lacked outright media support.⁴⁴ Ultimately, the rejection by the NUS of the Pearson settlement, the recommendations of a public enquiry that were widely regarded as generous settlement, invited universal criticism and ended all sympathetic coverage. Above all, the *Daily Mail* was broadly critical of Labour's handling of the strike, particularly after Wilson's dramatic speech. Wilson was consistently portrayed as an unwise and inconsistent negotiator, lacking sufficient 'statesmanship' to handle such problems.⁴⁵ The *Mail* was swift to highlight the inconsistencies of Wilson's no-nonsense approach to incomes, noting that 'the doctors did not even have to justify it [their rise in wages] to the Prices and Incomes Board', which suggested that Wilson's position was dictated by more than a commitment to an economic policy but a different agenda.⁴⁶ The *Times* also gave indications of partial sympathy for the seamen, commenting that it was 'sad that British seamen should be the anvil on which this hammer should fall', as other strikes had been vulnerable to similar treatment from government.⁴⁷ The NUS strike appeared to these newspapers to have been chosen by Wilson to use as an example, rather than because it was particularly exceptional.

However, the primary discomfort of the conservative press was Wilson's outspoken approach to handling the dispute. Personality politics, once again, had a significant impact on the coverage of industrial relations. As far as many columnists were concerned, Wilson flattered to deceive, as they labelled him a 'great impressionist' who ignored 'the fine print of his words', much to the disillusionment of his MPs.⁴⁸ Throughout the strike, the *Mail's* discomfort with Wilson's charismatic, personality politics was clear and a major foundation for criticism. In response to Wilson's claims about the political influences inside the NUS, the *Mail* declared that 'the gravy does not thicken' but that Wilson's comments were a 'professional exhibition'. This article argued that 'Communists were not doing anything they don't always try to do', in stoking the strike fire, and asked 'whether any Prime Minister is entitled to pick out individuals involved in an industrial dispute and shove them in the limelight in this way'.⁴⁹ The *Times* was equally sceptical of Wilson's claims, arguing that he was only able to claim he had substantiated his allegations because they were 'imprecise and therefore not capable of strict proof or disproof'.⁵⁰ This kind of coverage typifies a 'state of mind' amongst the

⁴⁴ Thorpe, 'The "Juggernaut Method"', p. 476.

⁴⁵ *Daily Mail*, 22 June 1966, p. 1.

⁴⁶ *Daily Mail*, 26 May 1966, p. 10.

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 21 June 1966, p. 13.

⁴⁸ *Daily Mail*, 27 June 1966, p. 6.

⁴⁹ *Daily Mail*, 29 June 1966, p. 1.

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 29 June 1966, p. 13.

press, described by historian Ben Pimlott, which perceived Wilson as ‘weak, two-faced, and morally corrupt’ and eventually became ‘so pervasive that it did not need a plot to back it up’.⁵¹

Although the *Express* was far more convinced of Wilson’s claims about Communist infiltration it felt Wilson’s promise of an investigation was ‘something of an anti-climax’, deeming his response to have not been strict enough in tackling ‘dangerous’ extremism.⁵² Throughout the strike, the conservative press framed the strike as a problem for the government, rather than employers, economy, or the industry more widely. Again, this was likely driven by a desire to apply political pressure on Wilson. Responsibility for the strike’s satisfactory conclusion lay with the Prime Minister, rather than the union or their employers, and the conservative press’s scepticism about Wilson’s style of government and broader political agenda made them far less willing to absorb and accept the vague language of Communist infiltration and extremism. This further illustrated the willingness of the press to use industrial relations coverage to fulfil wider political agendas.

Of the limited historiography on the strike, much is made of the damaging impact it had on Wilson’s relationship with his left-wing backbenchers. This analysis has highlighted that this fracture extended to the media’s relationship with trade unions. The willingness of elements of the left-of-centre press to utilise narrow binary narratives of union militancy; to denounce the trade union movement’s continued democratisation; and accuse unions of ‘blackmail’ demonstrated a sharp breakdown in existing relationships with trade unionism. That it was the conservative press that provided the most sympathetic media voice, driven by criticism for Wilson’s style of governance, perhaps best illustrated the radical changes in the dynamics of industrial relations coverage since the 1950s. This demonstrated the significance of newspapers’ party political agendas in shaping the direction of their industrial relations coverage.

In delivering his political goals – ending the strike and supporting the Incomes policy – Harold Wilson was undoubtedly successful and the media’s acquiescence in this mission was vital, as they legitimised the government’s politicisation of industrial relations. Wilson’s decision to publicly ‘expose’ political influence inside the NUS, which the media inevitably recognised as Communism, was hugely significant for public impressions of the government’s handling of the strike. Following coverage of Wilson’s comments on NUS politics, 50 per cent of those polled felt the government was ‘doing all it should’ to settle the dispute, an increase of 18 per cent on the previous month, while 57

⁵¹ Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, p. 448.

⁵² *Daily Express*, 29 June 1966, p. 10.

per cent felt his statement had helped towards a settlement.⁵³ For many members of the public, Wilson's intervention was a decisive moment in the strike and ensuring its conclusion. 67 per cent of those polled agreed that the 'political group' named by Wilson, embellished by the press, was responsible for the length of the strike, either to a 'great' or 'some' extent, which further indicated that Wilson and, perhaps more significantly, his media allies had been successful in convincing a majority of the public of the strength of Communist influences inside the NUS.⁵⁴ As the Labour Party had begun to distance itself from its traditional ties with trade unionism, the NUS strike coverage suggested the media would follow them in this pursuit.

If Paul Foot believed it was Wilson who 'brought politics centrally, and unequivocally into industrial relations' this was not without enthusiasm or encouragement from his media allies, and that was not without precedent, given the events of the bus strike. If, as Geoffrey Goodman argued, the industrial relations of the late 1950s blurred the lines between the industrial and the political, the events of 1966 represented their permanent erasure. The strike also established the media's tendency to frame the politicisation of industrial relations as union-instigated, despite the explicit intervention of major political personalities.

The Lost Labour Voter: In Place of Strife

The Labour Party's evolving relationship with class attitudes played an important part in shaping the policy debates of the late 1960s. In 1968, *Socialist Commentary* commissioned Abrams to conduct another survey, published in February 1969, in search of 'the lost Labour voter'. According to Abrams, a 'massive defection' had caused Labour to lose 'nearly half' of its committed support since the 1966 election.⁵⁵ In reflecting on the survey's results, Abrams reported that there was a 'considerable feeling', particularly among the middle classes, that a 'stricter line should be taken with the unions', where a majority believed unofficial strikes should have been made illegal and where, across all classes, a majority of people disliked strikes and looked to the Government to 'do something about them'.⁵⁶ This suggested that, amongst the middle classes, Labour had thus far disappointed with a perceived leniency in industrial relations policy, despite public appetite for firmer action. On the other hand, 'rather more of the ex-Labour people [defectors] than of others thought that the Government had been too strict' in its handling of union affairs, which highlighted a

⁵³ George Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain, Volume 2: 1965-1975* (New York, 1976), p. 875.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 875.

⁵⁵ Mark Abrams, 'The Lost Labour Voter', *Socialist Commentary* (February 1969), p. 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

key predicament for the Labour party in its reorientation towards the middle class vote – the risks of haemorrhaging traditional support. Of the former Labour voters, 79 per cent identified as working class, and the ‘lost Labour vote’ was to ‘disaffected working class voters’, many of whom indicated they would abstain from voting at the next election, put “keeping down prices” as ‘top priority’ and felt the government had ‘not kept its promises’ on industrial relations reform. With popular demand for government action, Labour now seemed to be faced with the choice of reengaging the working class vote with more conciliatory measures to deal with strikes or bow to the emerging middle class vote by introducing more severe sanctions.

So why were the growing number of middle class voters so enthusiastic for further laws to curb trade unions? If the late 1950s had been responsible for sparking a narrative of declinism, by the late 1960s the conceptualization of the country’s perceived economic struggle as a kind of ‘British disease’, a peculiar depressed national exceptionalism, was a firm part of the mainstream media discourse. By 1967, Britain’s faltering industrial productivity had been identified as a key symptom of this disease and this was viewed by contemporaries as ‘predominantly a “labour” problem’, concerned with the workforce and the unions, including strikes.⁵⁷ This economic frame was vital in establishing industry and unions as the focus of middle class attention. Moreover, the perception that the government was responsible for British economic improvement continued to be notably popular. It was this expectation that underpinned the creation of the *Donovan Commission*, an inquiry into British labour law and collective bargaining, ‘itself a monument to the growing obsession with industrial relations in 1960s Britain’ and the prelude to Barbara Castle’s *In Place of Strife* proposals.⁵⁸

These expectations of government did not mean that interventionism in British industry was wholly embraced and this further complicated the government’s mediation of industrial issues. Across the board, according to Abrams’s poll, there was opposition to government ‘having a hand in controlling wages’, despite early support for the government’s new incomes policy. This unified position on wages was labelled by Abrams as the ‘illogicality of people’s thoughts... either unable or unwilling to face up to the cause and effect relationship’ between wages and prices. It seems then that, by the time 1969 came around, public opinion regarding industrial relations was incredibly complex and difficult for policymakers to negotiate. Labour’s problems were compounded by increasing public doubt about Labour’s status as the best party to handle disputes. In October 1964, 42 per cent of

⁵⁷ Jim Tomlinson, ‘The British “Productivity Problem” in the 1960s’, *Past & Present* 175 (2002), p. 198.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

those polled by Gallup believed Labour to be best equipped but by November 1968, this number had steadily dropped to 26 per cent.⁵⁹ At the same time, several dents in Labour's media relationship, including Wilson's 'almost criminally over-complacent devaluation broadcast', along with the very public denunciation of Wilson by Cecil King of the *Mirror*, meant that 'the credibility gap' between the government's words and deeds soon 'widened into a chasm'.⁶⁰

When Castle came to propose legislation in early 1969, the issue of industrial politics and disputes had become a divisive issue for Labour. Castle published *In Place of Strife* to revise British industrial relations, through a raft of radical reforms, including a compulsory cooling-off period before official strikes, along with some punitive sanctions, such as financial penalties for non-compliance. A threat to the bed of legal immunities enjoyed by British trade unionism, the proposals were met with hostility from both the TUC and a number of Labour MPs. Castle attempted to use articles in *Tribune*, the left-leaning Labour newspaper, to insist this that she accepted the need for 'stronger' trade unions and the proposals formed the government's attempt to 'claim for [unions] a positive new role as a vital expression of democracy'.⁶¹ Such appeals failed to convince opponents inside her party. In contrast, the print media, with one notable exception, were largely supportive of Castle's attempts to reform trade unions and adopted varied tactics for cementing the support of the readership. *In Place of Strife* offered Labour the opportunity to regain some of the credibility it had lost in media circles during the preceding years. Although this episode was not particularly notable in the wider patterns of coverage previously explored, it was an important moment during a broad and gradual rise of industrial relations issues on the news agenda.

In light of the trend towards increased polling, newspapers were anxious to use public opinion to buttress their own editorial positions. The diversity of public opinion was not clear from the front-pages of the *Mirror*, as it published powerful polling results of its own. Labelled as the 'biggest opinion poll ever conducted among trade unionists on vital industrial issues' the *Mirror* professed to know 'what the workers really think about' the proposals. It summarised these thoughts as 'overwhelming support for the strike-curb proposals', highlighting 72 per cent in favour of secret ballots and 73 per cent support for a cooling-off period, amongst Castle's less controversial proposals.⁶² Public doubt about proposals to fine unofficial strikers, with only 53 per cent support,

⁵⁹ Anthony King and Robert Wybrow, *British Political Opinion, 1937-2000* (London, 2001), p. 85.

⁶⁰ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 63.

⁶¹ Barbara Castle, *Tribune*, 7 February 1969, p. 9.

⁶² *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1969, p. 1.

was obscured as the article continued on the following page.⁶³ Such selectivity illustrated the *Mirror's* political intentions, as well as their attempts to shape readers' perceptions of the political landscape, particularly trade unionists.

Although the *Daily Mail* did not go to the same lengths to survey opinion, it too drew upon such polls to contend that the proposals had the support of 'the public including the vast majority of ordinary trade unionists', in order to convince its readers of the strength of public demand for reform.⁶⁴ Whereas trade unionists had often found themselves isolated from media conceptualisations of 'the public' in previous years, with 'moderates' accused of being apathetic in resisting militancy, coverage in this instance, as means of isolating the dissenting voices of Labour and the TUC, drew upon the opinions of the rank-and-file. The reintegration of trade unionism into understandings of a British 'public' not only reflected a certain political expediency to the tabloid coverage of *In Place of Strife*, it also reflected the fluidity of such an idea, at a time of political uncertainty and anxiety.

Wilson was well aware of the importance of press support and, more significantly, published opinion polls. In an attempt to buttress his position in negotiations with the TUC over the proposals, he raised the 72 per cent figure with Vic Feather. The problem for Wilson was that he was far less popular than the proposals, as Feather quoted Wilson's 30 per cent popularity rating. This lack of approval which rendered him 'virtually powerless' and meant that his continuance as prime minister soon 'ceased to be a bargaining chip'.⁶⁵ It was difficult to insist on the supremacy of opinion polling when that same source also undermined his position as leader, particularly if one wanted to threaten departure to push proposals through – as was the case later that year.

⁶³ *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1969, p. 2.

⁶⁴ *Daily Express*, 16 June 1969, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, p. 540.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 3.2: 'Bloody Good Sense!', *Daily Mirror*, 18 January 1969, p. 1.

The *Mirror* repeatedly sought to convince its traditional unionized readership of the merits of the proposals, not just through the selective publication of polling, but also through the positive framing of proposals in its opinion columns. Castle's 'revolutionary new deal' not only made 'bloody good sense' but offered the opportunity to bring order to the 'jungle of industrial relations', which deserved the support of 'every unionist, every employer and every politician'.⁶⁶ It offered 'both trade unionists and employers a first-class new deal' and in doing so was 'far and away the most important of the uncompleted tasks of the Wilson government'.⁶⁷ Well aware of the common

⁶⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 18 January 1969, p. 1.

⁶⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 14 April 1969, p. 17.

criticisms of *In Place of Strife's* proposals, the *Mirror* sought to establish these changes as a restoration of order to negotiations, rather than a deliberate attack on trade unions. Although the *Mirror* confronted the issue of fines, it was swift to emphasize that these would also apply to 'bosses' and the new laws would also place certain responsibilities on employers, all as part of an effort to 'improve the atmosphere between Britain's workers and their bosses'.⁶⁸ Rather than a check on union power or influence, the *Mirror* headlined the White Paper as a 'curb on strikes' - the very issue which had concerned the public, across the board, in Abrams's survey.⁶⁹ Throughout the episode, the *Mirror* demonstrated a clear awareness of the likely social makeup of its readership, preserving a sense of unity in various forms, while pressing a very clear agenda in favour of legislation.

Elsewhere, however, media language was far more adversarial, as the White Paper was framed as a battleground for the government and the TUC. The *Times* commanded 'respect' for the Government's intentions, despite the fact it promised a 'head-on collision with the main interest on which it is founded'.⁷⁰ When the Cabinet gave proposals the go-ahead in April 1969, the *Express* declared this was 'Strike Law War'.⁷¹ According to this framing, the proposals were a deliberate and necessary attempt to curb the heightened and irresponsible power of trade unionism, capitalizing on public animosity. This dominant combative narrative, adopted by the majority of newspapers, undercut any attempts by the *Mirror* to cast the proposals in a positive light. An 'aggressive political lady', Castle's fine sanctions offered 'a condemned man the choice of a firing squad or the gallows'.⁷² In all of this language of combat and battle, the *Express* gave attention to the CBI's response, headlined 'Too Soft! Bosses rap Mrs Castle', suggesting that there was plenty of appetite for further reform and, inevitably, confrontation.⁷³ Moreover, this language of battle and antagonism did not just encompass Labour's relationship with the TUC, the 'ancient beam' which now creaked, but internal Party dynamics, as the *Daily Mail* appreciated the cracks in the Labour Party's 'jerry-built façade of unity' - a recurring metaphor in its coverage.⁷⁴ Throughout coverage, there was a suggestion that the important relationships both inside the Labour Party and outside were at breaking point and would be shaped by the outcomes of the government's attempts to legislate on union issues.

⁶⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 18 January 1969, p. 9.

⁶⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 31 December 1968, p. 1.

⁷⁰ *The Times*, 22 April 1969, p. 11.

⁷¹ *Daily Express*, 15 April 1969, p. 1.

⁷² *Daily Express*, 17 April 1969, p. 9.

⁷³ *Daily Express*, 1 January 1969, p. 1.

⁷⁴ *Daily Mail*, 31 March 1969, p. 1.

Woman in Power: Barbara Castle

Perhaps Barbara Castle's passionate and confrontational style partly inspired this depiction of an open battle. While there was a great deal of scepticism about Castle's department, as the *Guardian* labelled the Ministry of Labour as 'increasingly schizophrenic', this was mitigated by optimism about Castle's personal strengths and the hope that she could 'produce a new kind of conciliation, less crude than the splitting of differences'.⁷⁵ Parallels were drawn with Queen Elizabeth I, as both were 'eloquent' and 'feminine, not averse to using tears at the right moment', when caught in the eye of a 'political hurricane'.⁷⁶ A woman of 'immense energy and persuasive powers', she was, in the judgement of the *Times*, a woman who knew 'how to use feminine charm and when to be tough'.⁷⁷ Analysis, and general support, of Castle's political role, was built firmly upon her personality and gender, more than her political experience.

Even the *Observer* began its 1969 'Woman in Power' interview with Castle with two questions about her husband, Ted, which asked how she had met him and, prompted by her answers, why Castle 'needed him' before moving onto her political reflections and ideologies.⁷⁸ Undoubtedly, this interview pointed to a concern with Castle's gender but, perhaps more significantly, such a line of questioning tapped into a broader trend of personalization. Such a tendency, well established in the print media and unsettling for those in political life, had now begun to permeate broadcast media. In October 1968, Tony Benn expressed his frustration that political discussion was 'oversimplified' and conflict was 'artificially sharpened' by the BBC, concluding that broadcasting was 'really too important to be left to the broadcasters'.⁷⁹ Such a speech was indicative of the erosion of the relationship between politicians and the media, particularly the Labour Party and the BBC during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which would be crucial to winning any public argument over trade unions.

BBC television reporting of the Bill was prominent in *Panorama* coverage. The BBC interviewed both Wilson and Castle at different moments and employed a confrontational style which adopted many of the frames of reference of press commentary. Firstly, it is notable that by this stage even BBC interviewers regarded unofficial strikes as 'perhaps the central problem' for industrial relations

⁷⁵ *Guardian*, 11 April 1968, p. 10.

⁷⁶ *Daily Express*, 3 March 1969, p. 8.

⁷⁷ *The Times*, 6 April 1968, p. 1.

⁷⁸ *Guardian*, 5 October 1969, p. 29.

⁷⁹ *Daily Express*, 19 October 1968, p. 11.

reform, when putting questions to Wilson.⁸⁰ This was indicative of the prevalence of explaining Britain's industrial problems as a result of workers' attitudes, rather than wider systemic issues based around modernisation and productivity. Secondly, concern about the power of the left of the Labour Party and the trade unions to determine the direction of industrial reform was expressed by Robin Day, who 'rejected deference to politicians' and was known for 'probing and sometimes blunt questions', in a tone which irritated Barbara Castle.⁸¹ Day's questions about the state of the Bill were framed using words like 'weaken' or 'water-down' rather than 'negotiation' or 'compromise'.⁸² This was despite David Dimbleby's earlier suggestion to Harold Wilson on *Panorama* that union co-operation was 'essential' to the success of legislation.⁸³ The language of antagonism and animosity which underpinned the majority of press coverage had begun to permeate the purportedly impartial journalism of the BBC.

The clear exceptions to the White Paper's press endorsement, of those papers analysed in this study, were the editorial columns of the *Guardian*. The *Guardian* was far from alone as a newspaper in criticizing the proposals but it perhaps formed the most notable voice of media dissent. Throughout the episode, the *Guardian* advocated a more conciliatory tone to reform, feeling that harsh sanctions would only antagonise unions. Indeed, the *Guardian's* columns argued that, although the Bill would 'almost certainly be popular in the country at large', 'enforcement through law will lead to new disputes'.⁸⁴ John Cole, then the *Guardian's* news editor and the unsigned author of the majority of these columns, adopted a line of argument which he understood to be 'not universally popular within the office' and he suspected that even his editor Alistair Hetherington 'was not at all certain' of his judgment, particularly after an tense face-to-face meeting with Castle which Cole remembered as a 'full and frank exchange of views'.⁸⁵ The lunch between representatives of the *Guardian* and Castle, was, according to Alistair Hetherington, a 'fiery occasion' where Castle 'started her attack on John Cole even before she had a drink in her hand, and he replied in kind'.⁸⁶ Castle, intensely aware of the *Guardian's* considerable influence on centre-left policy attitudes, had failed to convince a crucial media outlet of its standpoint. Instead, the *Guardian* columns, accompanied by the *Observer* and Goodman's columns in the *Sun*, brought into question the entire economic frame of explanation which *In Place of Strife's* popularity was built upon. The

⁸⁰ *The Listener*, 23 January 1969, p. 111.

⁸¹ Martin Conboy, *Journalism: A Critical History* (London, 2012), p. 199.

⁸² *The Listener*, 1 May 1969, p. 614.

⁸³ *The Listener*, 23 January 1969, p. 111.

⁸⁴ *Guardian*, 17 April 1969, p. 12.

⁸⁵ Cole, *As It Seemed to Me*, p. 67.

⁸⁶ Hetherington, *Guardian Years*, p. 213.

Guardian was sceptical about the role of strikes in Britain's economic crisis, concerned that, in pursuing the perceived "strike problem", April's revised Bill did not engage with the 'most serious issues' for British industry of 'poor productivity, weak management, reluctance to export, and low investment'.⁸⁷ Moreover, although the Bill was intended to cut the number of strikes, it failed to address the issue of communication between workers and employers - the 'dominant cause' of unofficial strikes. The *Observer* contended that it was 'neither possible nor desirable' to abolish strikes completely, particularly given they were not 'the cause of our economic malaise', and that if ministers were less prepared 'to play the role of firemen, there would be fewer fires'.⁸⁸ A legislative shortcut would not only fail to remedy the symptoms of the 'British sickness' but, in encouraging the government to intervene, it would further damage industrial relations.

Rather than framing the debate between Castle and the TUC as a battle, this was a question of whether the TUC could 'save Labour', particularly given the 'personal implications' for Wilson, as failure to agree would leave the Government 'doomed'.⁸⁹ Once Castle's proposals stumbled, it was a matter of whether the TUC would help Labour save face, rather than placing the onus on government to induce the TUC to accept proposals. While the likes of the *Times* and the *Express* made demands for harsher measures, the *Guardian's* coverage was very much mindful of the TUC's power. Throughout the episode, Cole was given the licence to attack the proposals as he saw them, indicative of the paper's tradition of 'relying on the judgment of the person who has done the work on a subject', given Cole's knowledge of trade unions on both sides of the Atlantic, rather than follow a narrow editorial agenda. John Cole, then, was chiefly responsible for establishing the *Guardian* as a dissenting voice in media coverage. It rejected common frames of explanation for Britain's industrial struggles, as well as questioning the balance of power in negotiations. Although this dissent did not become popular amongst the press, it undoubtedly fuelled debates within the Labour Party, mirrored in the likes of *Tribune*. Moreover, as Hetherington recalled, this episode helped to shape the *Guardian's* line of argument for the early 1970s, when the issues became more 'intense'.⁹⁰

As debate surrounding the proposals continued, the *Mirror* became increasingly concerned with the impact the episode was having on the public's faith in British politics. In an editorial entitled 'Politics in Ferment', the paper reflected on the 'fever' around trade union reform and proposals in major

⁸⁷ *Guardian*, 5 May 1959, p. 10.

⁸⁸ *Observer*, 16 March 1969, p. 8.

⁸⁹ *Guardian*, 12 May 1969, p. 8.

⁹⁰ Hetherington, *Guardian Years*, p. 213.

newspapers for a 'different approach to the political realities of today', including the *Telegraph's* argument for a new coalition government to deal with trade union policy.⁹¹ The *Mirror* reflected that such ideas would always be raised when there was 'public disillusion over the ineffectiveness of the main political Parties', particularly when there was a divided government 'and an Opposition with nothing better to offer'.⁹² It was clear that the prolonged discussion over Castle's White Paper had prompted a raft of concerns about the ability of either major party to deal with the 'problem' of trade unions, not just the Labour Party. By late 1968, it had been clear that public concern about Labour's ability to deal with the problem of strikes and 'trade disputes' was symptomatic of a general disillusionment with party politics, as 41 per cent of those polled felt there wasn't much to choose between the Conservatives and Labour on industrial relations policy, up from 16 per cent in 1966.⁹³ Goodman believed that 'public disenchantment toward Parliament, and the widespread conviction that its debates scarcely ever reflect the realities of life, is less a criticism against individual MPs than against our inadequate system of popular representation'.⁹⁴

Overall, the media reception for *In Place of Strife's* proposals was about as good as Labour could have hoped for, in light of their fragile relationship with the media. By this time, the *Mirror's* attitude to government policy had softened since 1967, mostly due to Cecil King's dramatic exit, and Geoffrey Goodman, another critic, was yet to make his move to the *Mirror* from the declining *Sun*. Although the right-wing press may have preferred stricter sanctions, there was a general appreciation that Labour's proposals were as radical as party circumstance would feasibly allow. *In Place of Strife's* proposals addressed concerns with British industry, according to the pervasive frames of explanation in the media, namely that the labour force was at the root of Britain's problems. The *Guardian's* response was perhaps the only disappointment but, given Cole's role in steering its coverage and his concern with wider industrial issues and alternative economic frames, this was not wholly surprising.

Surrender '69: A crisis of control and authority

Media reaction to the Bill's collapse was predictable. The face-saving alternative, a 'solemn and binding agreement' with the TUC, was received with almost universal dissatisfaction. Following a language of battle and conflict, the decision to accept the TUC agreement was, according to the *Daily Mail*, 'the greatest surrender in modern British politics', after Wilson and Castle had 'weakly

⁹¹ *Daily Mirror*, 12 May 1969, p. 2.

⁹² *Daily Mirror*, 12 May 1969, p. 2.

⁹³ King and Wybrow, *British Political Opinion*, p. 85

⁹⁴ Geoffrey Goodman, 'In Defence of Ideology', *Socialist Commentary* (May, 1968), p. 5.

and cynically betrayed their promises'.⁹⁵ The *Express* followed a similar line (Figure 3.3), and declared that 'not since Napoleon turned his face towards Paris from the outskirts of Moscow has the been such a massive retreat' as Wilson's settlement with the TUC.⁹⁶ As far as the press was concerned, this historic battle over industrial reform had, by its very nature, produced a winner and a loser. The warmest press response, from the *Mirror*, was tepid. It declared the settlement was neither a climb down or a triumph, and while 'applause would be inappropriate', its front-page editorial column argued Wilson had 'no alternative' as a Labour Prime Minister. In its defence of Wilson, the paper referenced discomfort with the power of unions, both over the Labour Party and democracy more widely. The settlement exemplified trade union influence, 'a power outside the precincts of parliament as great as that which exists within', more than humiliation for Wilson.⁹⁷ Wilson's faith in this final settlement was his 'biggest gamble', as its failure would drive Labour 'into the wilderness for two decades'.⁹⁸ While many would suggest that *In Place of Strife* had been Labour's final chance to deal with the British disease, the *Mirror* clung to the hope that the new agreement may solve Wilson's woes.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 3.3: 'Surrender '69', *Daily Express*, 19 June 1969, p. 1.

⁹⁵ *Daily Mail*, 19 June 1969, p. 1.

⁹⁶ *Daily Express*, 19 June 1969, p. 8.

⁹⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 19 June 1969, p. 1.

⁹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 19 June 1969, p. 2.

In retrospect, the largely positive portrayal of Castle had done little to strengthen the government's position with the unions. Philip Ziegler has suggested that if Castle had been 'less colourful, less eloquent, less persuasive', the very traits that encouraged the newspapers, her White Paper might have enjoyed greater success.⁹⁹ Although Castle did meet many of these trade union leaders in person, it is not unreasonable to suggest that press coverage played a part in creating this impression, such was the hunger for personality politics. In Ziegler's judgement, 'cautious and male-chauvinist union leaders resented the pressure of this redoubtable Amazon and reacted against it by a stubborn determination not to yield', evidenced by the numerous conversations which took place between Castle, Wilson and the TUC leaders.¹⁰⁰ In 1969, the idea of a largely male dominated trade union leadership being dictated to by a determined and colourful female personality, as the press had suggested, was uncomfortable for many. Moreover, Castle felt that her political allies were glad to 'abandon' her to her political 'fate'.¹⁰¹ Although absent from Wilson's account of the episode, Castle recalled Wilson's rejection of the TUC's June Proposals ('Programme for Action') had been outlined in a statement under Castle's name while she was out of the country, much to her horror.¹⁰² The minister's determination to continue in her role the following winter was regarded by the likes of Peter Jenkins, writing in the *Guardian*, as 'foolhardiness' and Castle was now regarded as a potential 'political liability' for the government in its negotiations with the TUC.¹⁰³ Personally and politically embroiled in the episode, Barbara Castle was left with few allies and her experience post-settlement demonstrated the enthusiasm of Labour politicians to disassociate themselves from the undoubted embarrassment, which Castle was seen to embody.

Similarly, the right-wing enthusiasm for strict sanctions on trade unions, analysed earlier, also arguably had a counterproductive impact on negotiations. It was the antagonistic tone to the press coverage of *In Place of Strife* which Wilson viewed as decisive in shaping attitudes towards the proposals. He concluded that the TUC's negative response to *In Place of Strife* had been 'whipped up by the press: it was hardly surprising that the public regarded them as consisting entirely of the so-called "penal clauses"'.¹⁰⁴ Labour had constructed a bill built on the language of trade unionism's rights and responsibilities that had underpinned political commentary of trade unions since the

⁹⁹ Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life* (London, 1993), p. 302.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁰¹ Barbara Castle, *Fighting All the Way* (London, 1994), p. 425.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 423.

¹⁰³ *Guardian*, 21 October 1969, p. 12.

¹⁰⁴ Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-1970*, p. 605.

Second World War. Castle's proposals gave unions and workers new rights, such as the legal right to belong to a union, but it was the responsibilities, and the associated penal clauses, which were the emphasis of much of the coverage. This was indicative of the public mood around trade unions, not seeking to enable but to restrain the TUC, and illustrated an important development in the balance of industrial relations commentary. It also represented a failure on Labour's part to manage media communication of the proposals, particularly traditional press allies, as the emphases of coverage only intensified confrontation between the TUC and the Party.

Although the nature of press coverage contributed to the Bill's demise, the alleged crisis of authority which the Labour government endured after the breakdown of negotiations was partly of its own making. Harold Wilson had told the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) at an April 1969 meeting that the passage of the Bill was 'essential' to employment, economy, the 'recovery of the nation' and, most significantly, to the Labour Party's 'continuance in office'.¹⁰⁵ In doing so, Wilson 'staked the authority of the Government' on a Bill which was already clearly unpopular with a large proportion of the PLP.¹⁰⁶ These quotes appeared in almost every major newspaper, raising the stakes on such brinkmanship. When the Bill failed, it was inevitable that such a bold statement would come back to bite. To Wilson's irritation, it was this statement above all others which, to his mind, 'created yet another legend, unscrupulously fostered by Opposition leaders and Opposition press' and used to Labour's detriment at the 1970 General Election.¹⁰⁷ In the shorter term, it prompted a raft of criticisms about Labour's ability to govern, with the *Express* pondering if Wilson could ever recover his 'prestige'.¹⁰⁸ The *Express* conceded the likelihood that Wilson's government would continue in office, but would 'survive in contempt' as nothing could now 'bridge the credibility gap between the Government and the rest of the world', which suggested that Wilson's defeat had dented more than his government's domestic reputation.¹⁰⁹

While it also recognised Wilson's 'humiliation' and 'diminished authority', the *Times* argued that the 'charade', a term indicative of its contempt for the episode, had been played out on two levels – an argument about 'industrial discipline' and a 'political power struggle'.¹¹⁰ While the TUC commitments marked an 'advance to self-reform of the unions', Wilson's authority was now

¹⁰⁵ Harold Wilson, Speech to the Parliamentary Labour Party, 17 April 1969.

¹⁰⁶ Peter Dorey, 'Industrial Relations Imbroglio', in Peter Dorey (ed.), *The Labour Governments 1964-1970* (Abingdon, 2006), p. 102.

¹⁰⁷ Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-1970*, p. 643.

¹⁰⁸ *Daily Express*, 19 June 1969, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ *Daily Express*, 19 June 1969, p. 8.

¹¹⁰ *The Times*, 20 June 1969, p. 9.

'diminished' inside the Labour Party and the episode had left the impression that Wilson had been 'forced to abandon his political strategy... in order to quell mutiny at base'.¹¹¹ This problem had been predicted by the media before the collapse, as the *Mail* argued the Bill had provided the opportunity for Wilson to put aside his party's crisis for the sake of the country, perhaps at the expense of a general election result, as the British public would 'at least respect a man who goes out fighting for what he knows to be right for the country'.¹¹² The tension was not lost on the *Mirror*, as conventional Labour allies, which, even in its more softer verdict on the settlement, reprinted its April contention that Wilson should have 'put Country above Party – and damn the consequences' as what was 'immediately good for the Party militants is not good for Britain'.¹¹³ Such framing, shared on all sides, suggested that Wilson's ability to govern effectively had been impaired by the indiscipline or disloyalty of his traditional support.

Coverage of *In Place of Strife* depicted and exacerbated the tensions within post-war social democracy identified by Stuart Hall. Hall argued this contradiction lay between the 'government-to-people' attentions of the Labour party in power, which demanded that Labour disciplined working class groups in order to serve a 'national interest', and the 'class-to-party' rhetoric of Labour in opposition, the language of its political ideology and working-class tradition.¹¹⁴ It appeared that, in coercing Wilson into compromise, the labour movement had put their own 'sectional interests' ahead of public opinion and national interest. According to the *Mail* front pages, Britain now had 'two masters', in its foreign creditors and the TUC – not the government - where the creditors told Britain 'how to get out of the red' and the TUC prevented the country from doing so.¹¹⁵ This kind of commentary reinforced the sentiment that the government had lost control of the situation and it was now clear that it had to choose between solving the national debt or pandering to the unions, as the two were now completely irreconcilable.

In Place of Strife was far more than a public humiliation for Barbara Castle. It symbolised the ability of media forces to 'turn' on a government and intensified public anxiety about the ability of government to respond to the supposedly extreme power of trade unionism. What was left of *In Place of Strife* by the end of 1969, according to the *Guardian*, was an 'emasculated Bill' which lacked 'both philosophy and principle', and it would be wise for the next Government to 'start from

¹¹¹ *The Times*, 20 June 1969, p. 9.

¹¹² *Daily Mail*, 15 April 1969, p. 1.

¹¹³ *Daily Mirror*, 19 June 1969, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today* (January 1979), p. 16.

¹¹⁵ *Daily Mail*, 24 June 1969, p. 1.

scratch'.¹¹⁶ Although the events of 1969 once again demonstrated that the demarcation between the industrial and political was blurred in wider political culture, hostility to the Bill ensured 'the strengthening of the demarcation between the industrial and political sides of the labour movement in a way which probably forestalled similar "counter-attacks" on union power in the future'.¹¹⁷ While there were significant reasons to doubt Heath's claims of 'industrial anarchy' in Britain, it was true that the industrial climate was 'bad', and, for the *Guardian*, the episode had justified the opinion that it could not be improved by legislation.¹¹⁸ For other newspapers, with the 'labour problem' firmly established in mainstream political orthodoxy, the failure of the Bill merely revealed that cooperation with unions over industrial relations policy was now impossible. Commentators' questions about Labour's ability to successfully manage the union 'problem' would persist until the 1970 general election, when Edward Heath shocked political commentators with his surprise win.

¹¹⁶ *Guardian*, 29 December 1969, p. 10.

¹¹⁷ Dorfman, *Government Versus Trade Unionism*, p. 49.

¹¹⁸ *Guardian*, 31 October 1969, p. 10.

Chapter Four – Declinism, Morality and Productivity

Economic Futures, 1960-69

Would 1960s Britain choose to be a 'lotus island of easy, tolerant ways, bathed in the golden glow of an imperial sunset, shielded from discontent by a threadbare welfare state' or would it 'seek new worlds to conquer in place of those we have lost, ready to accept growing pains as the price of growth'?¹ This was the dilemma for Britain's economic future, posed by Michael Shanks in the conclusion of his influential work, *The Stagnant Society*, in 1961. As successive governments, Conservative and Labour, failed to provide sufficiently 'progressive' responses to such challenges, the economic narrative of the decade became increasingly 'declinist'. Although modern historians have interrogated the validity of such a pessimistic interpretation, particularly when compared to recent British economic experience, they have convincingly theorised why such a view existed. It was inspired by a British preoccupation with, firstly, its traditional manufacturing industries, and, secondly, its share of world markets. Barry Supple has highlighted a century-long British preoccupation with economic failure, based on Britain's relative performance with other countries, despite general growth. Ideologically driven, according to Supple, understanding of British failure is and was underpinned by 'the humiliation of the loss of international power, the insecurity of deindustrialisation, and the frustration of felt needs and aspirations'.² Analysis of the 1950s highlighted the media's willingness to compare Britain's performance with its perceived competitors and the nature of this discussion evolved as declinism grew more prominent. The prevalence of this narrative, despite an apparent rise in living standards and relative middle class affluence, suggests the media played a part in buttressing its appeal and sustaining impressions of looming economic ruin. Alan Booth has reflected on the 'manufacturing failure hypothesis (MFH)' of British declinism, where he concluded that while productivity growth 'could or perhaps should have been a little faster' during Britain's long boom, it was not the economic hindrance that many contemporary commentators claimed. Nor were accusations of British industrial 'ineptitude' accurate.³ Understanding the media's contribution to this misleading fixation with the manufacturing industry is an important focus of the following section.

¹ Michael Shanks, *The Stagnant Society* (London, 1961), p. 232.

² Barry Supple, 'Fear of Failing: Economic History and the Decline of Britain', *The Economic History Review* 47 (1994), p. 457.

³ Alan Booth, 'The Manufacturing Failure Hypothesis and the Performance of British Industry During the Long Boom', *The Economic History Review* 56 (2003), p. 2.

This chapter analyses media perceptions and portrayals of trade unionism's contribution to productivity, as well as the duties demanded of unions in order to salvage Britain's international reputation. In doing so, it seeks to interrogate relevant frames of explanation for disappointing economic performance, noting their evolution across the decade. This is supported by content analysis of newspapers. The impact of media coverage on perceptions of the complex emergent relationship between concerns about the growth of inflation, the maintenance of a feasible wages policy and the productivity of industry is explored, with particular focus on trade unionism's reported involvement and its perceived legitimacy. While the persistence of strikes inevitably informs some of the analysis in this chapter, particularly in view of the rise in 'wildcat strikes', emphasis shall lie in industrial strife's contribution to broader economic narratives and structures.

Inflation, Wages and Productivity

Arguably the single most significant issue of industrial relations coverage during the 1960s was productivity. On the surface, it is perhaps not immediately clear why that agenda topic would be directly relevant to the nature of trade union coverage. Failing industrial productivity *could* be explained by a variety of different problems, from the modernisation of industry to sufficient capital investment. However, Britain's emerging problem with rising inflation was perceived to be centred on its wage policies and the responsibilities of its workforce. This meant that, according to Tomlinson, for most employers productivity was deployed in 'long-term standing arguments against trade unions and their alleged restrictive practices', and, although the unions were 'happy to embrace at least the rhetoric', they soon became concerned about the 'perceived threats to free collective bargaining'.⁴ Prior to Labour's election in 1964, opinion polls reflected public support for Labour providing a policy to limit wage increases, more so than their Conservative opponents and, regardless of which political party should be successful, 58 per cent agreed that wages had to rise more slowly than they had in the past.⁵ Tomlinson argues that the 'rush of enthusiasm' for productivity policies in 1966, evidenced by Labour's general election manifesto, 'proved to be short-lived and productivity soon faded from political and public concern'.⁶ Nevertheless, for three prominent newspapers of the British press, there is clear quantitative evidence that interest in productivity was significant. Figure 4.1 reflects continued growth beyond 1966's high tide in Whitehall, particularly in the *Times*, as productivity was the emerging watchword of 1960s industrial relations coverage.

⁴ Tomlinson, 'The British "Productivity Problem"', p. 207.

⁵ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 1*, p. 705.

⁶ Tomlinson, 'The British "Productivity Problem"', p. 205.

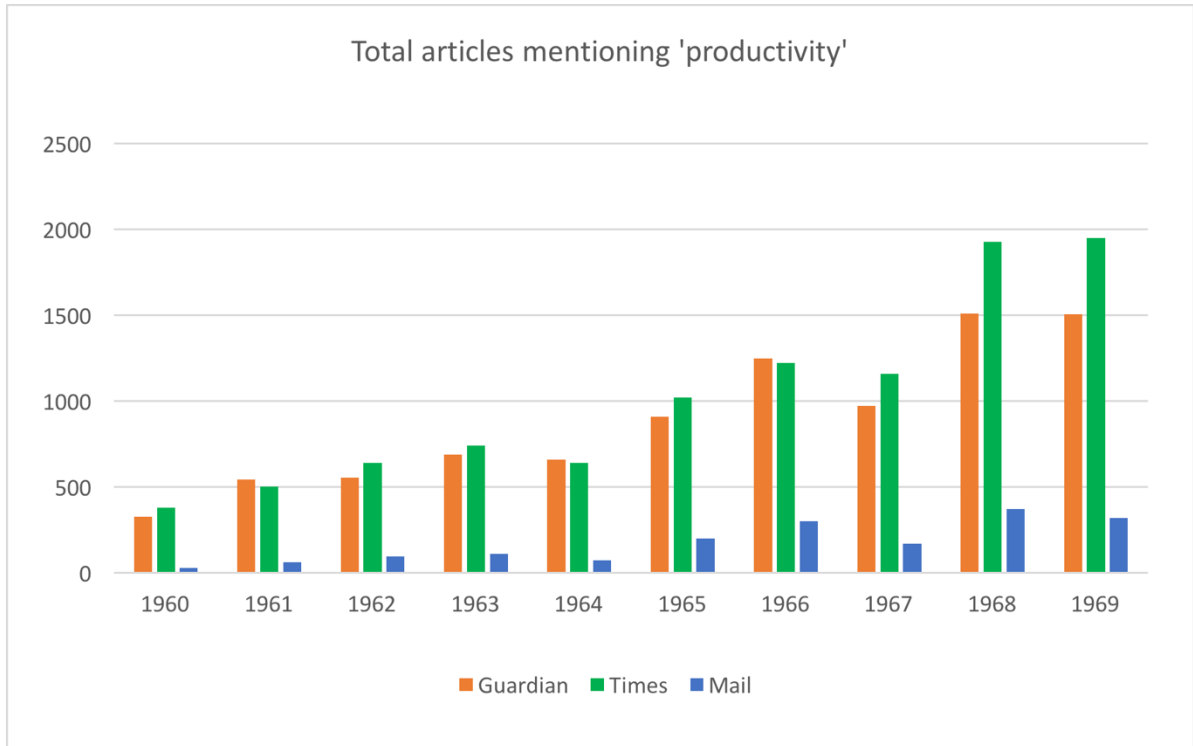


Figure 4.1: Productivity articles (1960-69)

As Labour's relationships with both unions and employers deteriorated and made negotiations seem futile, the rhetoric of the productivity debate shaped press coverage of industrial relations in more enduring ways, beyond 1966. Although interest showed a slight dip in 1967, the peak of press interest in productivity was in 1968-69, when the economy was perceived to deteriorate quickly. More significantly, the specific nature of this focus on productivity showed significant change over time, particularly when analysing the frames of explanation employed by different newspapers.

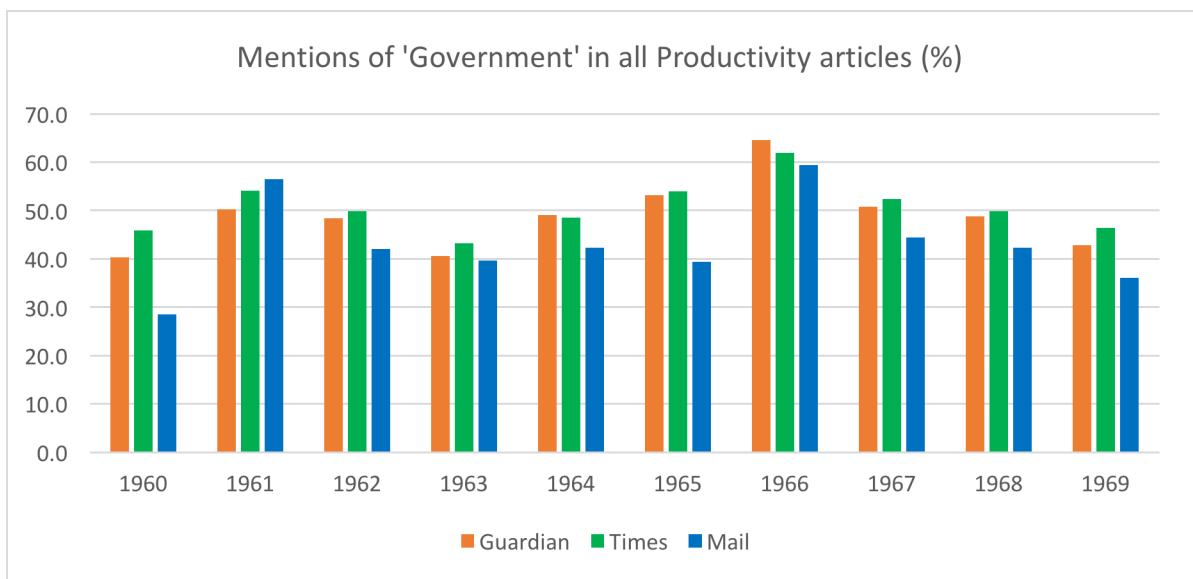


Figure 4.2: 'Government' in productivity articles (1960-69)

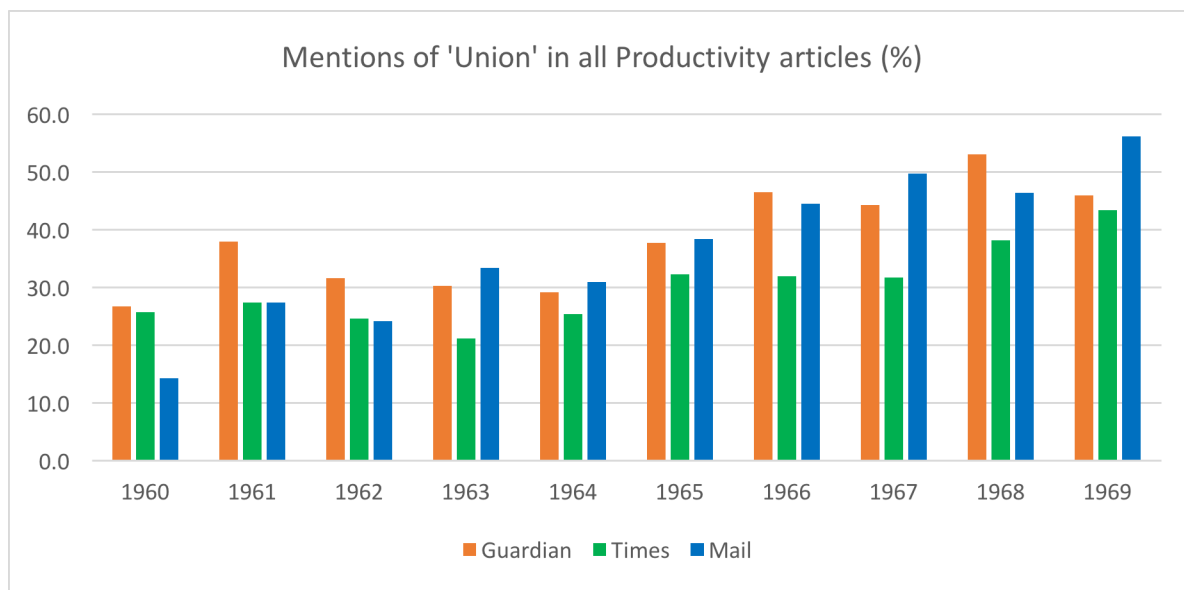


Figure 4.3: 'Union' in productivity articles (1960-69)

Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3 represent the proportion of productivity articles which mentioned the words 'government' and 'union' respectively. Inevitably, there is an overlap in these articles and mentions do not necessarily indicate specific frames of explanation but broad contextual trends can be drawn from the data above, such is the clarity in particular trends. From 1962 onwards, mentions of unions in productivity articles showed a gradual but consistent increase, particularly notable in the *Daily Mail*. Meanwhile, although mentions of 'government' in 1966 exceeded any other year for both categories and mentions remained prominent until the end of the decade, its decline after 1966 is marked. This pattern provides further evidence to support Tomlinson's belief that 1966 was the 'high tide' of productivity policy in Whitehall, with significant debate in the preceding years. There is evidence of a transition in the way productivity was discussed, as focus on the government's role declined and shifted towards scrutiny on unions. Such an evolution in the trends of productivity discussions suggests that the key anxieties expressed in industrial relations coverage were related increasingly to the protracted way wage improvements were obtained in the late 1960s, given the growing interest in industrial strife, rather than simply the increases themselves. By October 1968, ten per cent of those polled by Gallup perceived industrial disputes to be the most urgent issue for the government, the most since the Second World War.⁷ This change also correlates with Labour's change in policy emphasis, from productivity debates towards Donovan's structural analysis of industrial relations and *In Place of Strife's* anti-strike legislation.

⁷ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 2*, p. 1017.

While papers followed similar patterns in coverage, particularly with respect to the government’s role, indicative of a broader media dialogue, individual newspapers had their own agenda and focuses. In this respect, statistical profiling of each newspaper provides patterns which, although entirely in-keeping with their political agendas, shows interesting variety in which the issue of ‘productivity’ was approached, particularly when the contribution of management is also considered.

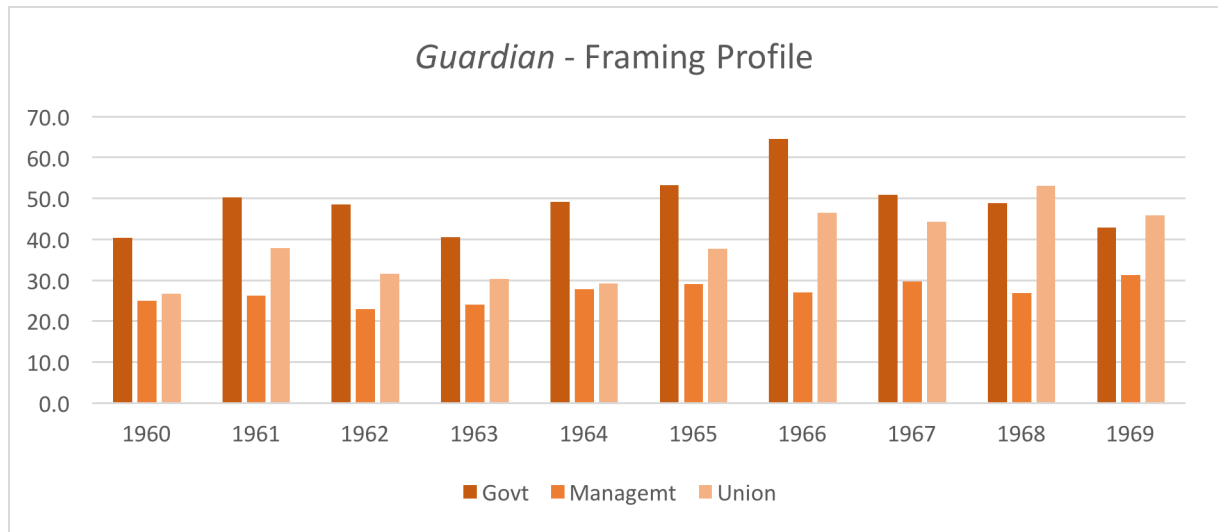


Figure 4.4: Comparison of frames of explanation in the *Guardian* (1960-69)

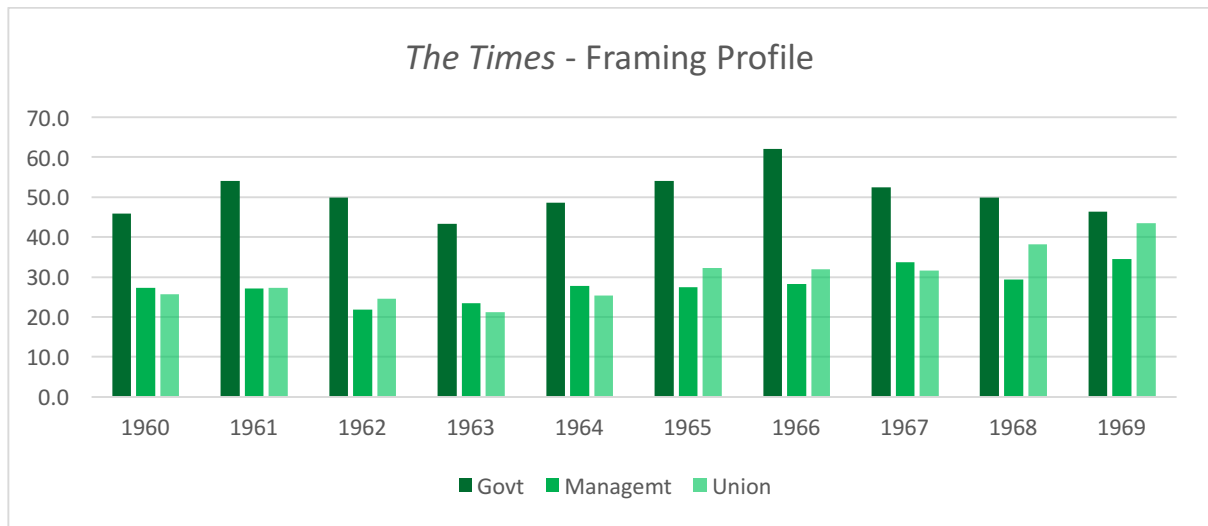


Figure 4.5: Comparison of frames of explanation in the *Times* (1960-69)

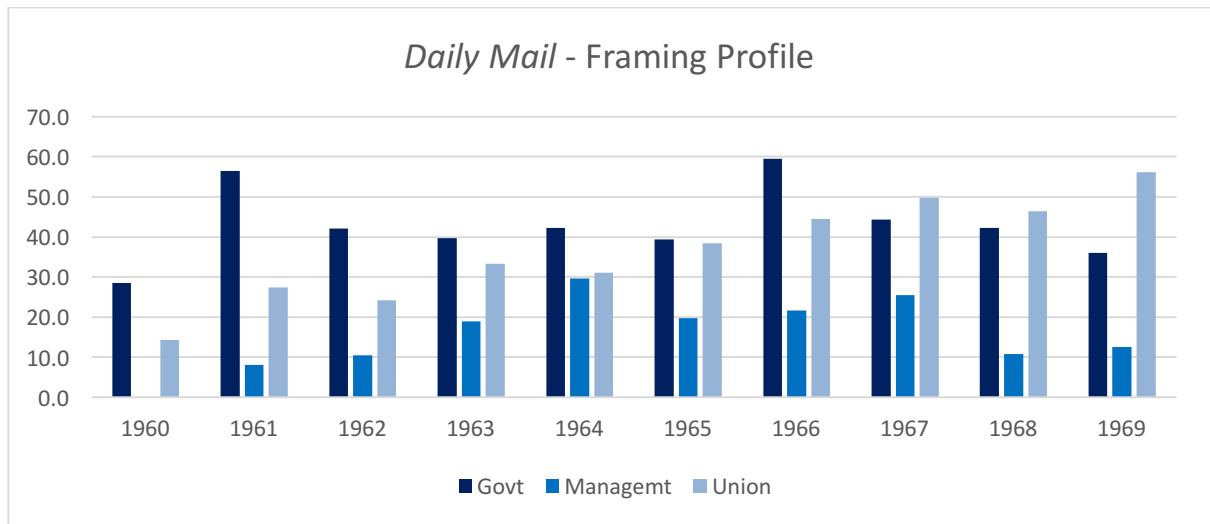


Figure 4.6: Comparison of frames of explanation in the *Daily Mail* (1960-69)

For the *Daily Mail*, management was consistently the least mentioned issue, notably so at the beginning and end of the decade. This is indicative of a lack of scrutiny of non-labour issues in relation to the supposed productivity problem. Similar analysis was conducted with mentions of 'employers' where the results were even more extreme, as the term was hardly mentioned in either the *Mail*, and never appeared in more than five per cent of a year's productivity articles. When this is coupled with the *Mail's* trend towards increasing mention of unions, which overtook both government and management factors by 1967, it is clear how the emphasis evolved. In the *Times*, mentions of both management and unions increased, while the government mentions declined, to the point where all three were very similar in frequency by the end of the decade. Both the *Times* and the *Guardian* provided consistent coverage of matters of management in its assessments of productivity, indicative of a more balanced analysis which employed a greater variety of frames of explanation than the *Mail*.

By the end of the decade, the *Times* provided the only annual coverage where the unions were not the most dominant issue in productivity coverage, although, as the chapter explores, the *Mail* and the *Guardian* addressed unions in contrasting ways, despite similar frequencies. It appears then, that while this quantitative analysis alludes to some interesting trends in media coverage of productivity, particularly in respect to trade unionism, it also raises some important questions about the reasons for certain focuses and shifts in emphasis, partly due to unexpected commonalities between newspapers.

Labour's moralised rhetoric and the media's response

Amongst his body of work on economic declinism, Tomlinson has highlighted the 'moralisation' of economic discourse in the post-war era. The government's rhetoric on wages was shaped for a working-class audience that had been long seen as having 'distinct cultural assumptions of a collectivist/solidaristic/moral nature, and to be at least potentially sceptical about how far such moral values could be reconciled with a market economy'.⁸ Although the meaning of 'fairness' in an economic context was 'always doubtful and contestable', one of the key versions of its meaning propagated by the government was derived from the link to productivity, part of the establishment's defence of its ability to produce 'morally acceptable, "fair" outcomes alongside the implementation of the Keynes and Beveridge agenda'.⁹ Although, as this research has already established, moralised language was not new to the field of industrial relations coverage, the shift in government engagement of such themes marked an important change. To adjudge a wage claim as 'fair', the alleged and attempted breach of that policy was to be considered 'unfair' or 'bogus'. If this moralised language was an important device for the government to convince working class groups of modern capitalism's merits by appealing to feelings of solidarity, it was also a way of isolating and delegitimising those that did not respect the system. In this respect, the media played a vital role in defining and delineating those moral boundaries in more aggressive and partisan ways than a Labour government could dare.

The emphasis of the *Daily Mirror's* industrial relations coverage changed after the election of a Labour government. This was a common and predictable element to coverage but had an important impact on the *Mirror's* attitude to wage restraint. In 1962, the *Mirror* greeted the conclusion of the Conservative government's 'Pay Pause' with a provocative front page article, headlined 'Want more Pay? You'll be lucky!', in which it declared the government would provide 'no more pay just because the cost of living goes up; no more pay just because you are working harder; no more pay just because your industry's profits are going up' and other reasons presumably deemed worthy of an increase by the *Mirror's* editors.¹⁰ In 1965, the *Mirror* described the payment gap as 'the loudest wailing baby ever dumped into the arms of an incoming government' but already alluded to the need to 'do our jobs in a new way, with a new spirit'.¹¹

⁸ Tomlinson, 'Reinventing the "moral economy"', p. 363.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

¹⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 3 February 1962, p. 1.

¹¹ *Daily Mirror*, 1 January 1965, p. 1.

Within a few months, it was clear that the *Mirror* would absorb much of the Labour Government's moralised rhetoric but it did so in ways which were far more partisan and outspoken than politicians. In a front page editorial that evoked war-time notions of solidarity, 'the Battle of Britain, 1965', the *Mirror* claimed that 'dishonesty and lousy service' were no longer regarded as 'shameful and intolerable' and were accepted as if they were a 'natural malaise of our time'.¹² 'Ignorance, sloth or selfishness' were 'imperilling the position in the world of us all', suggesting that Britain's economic struggle and lack of global competitiveness was underpinned by a lack of pride in work, rather than the failure of policy or the anxiety of change.¹³ In response to another wage claim from the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) in February 1966, Woodrow Wyatt launched a scathing double-page attack on the union. Wyatt argued that in demanding wages which far exceeded the current wage policy, the NUR should be 'ashamed' of its 'monstrous blackmail', 'irresponsibility' and 'fatuous ways' which threatened to 'sabotage' the Labour government, indicative of a kind of selfishness on the NUR's part.¹⁴ Such articles from the *Mirror* provided a distinct and toxic mixture of moral judgement with political indignation. This infusion of politics into coverage of wage claims, and an expectation of political loyalty from the trade unions, provided a curious inconsistency to an editorial line which had become uncomfortable with political intervention from trade unions, as a threat to the power of the Labour government.

¹² *Daily Mirror*, 26 April 1965, p. 1.

¹³ *Daily Mirror*, 26 April 1965, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 16 February 1966, pp. 16-17.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 4.7: 'Exposing the Fifth Column', *Daily Mirror*, 26 April 1965, p. 1.

While a double-page *Mirror* editorial claimed that 'nobody' disputed that 'men and women must have the right to bargain collectively over wages', it was claimed that trade unions were 'groping for the shadow of victory instead of the substance', where some of the 'zanier' wage claims suggested

unions were 'hellbent on sabotaging the national economy'.¹⁵ In their demands for shorter hours and longer holidays, unions had been 'basically dishonest', arousing the moralised language of government and demands for wage increases without a corresponding rise in productivity was 'suckerdom in technicolor'.¹⁶ In these cases, no mention was made of the profitability of industries, concerns about the cost of living or the shortcomings of welfare structures, as had been the case with 1962's disgruntlement over slow increases, and instead focused on the morality and rationality of union claims. Although it claimed to support the principles of organised labour, the *Mirror* supported government and management decisions to refuse wage rises and deflected attention away from governmental responsibility for a lack of industrial investment.

Unsurprisingly, this kind of moralised judgement was not unique to the *Mirror* and was prevalent across the spectrum of British newspapers. When the 1966 wage-freeze kicked in, the *Times* argued that there was simply 'no alternative' because, despite claims that this should not be interpreted as an 'attack on trade unions', too many had 'refused to take any notice of interests wider than their own', indicative of the same moral judgements on union self-interest.¹⁷ The strength of this rhetoric was apparent from the kind of stories seen in the *Daily Express*. In one example, during 1966's freeze, the *Express* reported on a book-keeper who had resigned because her employer had offered her a minor rise to reward good work, one which she rejected not just on grounds of legality but because she believed it to be 'unethical'.¹⁸

The inconsistencies and problems with moralised rhetoric

However, in defining these moral boundaries, much as many media outlets had attempted to delineate and qualify 'political' from 'industrial' strikes, there were undoubtedly moral inconsistencies for journalists to navigate. In February 1964, prior to Labour's victory, Trevor Evans reminded *Express* readers that postmen, in being granted a 6 and a half percent wage increase, did so because they were a 'special case', and that other unions should not 'ignore the fact that the postmen started on a comparatively low rate anyway' or 'conveniently forget' it had been 19 months since their last 'measly' increase.¹⁹ Of course this kind of nuanced contextual information was rarely found when 'bogus' or 'dishonest' claims were reported on and these kinds of exceptions would continue to provide problems for both journalists and the Labour government. As far as the

¹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 25 October 1965, pp. 16-17.

¹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 25 October 1965, pp. 16-17.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 26 July 1966, p. 13.

¹⁸ *Daily Express*, 19 October 1966, p. 15.

¹⁹ *Daily Express*, 27 July 1964, p. 4.

Daily Mail's editorial line was concerned, special cases and exceptions were merely 'gaps' or vulnerabilities in the wage policy, which were essentially 'invitations' to trade union leaders to 'squeeze as much as they could out of industry' but the *Mail* was unusual in its rejection of special cases.²⁰ It was inevitable that in a rapidly evolving economy such as Britain's in the 1960s that some industries would be more 'deserving' of wage increases than others, in these moral terms, partly due to discrepancies in industrial productivity. The precise contours of this moralised support were rarely explained, but were based on tacit assumptions and deep-seated social attitudes. Managing these differences would either mean holding those that had earned an increase back, undermining the very moral argument of the policy, or the less productive industries riding on the coat-tails of others, risking further inflation and degradation of the productivity policy. Although Labour had built a policy founded upon ideas of collectivist solidarity on moral terms in order to manage wages, the rewards for following such a policy were divisive. As Shanks had predicted in 1961, a widening in pay differentials as a result of the productivity agreements would soon be regarded as 'socially intolerable'.²¹

According to the *Times*, it was important not to 'underestimate the difficulties, even absurdities' in managing a wage policy which made it 'difficult to accept' that productive companies like Ford and Vauxhall should be kept down to the level of 'others not so efficient' just to avoid wage increases elsewhere.²² In another article, it argued that it was 'hard to see why a generous pay offer in one trade', the prosperous motor industry, 'should be condemned on the grounds that it might be followed by similar increases in trades unable to show similar prosperity'.²³ Simultaneously and paradoxically, in a nod to its readership, a primary concern for the *Times* was the 'increasingly crushed' workers in the middle, victims of the government's emphasis on the productivity agreements of the lower paid, which were 'always a response to an emergency', and the new willingness to commit to industrial action from the likes of air pilots and white-collar workers, rather than a focus on the maintenance of 'incentives for skill and responsibility' or adjustment for the 'long-term needs of industry'.²⁴ Having helped to bolster an economic narrative which emphasised the importance of restrictions rather than economic opportunities for expansion, enhanced industrial productivity in the manufacturing industries, particularly the automotive industry, was incredibly complex for the press to negotiate. The provision of socially acceptable solutions which

²⁰ *Daily Mail*, 26 April 1965, p. 1.

²¹ Shanks, *The Stagnant Society*, p. 72.

²² *The Times*, 3 February 1964, p. 11.

²³ *The Times*, 2 November 1963, p. 9.

²⁴ *The Times*, 22 December 1967, p. 17.

minimised gaps in pay without the risk of inflation threatened to compromise the very essence of a 'fair' wage policy. An emphasis on union tactics and industrial strife, particularly when the car industry became so adept at providing newsworthy cases, was one technique for deflecting critical attention away from the inconsistencies of low wages in productive industries.

A series of industrial disputes by teachers also complicated the *Mirror's* moralised rhetoric. As early as 1961, the *Mirror* defended the teachers' right to strike as a 'devoted group of people' who would only use striking in 'the last resort'. It even went so far as to describe them as 'victims' of a 'raw deal' from the government.²⁵ In a similar article earlier that year it adjudged that 'when dedicated people like teachers talk about striking, something must be wrong'.²⁶ Despite the consistency of problems within the teaching sector, the *Mirror* was convinced that teachers would not choose to take industrial action lightly, such was their loyalty, a message which was buttressed by the juxtaposition of such articles next to a discussion of a dispute over morning breaks at Fords.²⁷ There was a clear implication that teachers were more worthy than car workers of financial reward, partly as a result of their perceived difference in moral attitude to industrial action. Notably, this position on industrial action by teachers did not change under a Labour government, despite the *Mirror's* enthusiasm for the moralised rhetoric of wage restraint.

In 1967, once again in reference to 'dedicated people', the *Mirror* felt it was important to reward 'the quality of devotion to duty which every teacher must have' and, although it rejected the union's 'totally unrealistic' demand for a 30 per cent rise, it would not be drawn on the acceptability of the government's 6 per cent offer.²⁸ Gallup Polls suggested that teachers commanded a great deal of public sympathy, as 60 per cent of respondents in April 1966 believed they were deserving of a pay increase, while in October 1969, 53 per cent sympathised with teachers, compared to only 21 per cent for local authorities. At the end of 1969, Clive Jenkins wrote a column to urge the government to avoid a 'barefisted brawl' with teachers, concerned that the shortage of teachers in state education was worrying enough 'without repelling good people by low standards of pay'.²⁹ Explaining the *Mirror's* unswerving defence of the teachers' claims is complex. Firstly, class perception would have been an influence, where overtly militant industrial action was firmly associated with low-paid labour, such as those in private manufacturing, rather than middle-class

²⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 21 September 1961, p. 2.

²⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 4 April 1961, p. 2.

²⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 21 September 1962, p. 2.

²⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 12 July 1962, p. 2.

²⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 30 December 1969, p. 4.

public sector workers. Furthermore, the support of the teachers' claim would have strengthened and been consistent with the newspaper's demand for improved funding in state education, where teaching represented another 'deserving' sector. Finally, it could have simply been driven by their enthusiasm to prevent unnecessarily lengthy disruption, as exemplified in a 1969 column that complained about the 'leisurely approach' to pay negotiations.³⁰ These motivations aside, this example further illustrated the pressure on Britain's manufacturing industries, due to the unspoken status held by certain groups of workers, where moralised language was used to sustain this inconsistent position on wage restraint.

Public doubt about Labour's intent

Significantly, polling data from 1968 suggests that the moralised language of productivity and wage restraint had not been wholly successful in convincing the public, perhaps partly due to these inconsistencies. Although there is limited statistical value to a single poll, the fact that the majority, 52 per cent, felt that unions should 'remain free to negotiate at whatever levels the unions think [was] right' instead of following the government's wage policy, reflected the government's failure to impress the economic necessity to ground wages.³¹ It also suggested a certain respect for the government's judgement on what could be deemed 'right' or fair. Doubt about the power of government rhetoric was further reinforced by the fact a significant proportion, 39 per cent, felt their sympathies lay with the trade unions in 1968 when Barbara Castle had promised to 'veto' wage rises.³² Geoffrey Goodman reflected that while 'there was a powerful case' for the government's 'fair' incomes policy, its position at the centre of domestic economic policy meant it 'simply couldn't carry that weight and responsibility', as confidence in the government slumped.³³ In his travels around the country at that time, Goodman found that many union officials, workers and managers 'distrusted' the government, as Whitehall was perceived as distant from the shop floor 'and neither side seemed capable of bridging the gulf'.³⁴ Whether the government was aware of the severity of working class cynicism surrounding their economic policies is doubtful. Whereas Labour's revisionists of the late 1950s and early 1960s had become 'engrossed in polling evidence, obsessively tracking the polls whenever governments made major or controversial decisions', the

³⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 16 December 1969, p. 2.

³¹ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 2*, p. 1003.

³² Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 2*, p. 983.

³³ Goodman, *From Bevan to Blair*, p. 114.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

attitude within the Labour Party changed to the point where opinion polling was subordinated to Wilson's 'own instincts and political gambles' by the end of the 1960s.³⁵

The *Mail's* criticism of both government and the labour force provided further explanation for public scepticism about the government's wage policy. In 1965, the *Mail* asked how long Britain could 'pursue profligate paths and expect to go on prospering?', as it made reference to 'insidious' processes within unions that caused wages to increase.³⁶ This was indicative of an expectation that the contemporary approach to wages was unsustainable. Like the *Mirror*, the *Mail* also called for a refreshed approach from all involved, with 'a new outlook and new ideas', again in vague terms and presumably rather different terms to those alluded to by the *Mirror*, tapping into the popular rhetoric of modernisation and innovation which had been so successful in propelling the Labour Party into government. However, while it shared this modernising tone with the Labour government, the *Mail*, was predictably enthusiastic to scrutinise the rhetoric behind the government's income policy. Although encouraged by government measures to curb inflation and frustrated by the refusal of workers to 'play the game' in making pay claims, the *Mail* felt the Government needed to admit that their own 'planned incomes growth' was no different to the Conservative Party's earlier pay pause, the details of which were just as 'unpalatable' to unions.³⁷ This was a recurring description of the government's wage policies as far as the 'self-righteous' unions were concerned, referring to such policies as an 'unpalatable medicine' that was to be 'administered by a Government who depended so much on trade union funds for their election'.³⁸ There was a deal of cynicism about the 'rose-tinted cloud of soothing words' from government and scepticism surrounding George Brown's insistence that wage restraint was 'transitional' instead of 'shocking the unions into a sense of reality'.³⁹ Brown's economic plan of 1965 was criticised for its 'unfounded optimism', based on an apparently misplaced 'assumption that today's conditions will be repeated tomorrow'.⁴⁰ The *Mail* grew increasingly frustrated that economic optimism on both sides seemed to be leading to a lack of communication between the government and TUC, 'each party wrapped up in a private day dream of painless prosperity'.⁴¹

³⁵ Tom Crook and Glen O'Hara, "'The Torrent of Numbers': Statistics and the Public Sphere in Britain, 1800-2000", in Tom Cook and Glen O'Hara (eds), *Statistics and the Public Sphere: Numbers and the People in Modern Britain, c 1800-2000* (Abingdon, 2011), p. 15.

³⁶ *Daily Mail*, 17 February 1965, p. 1.

³⁷ *Daily Mail*, 26 April 1965, p. 1.

³⁸ *Daily Mail*, 6 September 1965, p. 1.

³⁹ *Daily Mail*, 26 April 1965, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Daily Mail*, 17 September 1965, p. 1.

⁴¹ *Daily Mail*, 23 January 1968, p. 1.

Media concern about the implications of productivity

Just as they had shown in the political sphere, the *Mail* demonstrated a discomfort with the apparent gloss Labour applied to its industrial relations rhetoric and its attempt to more furtively coerce unions, despite similar motivations in policy to the troubled Conservative policies of the early 1960s. The *Mail's* cynicism about Labour's chosen path on wage policy, and its associated economic rhetoric, even came down to a concern with the very word 'productivity', described as a 'five-syllable horror', and the buzz of studies and discussion surrounding it.⁴² It argued that Wilson's Productivity Conference in September 1966 would amount to 'window-dressing' when 'top men in industry' had been considering the issue 'for years', and simply illustrated the need for 'a more purposeful lead from the top'.⁴³ The implication of an irritation with Labour's ability to talk about a wage policy, to commission studies and organise conferences, was rife amongst the *Mail's* columns, frustrated with a perceived lack of action or direction – once again, a dig at its political opponents. This response to the government's productivity push in 1966 explains the large spike in the *Mail's* productivity articles referencing the government.

With regards to the frames employed more broadly, the *Mail* was sceptical about the way prominent members of the Labour Party had chosen to promote certain frames about the productivity policy – either in Brown's case as a way to ground wages, as adopted by so many members of the press, or in Frank Cousins's case as a way to increase productivity, a more minority view. It was time, by 1966, for the government to 'forget the figures and the theories' and start promoting a policy which had 'some connection with the realities of industrial life'.⁴⁴ Rather than focusing on wages and full employment, the *Mail* remarked on the failure of government to address the issue of restrictive practices and industrial resistance to modernisation. In some ways, the *Mail's* political agenda against the policies of the Labour government tempered its acceptance of the moralised and negative frames of an incomes policy based on productivity, although it was essentially negative about the role of unions in this issue.

Unusually, there were commonalities in the perspectives adopted by the *Guardian* and the *Express* on the issue of wages, despite their often antagonistic editorial positions. The *Guardian* opposed the negative framing of wage rises, much as it had it done with Barbara Castle's strike legislation, but it was also enthusiastic about engaging with and encouraging the popular productivity rhetoric. The paper certainly did not object to the prospect of British industry becoming more efficient. In doing

⁴² *Daily Mail*, 19 July 1966, p. 1.

⁴³ *Daily Mail*, 19 July 1966, p. 1.

⁴⁴ *Daily Mail*, 14 July 1966, p. 1.

so, the *Guardian* persistently argued for economic measures which were 'creative' and could provide for growth, instead of 'destructive deflation' based on limiting incomes and governmental controls.⁴⁵ Although it recognised the necessity of 'temporary evils', such as wage and price freezes, the only long-term remedy to British problems lay in sustained growth, the date for which 'could not be forecast' under Wilson's measures.⁴⁶ Rather than follow the government's attempts to use the productivity debate to ground wages, the *Guardian* argued that the relationship should work in the reverse. It described the government as the 'victim of a myth' which linked rising wages to economic trouble, the same myth that had 'distorted the policies of successive Administrations'. While many were keen to emphasise the extent of the "British disease", the *Guardian* suggested that the situation was not so severe, likening the coverage to exaggerated British weather reports.⁴⁷

Instead, the *Guardian* argued, Britain's economic problems were because 'far too much of British industry relies on using inadequately paid labour inefficiently and wastefully'.⁴⁸ A universal increase in wages would encourage a more efficient use of labour, citing the example of America's higher wages, and encourage innovation in industrial machinery. The editorial columns recognised that automation had developed a connotation that was 'faintly inhuman', 'blind to social values or to the needs of ordinary human beings', which had provoked animosity from trade unions, but argued that Britain's lack of competitiveness in world markets was because of the 'slowness of technological change' rather than too much automation.⁴⁹ Such reports represented a hesitancy to be absorbed by the rhetoric of immorality and irrationality which had motivated some of the *Mirror's* explanations of the so-called British disease. Once again, the *Guardian*, led by John Cole, provided a minority voice in rejecting the pervading explanations for economic uncertainty found on rival's front pages, although it was technically in favour of a voluntary wage policy based on improving British industry's productivity.

The *Express* went a step further in outright rejection of this strand of economic policy. The paper's adoption of a position coherent with its 1920s campaigns for higher wages reflected the emerging limitations with a post-war consensus.⁵⁰ The principal objection to the government's wage policy ran along strongly anti-interventionist lines of argument and a reversion to pre-war conventions. The

⁴⁵ *Guardian*, 18 July 1966, p. 8.

⁴⁶ *Guardian*, 8 August 1966, p. 8.

⁴⁷ *Guardian*, 16 May 1968, p. 10.

⁴⁸ *Guardian*, 30 April 1967, p. 10.

⁴⁹ *Guardian*, 31 August 1965, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Adrian Bingham, 'Ignoring the First Draft of History?: Searching for the popular press in studies of twentieth century Britain', *Media History* 18 (2012), p. 314.

Express argued that the new wage policy was unfair, not because it explicitly opposed a productivity-based wage policy, but because the Chancellor had produced 'an inflationary budget' which forced others to ask 'everyone to ignore its consequences'. This was as 'the sinister combination Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' which made 'victims' of the 'innocent tax payer'.⁵¹ It later admitted that 'superficially' determining wage rates 'may be attractive' but felt that government controls on wage rates were 'simply in the interest of the present government' rather than the much vaunted 'national interest', and likened the TUC's potential 'surrender' of authority to 'totalitarian countries'.⁵² The erosion of consensus that is typically associated with the emergence of Conservative neoliberalism of the late 1970s, was already quite apparent in the *Express's* dialogue about the wage policy, to the extent that it found itself buttressing the language of trade unionist solidarity. When Wilson introduced a complete pay freeze at the 1966 TUC annual conference, the *Express* felt that a majority of the public felt that the policy was a 'desperate, last-minute attempt' to deal with Britain's problems and ran 'counter to everything the trades unions stand for'.⁵³ When the TUC accepted the freeze, the *Express* asked if there was anything more 'paradoxical' or 'misguided' than trade unionists' 'absurd and destructive' vote to hold wages down.⁵⁴ Although few would have conventionally identified the *Express* as guardians of trade unions' traditional rights, the newspaper's opposition to a wage-freeze which 'frustrated the exemplary productivity agreements' at major firms, left the newspaper supporting union rights.⁵⁵ The *Express* provided an important minority voice in this example in rejecting the pervading assumptions, something of a consensus, about the need to limit inflation through wage limits.

The nature of television coverage

The timing and strategy behind television coverage contributed to public perceptions about industrial relations, including the dominant frames of explanation for Britain's economic failure. This marked an important change since the early post-war period, where influence was primarily limited to newspaper pages. A common concern from industrialists was the sporadic and sensational nature of the BBC's specialist industrial relations coverage, particularly where the car industry was concerned. Prominent industrialist, William Campbell Adamson, yet to join the government's Department for Economic Affairs, conducted a report and interview regarding the BBC's industrial coverage in 1966. This was intended to clarify the impacts of the BBC's chosen approach to industrial

⁵¹ *Daily Express*, 9 April 1965, p. 12.

⁵² *Daily Express*, 4 September 1965, p. 8.

⁵³ *Daily Express*, 5 September 1966, p. 8.

⁵⁴ *Daily Express*, 8 September 1966, p. 8.

⁵⁵ *Daily Express*, 6 September 1966, p. 8.

relations coverage. Campbell Adamson was concerned that the BBC's treatment seemed to 'lack a broad plan', predominantly dependent on news bulletins, 'where a relatively small amount of broadcasting time is concerned with the world in which the majority earn their living'.⁵⁶ He was in favour of the BBC creating a new 'Head of Industrial Programmes' in order to better focus on these issues 'in a more interesting and entertaining way'.

In a similar manner, Oliver Whitley, then Chief Assistant to the BBC Director General, produced a report in 1965 which argued for a 'particular emphasis on radical analysis and re-thinking' in industrial relations coverage which should be 'prepared to take the spotlight away a bit from purely political rethinking'.⁵⁷ This was important in the context of the parliamentary sphere's deteriorating public image. According to Whitley, although the BBC produced 'excellent documentary programmes on an extraordinary range of subjects', their programming tended to 'skip over the relatively unattractive, less tractable' issue of industrial relations. If the BBC poured its efforts into documentary programmes, Whitley felt the organisation might be able to convince industrial and political heads, those often hesitant to participate in industrial affairs programmes, that the BBC was enthusiastically involved in industrial issues, rather than 'as many of them now seem to think, just a detached, rather cynical, professionally adept reporter of other peoples' efforts'.⁵⁸ It is clear that some within the BBC believed the apparent detachment between the BBC and industry was more than simply a symptom of top industrialist's 'divided interests', but rather a consequence of the BBC's own attitude; they cited the reluctance of the troubled BMC's board members to appear in interviews as an example.⁵⁹

However, despite these recommendations for more focussed, documentary-oriented coverage of industrial relations, the BBC remained steadfast in its preference for 'fragmentation' and decentralisation in its coverage of industrial relations, without a specific lead journalist, as this approach promised a 'more lasting effect than the *succés d'estime* of full length documentaries with smaller audiences'.⁶⁰ It was felt that 'worthy documentaries' were unwise because they had already proven in the past to be 'remarkably unsuccessful' in attracting viewers.⁶¹ In 1961, the *Guardian* reported that both ITV and the BBC had rejected for broadcast a 'sane, intelligent, and prize-winning

⁵⁶ BBC General Advisory Council Paper 261, 20 December 1966; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T16/564).

⁵⁷ BBC Board of Management Paper (65) 106, 23 August 1965; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T16/59/3).

⁵⁸ BBC Board of Management Paper (65) 106, 23 August 1965; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T16/59/3).

⁵⁹ BBC General Advisory Council Paper 261, 20 December 1966; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T16/564).

⁶⁰ BBC General Advisory Council Paper 261, 20 December 1966; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T16/564).

⁶¹ BBC Head of Current Affairs Group to Director of Television, 23 August 1965, ; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T16/59/3).

film on industrial relations' which prompted the 'sad conclusion' that British television regarded 'the real detail of industrial relations as too sober material for their respective audiences', partly because of its complexity compared to the 'werewolf theory of strike motivation'.⁶² This description alluded to the mythologised nature of strike coverage. The BBC's attitudes towards industrial relations coverage was part of a wider debate, which culminated in speeches by Tony Benn and Richard Crossman in 1968, regarding the trivialisation of important political issues and the 'lack of sufficient serious and penetrating coverage'.⁶³ Understanding Britain's industrial problems in long-term and broader structural terms through the medium of television was thus very difficult.

However, despite this hesitancy to invest time and money in full-length programmes, the BBC Director General had been 'greatly interested' in a report from the BBC's senior Industrial Correspondent, Bertram Mycock, on 'Subversion in Industry' in Spring 1965, and felt a 'full-scale investigation' of the subject would make a 'valuable major long-term programme project'.⁶⁴ There was continued enthusiasm from the Editor of News and Current Affairs some two years later, prompted by a Ray Gunter speech, to pursue this topic in depth but eventually Mycock decided this would require too much work.⁶⁵ Although ultimately fruitless, the BBC's protracted interest in following this issue suggests that interest in more focussed coverage of industry was reserved for controversial aspects of industry, deemed 'newsworthy'. In line with this, the BBC Head of Current Affairs, Paul Fox, expressed an enthusiasm to 'pool the best film and programme makers and form them into an emergency team' in order to make 'really splendid emergency programmes'.⁶⁶ This enthusiasm for 'of the moment' industrial relations programming which would be popular and bolster audience numbers, coupled with the continuance of high profile strike coverage in BBC News reports, inevitably provided challenges for portraying British industry in a positive or constructive light. Consequently, it was unsurprising that the BBC continued to struggle to persuade industry bosses to appear on its limited coverage to provide the required 'balance' to its reports, even as Mycock noted deteriorating BBC relationships with union leaders.⁶⁷

⁶² *Guardian*, 26 April 1961, p. 13.

⁶³ *The Times*, 22 October 1968, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Extract from BBC Board of Management Minutes 437, 24 May 1965; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R78/1498/1).

⁶⁵ Extract from BBC News & Current Affairs Minutes 708, 15 December 1967; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R78/1498/1).

⁶⁶ BBC Head of Current Affairs Group to Director of Television, 23 August 1965; BBC Written Archive Centre, (T16/59/3).

⁶⁷ Extract from BBC News & Current Affairs Minutes 721, 2 February 1968; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R78/1498/1).

This dislocation between the television media and industrial management provides an important context for one of the key concerns raised by Tomlinson with regards to corporate attitudes within the car industry. Tomlinson argues that 'the industry created a culture of complaint, in which the cause of its difficulties was seen elsewhere'.⁶⁸ Although Tomlinson recognises that the trade union and government situation was far from perfect, 'the key problems were matters of corporate strategy and management' or 'corporate culture'. Although television reports would often refer to 'underlying bitterness' in the relationship between managers and shop floor workers, the transactional nature of such a problem was never adequately explored.⁶⁹ The BBC's continued indifference towards covering a 'management angle' provided very little opportunity for the likes of Robin Day, who had moved to the BBC from ITV and was known for his interrogative style, to truly probe leading industrialists' behaviour during moments of industrial controversy. Moreover, these long term, structural issues of 'corporate culture', even if BBC-management relations had been better, were unlikely to satisfy the BBC's enthusiasm for emergency programming or its desire for 'newsworthy' features. Thus, as far as television coverage of the automotive industry was concerned, the management-centred explanation was marginalised, despite its validity.

Absenteeism and Redundancy – a contrast of industries

However, while coverage of 'structural' issues was marginalised, ITV did provide a number of extended news features on the implications of mechanisation on mining communities. Here, 'absenteeism' became a focus as 'idle machinery is expensive machinery', although reports recognised that in an industry where 'uncertainty hangs over it like a cloud', 'devotion to duty' did not come easy to miners who felt they were 'doomed long-term'.⁷⁰ Although with such moralised references to 'duty' this coverage was very much typical of the popular industrial relations narrative, there was a difference in tone and attitude. In this declining industry, of dwindling significance to Britain's economic performance, there was a sympathy about the reasons for such extreme absenteeism, a kind which would have been almost impossible to conceive of in relation to the car industry. The very fact that workers taking time off work was referred to consistently as 'absenteeism' rather than 'idleness' or 'skiving', indicated the sensitivity of the subject and the social concern with which the issue was dealt with by the media. A Gallup poll in January 1969 which asked those surveyed to consider the factors which had influenced a rash of absenteeism that winter, revealed that 39 per cent thought that it was 'very important' and 25 per cent thought it was 'fairly

⁶⁸ Tomlinson, 'The Government and the Car Industry, 1945-70', p. 27.

⁶⁹ *ITV Evening News*, 15 November 1963.

⁷⁰ *ITV Evening News*, 27 October 1965.

important' that 'workers are so depressed about the future that they just live for the present'.⁷¹ Overall, respondents felt that this was the second most important factor, only to income taxes, and ahead of trade union leadership or government policy. From this, it would appear that the fatalist attitude towards declining industries, albeit sympathetic, had permeated public consciousness so much as to override considerations of trade union leadership at a time when anti-strike legislation was at the top of the political agenda.

Away from the mining industry, in more 'high-stakes' manufacturing industries such as the motor industry, where redundancy was perceived to mean temporary and fluid, rather than terminal, unemployment, consideration of these issues was rather different. There were key inconsistencies and incompatibilities regarding the relationship between the rhetoric of technological optimism, that had been so powerful in convincing the British public to vote for the Labour Party in the 1964 general election, and the latent, long-term concerns about redundancy that had existed since the popular discussions surrounding the car industry during the late 1950s. It was felt there was little the unions could do to resist redundancies, which became more common as the problems of 1966 became more stark. ITV News argued that any attempt at strikes, regardless of whether they were sanctioned by union leadership, were 'pretty barren measures' against redundancies that were 'likely to continue' and the ever-popular 'work-sharing plans' were no longer deemed 'practical' for answering such problems.⁷² This kind of attitude to union action against redundancy represented clear continuity from the dialogue of the 1950s, where strikes against redundancy had been so harshly judged, irrespective of sympathy for the unemployed.

However, some media coverage did show limited evidence of a shift in attitudes about workers' rights and the desirability of employment. Despite concerns about high profile redundancies in the car industry from some sources, particularly the *Mirror*, and the struggling economy, British unemployment rates were very manageable. By 1965, unemployment stood at a mere one and a half per cent, not far from a post-war low and, as the *Times* pointed out, compared favourably to Britain's rivals.⁷³ In this context, then, and roused by the rhetoric of productivity and efficiency, the *Times* published a number of editorials arguing for low levels of temporary unemployment, in what it called 'labour mobility'.⁷⁴ Although it conceded that 'enforced idleness', such was the strength of

⁷¹ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 2*, p. 1029.

⁷² *ITV Evening News*, 14 October 1966.

⁷³ James Denman and Paul McDonald, 'Unemployment Statistics from 1991 to Present Day', *Labour Market Trends* 104 (1996), p. 2.

⁷⁴ *The Times*, 27 August 1965, p. 9.

moralised economic language, ‘never solved anything’, it argued that the ‘right measures to cure Britain’s payments’ would ‘incidentally and temporarily produce – even encourage – some unemployment’.⁷⁵ Earlier in the decade, it had lamented that the working week in the motor industry was shortening, citing the influence of the shocking redundancies of 1956 on the attitudes of management who wanted to ‘avoid trouble and keep their labour force intact’, and this meant the ‘limit of idleness must be very near’.⁷⁶ At a time when the prevention of unofficial strikes was high on the public political agenda, it was noteworthy that the *Times* expressed confidence that such redundancy would not have the same inflammatory impact as those in 1956, with car workers appeased by their high rates of pay. Moreover, it remarked on the connection between high rates of employment and the predictability of ‘a spate of wage claims’, which compromised the government’s attempt to moderate inflation, as shortages of labour encouraged private deals between workers and employers, without the input of union leaders.⁷⁷ In an economic climate which was very conscious of the need to use work forces productively and efficiently, issues high on the political agenda, the surplus of labour was adjudged as a ‘waste’ which required a ‘good deal of justification’.⁷⁸ Although this perspective was far from universal by this point, it did allude to a mounting pressure on the position of unions to defend their members’ jobs, as consensus on the ideals of full employment began to erode.

As significant as this shift was, the likes of the *Mirror* continued to show sensitivity to working class anxiety about redundancy and unemployment. Geoffrey Goodman remarked in 1962 that it was a pity that there was not a more ‘sympathetic phrase’ than redundancy, given its ‘superfluous, uncalled-for and unwanted’ nature, and lamented the failure of the Government ‘and of the bulk of employers’ to provide a ‘coherent policy for redundancy’.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the discussion of the *Times* clearly illustrates that there was confidence, or perhaps, with hindsight, complacency, in the long-term continuance of high employment rates in Britain’s modern manufacturing industries. This conviction lay in stark contrast to the bleak outlook for the mining industry. This confidence and the rhetoric of productivity gave the likes of the *Times* a platform on which to suggest better ways to deploy its work force in more efficient ways. Moreover, the case exemplified the power of the media to steer the industrial relations agenda so that once again, although less critical of unions, the focus of reform debate was the labour force.

⁷⁵ *The Times*, 27 August 1965, p. 9.

⁷⁶ *The Times*, 14 January 1961, p. 7.

⁷⁷ *The Times*, 1 May 1965, p. 11.

⁷⁸ *The Times*, 14 January 1961, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Geoffrey Goodman, ‘Redundancy in the Affluent Society’, *Fabian Tract* 340 (1962), pp. 1-37.

Media scrutiny of the car industry

Tim Claydon's study of media coverage of the car industry, albeit focused specifically on the coverage of the *Times* and the *Mirror*, established two important trends in coverage. Firstly it corroborated claims by the GMG that the motor industry was 'more extensively covered than any other industry' and that other strikes were 'significantly under-reported', in proportion to their severity and extent.⁸⁰ From Claydon's quantitative analysis, it is clear that media interest in the car industry, as part of this wider declinist preoccupation with manufacturing, started to intensify in the late 1960s, at a rate which was disproportionate to the increase in the number of disputes recorded by the Department of Employment.⁸¹ Above all industries then, media coverage of the car industry was significant. When these data are viewed in tandem with the results of Gallup's 1968 opinion polls on the car industry, the nature of media concern with the car industry is clear. While opinion was fairly evenly divided on whether management was doing 'all it reasonably could' to avoid strikes in the car industry, only 23 per cent felt unions were doing all they could. When asked who they deemed responsible for the large number of strikes, 14 per cent blamed management, 29 per cent blamed unions and 44 per cent blamed 'groups of workers'. Although unions drew almost twice the amount of 'blame' as management, hardly surprisingly given the dominant frames of explanation, it is noteworthy that 'groups of workers' were considered distinct from their unions and much more of a 'problem' as far as industrial strife was concerned. By the time similar questions were asked about the car industry in April 1969, workers at Ford registered very limited public sympathy – only 16 per cent, compared to the 39 per cent generated by the management.⁸²

⁸⁰ Claydon, 'Tales of Disorder', p. 9.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸² Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 2*, p. 1021.

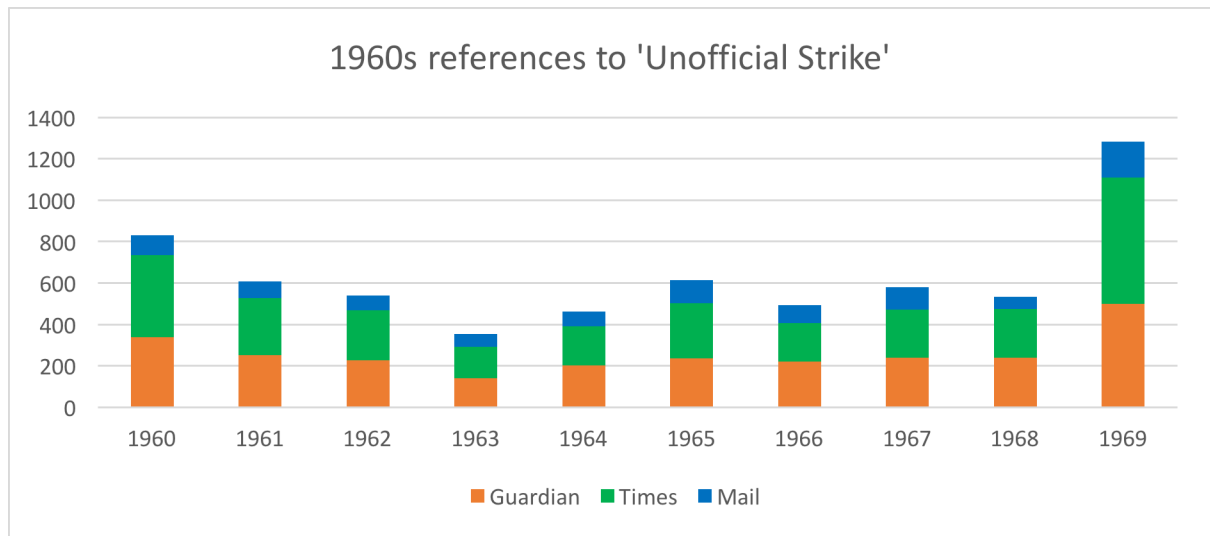


Figure 4.8: Total references to 'Unofficial strikes' in British dailies (1960-69)

Explaining why 'groups of workers' were thought to have been such a disruptive influence on the day-to-day running of the car industry is complex but can be attributed to a number of key trends in media coverage. Firstly, as evidenced in Figure 4.8, unofficial strikes were a controversial and high profile issue for newspapers to cover. This issue was not new, and had featured to a more limited extent in the coverage of the 1950s, but it seemed to be the subject of greater media interest towards the end of the 1960s. Inevitably, by their very nature, unofficial action increased scrutiny on shop stewards as such strikes operated without approval from their union leadership. However, as Figure 4.8 also illustrates, the true upsurge in interest only happened in 1969, after the first set of polling was conducted. Of course this may suggest that the latent interest in unofficial strikes had an important impact on public perception, but does not entirely explain the phenomenon.

The *Mirror* believed it was 'scandalous' that gentleman's agreements with official union representatives did not hold water against unofficial 'union militancy', where the deterrents against unofficial industrial action so small they could 'barely be discerned'.⁸³ After a major strike in 1968, the *Mirror's* industrial editor, Roland Hurman, likened the return to work to 'an alcoholic nursing a king-sized hangover', and attributed the year's 'unparalleled' loss of production and exports to 'wave after wave of unofficial strikes'.⁸⁴ This provided further evidence of the *Mirror's* attempts to link Britain's failing productivity with the effort of trade union members and their dubious political motives.

⁸³ *Daily Mirror*, 20 March 1969, p. 6.

⁸⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 30 September 1968, p. 16.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 4.9: 'This bloody mess in the car industry', *Daily Mirror*, 30 September 1968, pp. 16-17.

This double-page spread, Figure 4.9, highlighted a notable increase in the number of days lost to strikes in the car industry and featured articles from a number of sources, including a leading trade unionist and a Vauxhall director. All elements of this spread focused on issues such as outdated collective bargaining mechanisms, strike militancy and union reform, rarely touching upon the attitudes of government and employers. By 1969, the *Mirror* considered the 'most alarming problem' for Britain's economic prosperity was 'industrial anarchy', which would be seen by foreign competitors as a 'complication of the "British malaise" which verges on lunacy', and threatened 'the economic equivalent of the shock of military defeat administered to the Germans and the Japanese'.⁸⁵ This kind of narrative tapped into the insecurity about foreign competition, a legacy of the rhetoric of war-time, and thus represented a clear continuity from the 1950s. It also pointed to the emerging and complex relationship between perceived British exceptionalism and economic decline. There were very real concerns that Ford would take its business 'to comparatively trouble-free plants in Germany' resulting in redundancy and lost exports.⁸⁶ Significantly, these articles did not attribute Britain's lack of competitiveness to its wage levels or its inflation, the issues which had been such an important part of the prevalent productivity debate, but to the behaviour and tactics of its unions. This marked an important shift in emphasis and aligns with the quantitative analysis from the beginning of this chapter, which reflected the shift from government scrutiny to unions.

The use of the word 'wildcat' to describe unofficial strikes exploded in the late 1960s and illustrated the continued frustration and value-laden judgements on unofficial groups to embark on industrial action without the approval of their union leadership (Figure 4.10). It was particularly popular with

⁸⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 17 April 1969, p. 17.

⁸⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 3 March 1969, p. 25.

the right-wing *Express*. Shop stewards were consistently referred to as ‘wreckers’, such was the link between shop stewards and so-called industrial ‘sabotage’. The *Mail* was disgusted that some shop stewards had allegedly gone as far as suggesting secret ballots were ‘undemocratic’, in contradiction of the *Mail’s* long-held editorial line.⁸⁷ There were continued concerns about the degradation of centralised control in the TUC, with unions ‘too often impotent’ against the new power shop stewards, coining the phrase ‘too many kooks spoil the broth’.⁸⁸ Shop stewards were guilty of ‘half-baked schemes’ and ‘class warfare’, according to the *Mail*, perturbed by the reinforcement of such divisions and the promotion of working class politics.⁸⁹ They were more often than not directly implicated in these loathed wildcat strikes, either by their dismissal prompting an angry reaction from the shop floor, or by promoting ‘wild cat walk-outs on grounds so frivolous that they shame this country’.⁹⁰ They continued to fall victim of the ‘moderates versus militants’ rhetoric of the 1950s but this was now ensnared in the increasingly divisive productivity rhetoric, which provided further evidence of the blurring of ‘industrial’ and ‘political’ issues.

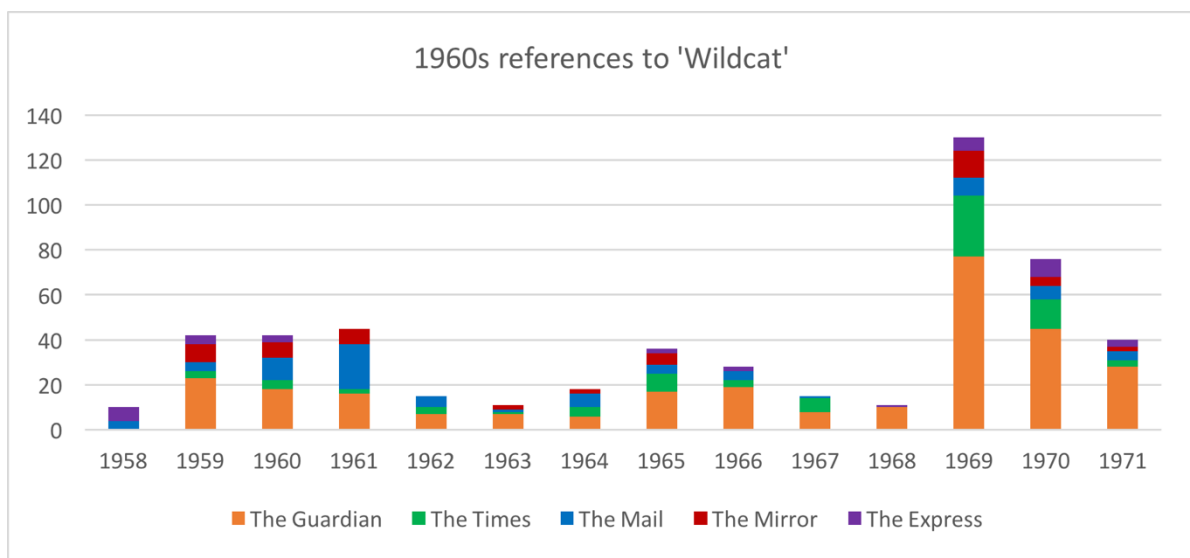


Figure 4.10: Total references to ‘Wildcat’ industrial action in British dailies (1958-71)

There are important caveats to the immediate public impact of this increased anxiety surrounding unofficial or wildcat strikes. Blumler and Ewbank’s 1968 survey of popular attitudes to unofficial strikes found that not only were middle class respondents the most worried about unofficial strikes, there was little correlation between what kind of newspaper people read or the political party they

⁸⁷ *Daily Mail*, 25 July 1966, p. 1.

⁸⁸ *Daily Mail*, 28 June 1968, p. 1.

⁸⁹ *Daily Mail*, 19 September 1969, p. 1.

⁹⁰ *Daily Mail*, 3 September 1965, p. 1.

supported and their levels of concern.⁹¹ The readers of 'more Labour-inclined newspapers' were just as concerned about unofficial strikes as readers of Conservative-supporting newspapers. Only rank and file trade unionists were likely to have their opinion on unofficial strikes affected by the output of the mass news media but this was from broadcast news media, rather than the so-called partisan press, and this impact was limited purely to the unofficial cases, rather than other issues facing the trade union movement. Therefore, it seems unlikely that in isolation this sort of coverage had a major impact on public opinion. However, such discussion would have had an impact as part of a broader moralised narrative surrounding productivity and the involvement of unions in Britain's decline.

The concern with shop steward influence was primarily a symptom of a wider debate about the leadership and direction of the trade unions more generally. In 1960, George Woodcock became the TUC's General Secretary. While many obsessed with union and industrial relations structure (the primary focus of the Donovan Report) Woodcock was in a minority of raising the issue of purpose. Discussion about structure was a 'pointless exercise', according to Woodcock, without a consensus on union purpose, where he was particularly concerned about the 'free-for-all society' that was emerging as a result of employers' abuse.⁹² In expressing rising wages in such terms, Woodcock reflected a deference to the dominant narratives of inflation. During his time as General Secretary, Woodcock sought to discover how trade union autonomy could be 'reconciled with industrial efficiency and innovation', as he wrestled to balance the 'defence of trade union custom and practice' with the demand for reform and increases in productivity.⁹³ Woodcock benefited from a close relationship with many journalists, including Cole at the *Guardian* and Wigham at the *Times* – 'his coterie of admirers' according to Robert Taylor – and initially their reception of Woodcock was hopeful about the new direction Woodcock may take the TUC with regards to economic policy, applauding his 'reforming zeal'.⁹⁴ The *Guardian* praised Woodcock's intention to address the issue of the trade unions' purpose as a 'good question and a good starting point' in order to further understand structural reform, and provide answers to questions that had 'mystified the public for many years'.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Blumler and Ewbank, 'Trade Unionists, the Mass Media and Unofficial Strikes', p. 51.

⁹² Robert Taylor, "'What are we here for?": George Woodcock and Trade Union Reform' in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-1979* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 198-99.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁹⁴ *Guardian*, 7 September 1964, p. 8.

⁹⁵ *Guardian*, 19 January 1965, p. 8.

However, even at the beginning, the *Times* was sceptical about Woodcock's influence on economic attitudes and that it was on the subject of 'influencing wage movement that Mr Woodcock was least impressive'.⁹⁶ The suspicion of ITV journalists by the time the 1964 TUC Congress arrived was that 'controversial issues' might be 'smoothed over' because many unionists would be hesitant to 'rock Labour's vote'.⁹⁷ By mid-decade, the optimism surrounding Woodcock's leadership soon dwindled and the media attention on Woodcock translated into intense scrutiny, particularly in the face of these unofficial strikes. Although the *Times* was sympathetic that the 1966 national emergency had blown long-term TUC plans 'to pieces', it was clear that the pace of TUC reform had 'proved too slow for the politicians' interpretation of the country's needs', and so too the majority of the media.⁹⁸ On the eve of the TUC annual conference in 1967, ITV's reporter suggested that nothing said at the conference would 'have very much effect on policy' and was an indication that Congress was 'already a little out of date'.⁹⁹ Taylor suggests ultimately it was Andrew Shonfield of the *Observer*, in his critique of the Donovan Commission's recommendations, who came the closest to addressing the issue of trade union function with his 'one-man minority report' against voluntarist bargaining in such an interdependent society, rather than any trade union leader.¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, Woodcock struggled to turn the questions of structure into questions of purpose, and it was the continued media interest in the influence of shop stewards, above all, that signalled this failure.

When a strike erupted after the dismissal of seventeen 'trouble-makers' at Dagenham, the *Times* argued that the 'first responsibility' was on the unions 'to see that their shop stewards and members honour the agreements', having shown themselves previously 'incapable of carrying out this basic and elementary obligation'. Although the newspaper did concede that there was 'ham-handed' management at play, workers had been 'supine', shop stewards 'provocative' and the unions 'ineffectual'. This was one of a number of reports that placed the emphasis of malpractice on the labour force and union representation, taking the company's claims of trouble-making at face value and defending the right of a firm to dismiss an employee 'who persistently breaks his contract and induces others to do so'.¹⁰¹ Certainly, very little of ITV's news coverage represented clear interest in the long-term and structural economic experiences of the British car industry, but on the attitudes and agendas, political or otherwise, of strikers. When faced with a lengthy strike at Ford's plant in Dagenham in 1962, ITV's correspondent was keen to point out 'interesting things' about the strike.

⁹⁶ *The Times*, 6 September 1962, p. 11.

⁹⁷ *ITV Evening News*, 6 September 1964.

⁹⁸ *The Times*, 22 August 1966, p. 9.

⁹⁹ *ITV Evening News*, 13 September 1967.

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, 'Woodcock and Trade Union Reform', p. 201.

¹⁰¹ *The Times*, 13 February 1963, p. 11.

This predominantly centred on the timing of the strike (just after an annual holiday), and the position of the strikers (right at the end of the assembly line), in order to raise questions about the validity of the strike.¹⁰² Correspondents even went as far as to ask workers if they believed the strike to be ‘a communist plot’.¹⁰³ From all sides, then, shop stewards were the common denominator in worker unrest and an undesirable evolution in the structure of contemporary trade unionism.

The media’s handling of shop stewards forms an example of Stanley Cohen’s conceptualisation of media ‘symbolization’ – the mass communication of stereotypes where supposedly ‘neutral words’ can be made to ‘symbolize complex ideas and emotions’.¹⁰⁴ Although Cohen’s analysis focussed on a different set of symbols, looking at the likes of Mods and Teddy Boys, where visual and material culture was important, the communication processes were similar with shop stewards. As with the Teddy Boy, the shop steward ‘label’ acquired its own ‘descriptive and explanatory potential’, indicative of an individual with ‘a distinct type of personality’, where such symbolisation was bolstered through the use of ‘dramatized and ritualistic interviews’.¹⁰⁵ By the end of the 1960s, the use of ‘shop steward’ in industrial relations coverage was a short-cut to important stereotypes and associations – impediments to national prosperity, reckless self-interest and political extremism. This kind of symbolization, combined with the moralised language apparent in the coverage of the *Daily Mirror*, allowed industrial relations coverage to become increasingly personalised and one-dimensional, rather than tackle the complexities of wider economic structures.

It is difficult to reconcile these toxic portrayals of shop stewards in newspapers with the realities of their impact on industrial productivity. Tomlinson has convincingly argued that one of the ‘peculiarities’ of the reality of factory life was that ‘the much-abused shop steward found himself in the role of “progress-chaser”, trying to maintain his members’ wages, thus effectively playing a managerial role in keeping production going’.¹⁰⁶ Considering the media’s near-obsession with the impact of strikes on industrial output, one might think this would have warranted praise. Similarly, Tim Claydon’s study of the car industry highlighted that shop stewards were identified as ‘more of a lubricant than an irritant’ in industrial relations by the government’s Donovan Commission.¹⁰⁷ However, as has been analysed on multiple occasions, such a role was incompatible with the productivity narrative’s emphasis on grounding wages. Shop stewards, in seeking ways to legitimise

¹⁰² *ITV Evening News*, 31 July 1962.

¹⁰³ *ITV Evening News*, 11 May 1962.

¹⁰⁴ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: Third Edition* (Abingdon, 2011), p. 36.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 40.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁷ Claydon, ‘Tales of Disorder’, p. 35.

improvements for workers through progress and productivity, compromised such an interpretation. Moreover, their successful interventions rarely warranted news coverage and perhaps would have benefitted from the type of in-depth coverage which the BBC was so reluctant to provide. Shop stewards were only newsworthy when at the centre of a strike or a political controversy, tapping into Cold War political binaries, perhaps more so than any other figures.

The Decade of Productivity

Throughout the 1960s, Britain's culture of economic declinism framed the relationship between wage increases and productivity in negative terms. Government policy and indeed the majority of the media narrative understood productivity to be a way to ground wages as a deflationary measure, rather than, as the *Guardian* had suggested, a way to stimulate economic growth through improved productivity, particularly in high profile manufacturing industries. The moralised and political language used to chronicle wage claims and union conduct helped to buttress these negative frames and assumptions to significant effect, although it was not without its inconsistencies and problems. The emergence of such rhetoric was particularly notable in the *Mirror*, having previously been a critic of the Conservative's wage pause, which also drew on the unions' traditional, albeit strained, relationship with the Labour Party. Understandings of a British post-war consensus, specifically in the industrial sphere, became increasingly complicated, illustrated by the many criticisms of Labour's decision to use the language of productivity to ground and restrict wages, concerned about inflation. Although these criticisms varied in their severity and nuances, and not all were as extreme as the *Express's* outright rejection of a wage policy, they came from both left and right, which illustrated the erosion of Labour's increasingly precarious position and the divergence of economic opinion.

From the outset then, the trade unions, although initially open to productivity based agreements, faced an uphill battle in maintaining a positive media image because of their desire to seek the best wage deals for their members, particularly in high-profile, economically vital industries. This would have been the case almost regardless of the frequency or methods of industrial action, although strikes provided ideal opportunities for 'newsworthy' criticism. The drive for 'emergency' programming within television, now an important part of media coverage, and its reluctance to explore long-term structural issues through documentaries, due to the pressures of commerciality and competition were certainly influencing factors in the focus on industrial strife. Moreover, the unions' apparent failure to comply with or consider government policy in understandings of their purpose or development of structure, along with the continued erosion of centralised power, only

intensified such problems. Shop stewards, in assuming a leading role in wage bargaining and promoting industrial action where deemed necessary (and not always legally), were divisive figures because of their disregard for the dominant economic rhetoric. The narrow industrial relations agenda even meant that less contentious issues of efficiency and productivity still revolved around the experiences and attitudes of the labour force, as exemplified by the discussions in the *Times* on redundancy and redeployment.

Increased scrutiny of the motivations of the labour force meant that management's role in workplace unrest or Britain's faltering productivity was largely neglected or intentionally deflected, as indicated by the BBC's experience, and likely contributed to the damaging and complacent 'corporate culture' that Tomlinson described. Moreover, in many ways, the increasing focus on the trade union movement in scrutinizing the British disease and its productivity problem, driven by strikes, masked the growing public scepticism regarding the ability of a Labour government to manage the industrial economy through wage restraint. If, as Tomlinson described, 1966 was the high tide of the productivity debate in Whitehall, the frames and agendas of the media ensured that the problem of productivity took on a very different image in the years following.

Although the experiences of 1969, typified by a peak in media concern about unofficial strikes and, as explored in the previous chapter, the debate over *In Place of Strife*, cannot be framed as a crisis, they did represent an important stage in the relationship between unions, media and government. The failure of Labour to answer public concerns about the militancy of unions, particularly shop stewards, through incentives, as exemplified in productivity legislation, and, on the other hand, the punitive measures of *In Place of Strife*, led many to doubt the party's ability to arrest Britain's economic demise. By February 1969, not only did the Conservatives hold a lead in election polls, this was underpinned by the belief that the Conservatives could better maintain prosperity, with a 22 per cent lead in this area, as well as a perceived superiority in handling industrial disputes, albeit with a less impressive 6 per cent lead.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 2*, pp. 1038-39.

Chapter Five – Public disillusionment and the Manufactured Crisis *Governance and Politics, 1970-79*

The relationship between government, unions and the media experienced unprecedented transformation during the 1970s, as each element wrestled for influence in an increasingly hostile atmosphere. While this final decade does not mark a clear break from the analysis that preceded it, this chapter assesses media coverage of a period which has an 'orthodox internal chronology of escalating problems', with 1978-79's 'Winter of Discontent' as its finale.¹ As Geoffrey Goodman reflected, if 1979 was the 'watershed year' of post-war British politics, 'the story line effectively began with Heath's victory' in 1970's shock election result.² As this chapter illustrates, the story line took a clear turn after 1974, which had a dramatic impact on coverage of industrial relations. Heath's period as Prime Minister was characterised by intense public disillusionment, particularly in response to the government's confrontation with major unions, and its dependence on unparalleled deployment of 'State of Emergency' powers. The 1974 miners' strike, with the February general election as its backdrop, forms the first of the political case studies of this chapter, as Edward Heath went to the country with the campaign slogan 'Who Governs Britain?', in the hope of consolidating his position in a supposed battle with trade unionism. Although historians such as Jim Phillips have argued that government authority was 'certainly questioned' but 'not seriously jeopardised' by NUM industrial action, the media narrative and public perception of the strike lies relatively unexplored.³

1974 and the winter of 1978-79 represent the collision of trade unionism and high politics, almost without parallel in British contemporary history, perhaps with the exception of 1926 and 1984-85. This chapter seeks to assess the influence and effectiveness of the framing of these case studies as moments of 'crisis', rather than the validity of such portrayals, analysing their construction and context. In the case of 1974, despite the government's suggestion that the unions actively challenged governmental power, the development of a crisis narrative in the British media was limited. The considered response of unions, public perceptions of political leadership and the NUM, and the influence of the election agenda is examined, in order to further explain 1974's contained or limited crisis. In the assessment of 1979, the influence of structural changes to the three strands of analysis – media, politics and union strategy – is reviewed, to contextualise the clear continuities and changes to media coverage. Through this analysis, this chapter explores how 1979 had such radically

¹ Black, 'An Enlightening Decade?', p. 176.

² Goodman, *Bevan to Blair*, p. 141.

³ Jim Phillips, 'The 1972 Miners Strike: Popular Agency and Industrial Politics in Britain', *Contemporary British History* 20 (2006), p. 202.

different results to the events of 1974 and why it has been considered a crisis in ways that 1974 could not fulfil.

1974 and Britain's agonising drift

Although the events of 1974 did not constitute a serious challenge to the government's authority, the media narrative depicted clear conflict between government and unions. The long-established language of war and conflict in the industrial context changed orientation around the turn of the decade. Although James Thomas suggested that it was the memory of the poverty of the inter-war period which established consistency in the media's meta-narratives until 1970, in the industrial example it is clear that it was memory of the Second World War which had crystallised attitudes.⁴ The lexicon of the 1950s, which highlighted Britain's dwindling position in the international market as a deterrent from striking, and juxtaposed British performance against a foreign 'other', gave way to something much more insular. Increasingly, the 'other' in media narratives of industrial relations was the trade unions, posed against the government or, in the case of the right-wing press, the 'national interest'. This had already been evoked during the *In Place of Strife* episode under Labour but became more firmly entrenched as the unions faced conventional Conservative adversaries in government. According to the *Mirror*, the first of the two miners' strikes under Heath's leadership, formed 'a Blitzkrieg for which Government and country were totally ill prepared', as Heath had 'lost his nerve'.⁵ In 1974, the NUM's decision to take industrial action was described by the *Express* in a front-page headline as the miners' intent to 'go for all-out war'.⁶ Much like the narrative of the Second World War, this was understood to be a challenge distinctive to Britain. Fittingly, the *Sun* consistently dubbed the government's confrontation with the NUM, or vice versa, as 'the Battle of Britain'.⁷ The narrative of the British disease that had become an entrenched part of the popular industrial narrative continued to sustain a popular perception of a country with unparalleled challenges to a unique national character, despite a European context which suggested that British experience of striking was typical of the period.

1974's period of industrial unrest was the first winter to be dubbed as a 'winter of discontent', but the prevalence of this styling was relatively limited.⁸ The majority of newspapers were reluctant to describe the battle between government and unions as anything perilous or critical. This was despite

⁴ James Thomas, "'Bound In By History": The Winter of Discontent in British Politics, 1979-2004', *Media, Culture & Society* 29 (2007), pp. 265-267.

⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 22 February 1972, p. 2.

⁶ *Daily Express*, 6 February 1974, p. 1.

⁷ *Sun*, 14 December 1973, p. 2.

⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 14 December 1973, p. 1.

an official State of Emergency and an impending general election, both bound in war motifs. The media narrative of conflict between government and unions insulated these industrial issues from the 'national interest' or the general public, although the Conservative's 'Who Governs Britain?' slogan reflected attempts to widen public anxiety about these issues. The *Express* did refer to 'the incredibility of our industrial crisis' but in an article that was laced with hope for the future and a sense of impermanence.⁹ Similarly, the *Guardian* referred to the winter's strike as 'the worst industrial crisis to grip the country since pre-war' but conceded this was likely to be resolved in 'good old soggy compromise'.¹⁰ Throughout, although the threat to the country's governance was recognised, the situation was rarely framed as something beyond the means of mediation or negotiation.

A much more popular narrative of Britain's political and industrial situation, fostered by the most popular tabloids, was a sense of 'drifting into a nightmare' rather than the expectation of any kind of denouement or climax.¹¹ The *Mirror*, although it recognised the anxiety surrounding this 'drift', denied that situation was immediately 'serious' and insisted that in thirty years' time, the supposed 'Great Crisis of '74' would be remembered for the 'ministerial appeal to us all to brush our teeth in the dark'.¹² If there was any suggestion of crisis in any transformative terms, it was pushed by left-wing newspapers, for example the *Mirror*, which sought to widen the political agenda beyond industrial strife. Both the *Guardian*, under John Cole's influence, and the *Mirror* were keen to explore the 'real issues' such as 'collapsing social services, 'soaring rents' and 'astronomical prices'.¹³ Moreover, the *Mirror* consistently referred to Heath's image problem as part of a 'crisis of confidence' from both the public and those inside his own party.¹⁴ As far as the industrial scene was concerned, although the miners' strike provoked anxiety and undermined the position of both sides, the situation was rarely understood as a crisis of governance.

An important explanation for the limited crisis narrative of 1974 was the lack of union action which might have satisfied right-wing promises of extremism or violence to indicate a threat to government or democracy. The *Express* made significant attempts to frame an influential minority of trade unionists as militant aggressors during the early 1970s, with foreboding articles about 'the shadowy men who thrive on strife', but this gained very little traction in 1974, despite the popularity

⁹ *Daily Express*, December 12 1973, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Guardian*, 1 February 1974, p. 12.

¹¹ *Sun*, 14 December 1973, p. 2.

¹² *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1974, p. 12.

¹³ *Daily Mirror*, 8 February 1974, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 6 February 1974, p. 5

of conflict themes.¹⁵ This failure to convince was partly a symptom of the paper's waning influence, in the midst of a succession of cover price rises (eleven between 1970 and 1983) caused by a surge in running costs, and its failure to widen its appeal beyond its aging readership, as 58 per cent of its readers were over the age of 45.¹⁶ In many ways, the *Express* was left behind by the dominance of the *Mirror*, emergence of the *Sun* and the *Mail's* shift to the tabloid format, something the *Express* did not follow until 1977. However, these commercial issues aside, even the *Express's* columnist conceded that the promise of 'rough sailing' had been denied by an 'unexpectedly pacific campaign'.¹⁷ The conciliatory campaign was partly as a result of the NUM's healthy position within the wider trade union movement, as 'their political and social clout extended far beyond their memberships', which gave the NUM the ability to convince and persuade in very small numbers.¹⁸ More significantly, the peaceful strike and ensuing election demonstrated acknowledgment by both miners and the Labour Party that any untoward behaviour at picket lines could have damaging repercussions for Labour's performance at the polls. As the *Sun* suggested, 'Mr Heath's Ace for an election would be confrontation with the unions... but it takes two to make a confrontation'.¹⁹

Although the *Sun* referenced its established 'friendship' with the miners, in reflecting on the rise of supposed extremism in major unions, it initially warned unions that 'no group, no union, no party' could be allowed to challenge the government's authority, the result of which would be 'the death of democracy' – and this seems to have been a warning that the NUM was largely receptive to.²⁰ NUM members voted against Gormley's request to delay a strike in 1974 'in the national interest' but recognised concern about the flying pickets of 1972 at a time when Britain was sensitive to the physical threats posed by football hooliganism.²¹ NUM leaders at national and local level employed a 'strict code of behaviour', understood as 'victory without violence', aware of the potential damage to the miners' well-earned public image.²² The election 'gave the miners a very strong motive for behaving so as to dissipate as little support for the Labour Party as possible.'²³ The miners' media awareness, in contrast to unions in other disputes, and their responsiveness to the election campaign confirmed the continuance of a complex relationship of loyalty to the Labour Party,

¹⁵ *Daily Express*, 8 August 1970, p. 6.

¹⁶ Williams, *Read All About it*, p. 203.

¹⁷ *Daily Express*, 14 February 1974, p. 10.

¹⁸ Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2009), p. 64.

¹⁹ *Sun*, 14 January 1974, p. 2.

²⁰ *Sun*, 24 January 1974, p. 5.

²¹ Martin Holmes, *Political Pressure and Economic Policy: British Government 1970-74* (Basingstoke, 1987), p. 116.

²² Roger Geary, *Policing Industrial Disputes: 1893-1985* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 122.

²³ *The Times*, 23 March 1974, p. 13.

despite the embittered experiences of 1969. The *Express*, frustrated by the unions' refusal to fulfil its predictions, suggested that because television was the source from which 'most of the electorate is likely to get its impressions of policies and personalities', there was a 'determined effort on both sides to swamp the box with sweet reasonableness'.²⁴ This demonstrated the kind of awareness about the influence of television coverage on public opinion, and cultivating media image, which Edward Heath had consistently either overlooked or ignored, having 'neither the time nor the inclination to indulge in such fripperies'.²⁵

Personalised Coverage and Heath's U-turn

Heath's media conduct was significant for the way 1974's events were understood. 1972 had provided important warnings for Heath about media coverage, beyond his apparent distaste for television appearances and editorial pandering. Although cases of controversy involving NUM members were more widespread in 1972, this was often glossed over as a response to incitement from the government. The *Sun* referred to miners as 'only playing at Ted's game', which was 'tough' and 'unsentimental', with the suggestion that their response was dictated by the pressures exerted on workers by the government's industrial policy.²⁶ The *Times* described the Government's response to the long-term commercial difficulties facing the mining industry as 'crude and hurtful'.²⁷ The moralised norms of the tabloid lexicon were utilised to the miners' benefit, rather than the government's, playing on concepts of justice, for an underpaid and hard-working group of employees, and victimhood, with the miners framed as 'the unlucky victims of a national confusion' surrounding modernisation and economic management.²⁸ These were the same sympathetic patterns of coverage which had typified the media's response to cases of absenteeism in the mining industry in the 1960s and reflected the public respect for the miners' contribution to the nation. The varied nature of the public support, governed largely by affluence and class to surprising effect, and the subsequent moderation of volatile currents of opposition and support by newspapers, is explored further in the analysis which follows. However, at the conclusion of the 1972 strike, 81 per cent of those polled supported the generous pay settlement offered by the independent Wilberforce Report and 52 per cent said their sympathies lay with the miners, as opposed to 20 per cent for employers.²⁹ Between 1972 and 1974, the public increasingly saw the responsibility for Britain's economic problems as a governmental one, as polls reflected an 11 per cent rise in those blaming

²⁴ *Daily Express*, 14 February 1974, p. 10.

²⁵ Philip Ziegler, *Edward Heath: the Authorised Biography* (London, 2010), p. 231.

²⁶ *Sun*, 14 February 1972, p. 2.

²⁷ *The Times*, 6 February 1972, p. 11.

²⁸ *The Times*, 6 January 1972, p. 11.

²⁹ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 2*, p. 1171.

the government, while the number apportioning blame to the unions dropped by 8 per cent.³⁰ Following the first of the national mining strikes, 45 per cent of respondents said that their impression of Heath had 'gone down' as a result of his handling of the dispute.³¹

With Heath's government struggling in the polls after the events of 1972, Britain was said to be at 'a stage of disillusionment', which could only be recovered by a 'learning government'.³² Heath responded to such demands by implementing a more interventionist policy, a 'near-sensational shift from one end of the political stage to the other'.³³ Demonstrated through the statutory incomes policy and the nationalisation of Rolls Royce, this change in policy, despite being a reversion to the post-war norms that many had demanded, only served to increase scrutiny on Heath. The fraught situation in the coal industry in the winter of 1973 prompted the *Sun* to ask 'WHERE IS OUR CHURCHILL?' in a situation apparently reminiscent of Dunkirk.³⁴ This preoccupation with 'Churchillism' was indicative of Britain's long-term desire for a leader with Churchill's rhetorical skills and formed part of the cult of personality which had become such a prominent part of media coverage since the war.³⁵ Concern about a lack of effective leadership, typical of earlier coverage of the TUC, albeit for different reasons, now applied to a Conservative government that was traditionally tough on union issues. In Ana Ines Langer's post-war research of this personalisation trend in British politics, quantitative analysis showed Heath to be far less prominent in the coverage of the *Times* compared to his predecessors, as he lacked the 'leadership style' to inspire its journalists.³⁶ According to the *Guardian*, Heath's 'cold, remote and unsympathetic' approach, illustrated by his apparent public detachment, 'made him an easy and inviting target for criticism'.³⁷ This was particularly damaging when he embarked on such a sharp change in policy direction. It was clear from an early stage then that a positive outcome for Heath during any case of perceptible national crisis in 1974 was far from guaranteed.

³⁰ Connie De Boer, 'The Polls: Unions and Strikes', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41 (1977), p. 122.

³¹ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 2*, p. 1171.

³² *The Times*, 8 March 1972, p. 15.

³³ John Ramsden, 'The Prime Minister and the Making of Policy', in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds), *The Heath Government, 1970-1974: A Reappraisal* (London, 1996), p. 37.

³⁴ *Sun*, 12 December 1973, p. 2.

³⁵ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991), p. 271.

³⁶ Ana Ines Langer, 'Historical Exploration of the Personalisation of Politics in the Print Media: The British Prime Ministers (1945-1999)', *Parliamentary Affairs* 60 (2007), p. 377.

³⁷ *Guardian*, 20 February 1972, p. 8.

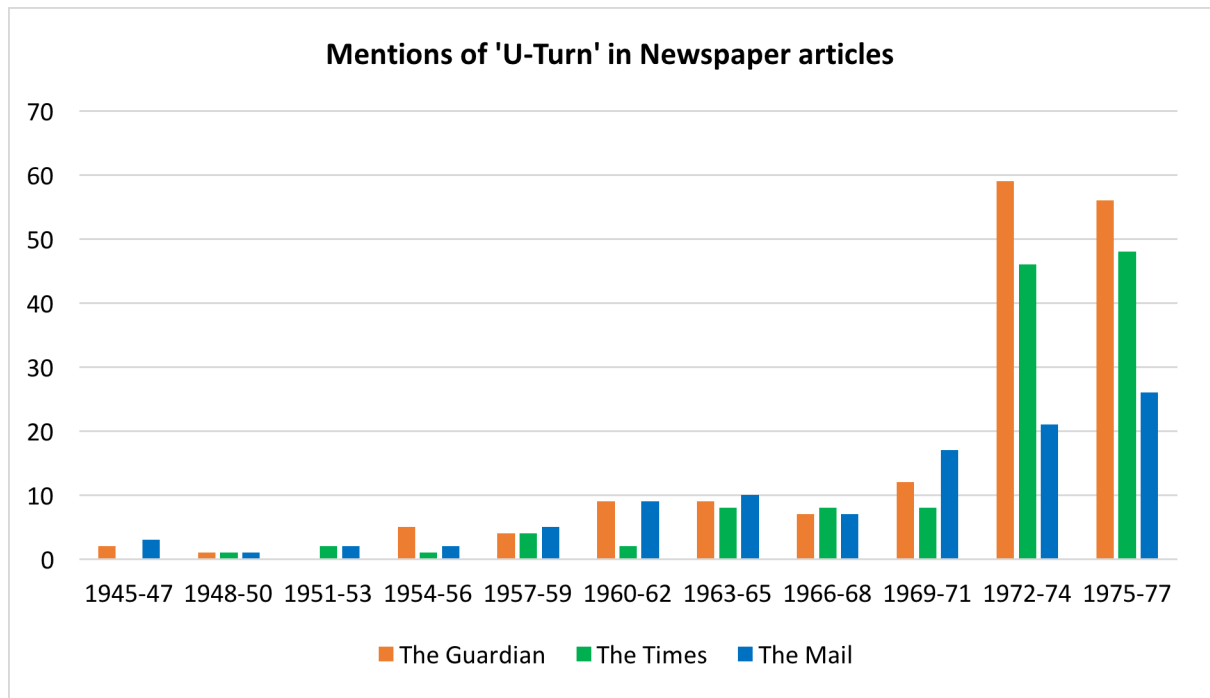


Figure 5.1: 'U-Turn' articles in national dailies (1945-77)

Figure 5.1, an overview of the period, demonstrates a surge in the use of 'u-turn' in newspaper coverage following Heath's change in policy direction. Although the upturn in its usage was most distinct in the *Guardian's* reports, all three of the newspapers showed an upturn of varying degrees, indicative of the near-universal attention paid to Heath's political changes, and the stigma associated with them. The sustained coverage and political scrutiny of Heath's multiple u-turns, defied expectations of a disproportionate focus on unions in order to suggest that their activities warranted 'closer scrutiny than those of employers because their legitimacy is suspect'.³⁸ This surprisingly balanced coverage provided the Conservatives with problems in their single-issue campaign, as it did not exert the pressures on unionism that would be traditionally expected. It is also notable that its use continued after Heath's incumbency, suggestive of continued public disillusionment with British political leadership, despite a change in government, which established an important foundation for shaping Margaret Thatcher's conviction politics.

Narrow agendas and public disillusionment

The narrow agenda of the election campaign, at the instigation of the Conservatives, also influenced the way the debate swung in the media. Many commentators argued that Heath had been outmanoeuvred on the central campaign issue, as he had been 'forced to fight on ground that in

³⁸ Paul Hartmann, 'Industrial relations in the news media', *Industrial Relations Journal* 6 (1975), p. 16.

many ways favours his opponents'.³⁹ This perspective suggested that, although the Conservative campaign suggested otherwise, a narrow media agenda focused on the industrial situation, contrary to conventional expectations, put the government at a strategic disadvantage in fighting the election. This was despite the fact Sydney Jacobson from the *Mirror* had 'advised Heath strongly' that the single issue of trade unions would fail him in a general election.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Alistair Hetherington, *Guardian* editor, recalled that even the Labour 'stalwarts' amongst the *Guardian's* staff had been 'notably reserved in their view of the Labour alternative', without 'real confidence' in Wilson, and suggested that had it not been for the Conservative's tax policies, 'the *Guardian* might well have supported Heath'.⁴¹ More than simply illustrating the severity of popular political scepticism, the *Guardian's* support for Wilson after consideration of the wider political agenda alluded to Heath's problem had he chosen to fight something broader than a single issue campaign based on the threat of trade unionism. The *Express's* frustration with the fact state-ownership had turned the miners case into a 'political football' hinted at the continued divisiveness of strikes in public sector industries.⁴²

Both sides of the so-called battle struggled to convince their traditional support, indicated by the lack of endorsements in the build up to the general election. The *Guardian* described the recent transition in public mood as 'scepticism' to 'political cynicism'.⁴³ There was clear evidence that public disillusionment had begun to reach beyond the government and towards the trade unions, with the conflict perceived to be focussed on 'not really principle so much as politics, conducted above the heads of the people'.⁴⁴ Although this assessment alluded to the lack of threat posed by miners to the national interest, it also reflected the continued attempts of the press to separate industrial matters from political ones, as a means of delegitimising industrial action. John Cole felt that by this point 'the Zeitgeist' was beginning to turn against the union movement, despite the lack of effective resolutions from the Conservatives.⁴⁵ Despite public anxiety about the rise of militancy, a consistent theme across the period of research, there was a concern about the inability of either side to effectively counter such issues, which were allowed to slip between the cracks of political policy. The *Guardian* believed the Conservatives thought it was 'up to Labour to expose and counter left-wing

³⁹ *Guardian*, 10 February 1974, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Cole, *As it Seemed to Me*, p. 458.

⁴¹ Hetherington, *Guardian Years*, p. 219.

⁴² *Daily Express*, 15 February 1974, p. 8.

⁴³ *Guardian*, 15 November 1973, p. 16.

⁴⁴ *Guardian*, 8 February 1974, p. 12.

⁴⁵ Cole, *As it Seemed to Me*, p. 100-101.

subversion of unions, and Labour politicians hesitate to say anything which may embarrass the unions'.⁴⁶

The difference in political perspectives between the country's leading newspapers, or more precisely the *Sun's* lack of a clear political position, had a decisive impact on the outcomes of 1974. Although 1974 is often emphasized because it was the first time Murdoch's *Sun* endorsed a Conservative campaign, this was a very tepid recommendation, which referred to the decision for the electorate as between 'the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea', with Labour perceived to be 'even less likely to have the answers' to Britain's economic problems.⁴⁷ In the lead up to 1974's election campaign, the *Sun's* emphasis on the likes of Page Three, lifestyle columns and other cultural endeavours, had further reflected and responded to the country's political disengagement. When required to take a political position in the electoral context, the tenuousness of the *Sun's* support for the Conservatives was summed up by the presence of columns in that same pre-election issue which fell on the side of Labour because Wilson would 'just have to do' for Britain.⁴⁸ Moreover, earlier in the campaign, the *Sun* had adjudged that the election had been 'fought in the no-man's land between aspiration and belief' where the Labour manifesto was 'marginally more believable'.⁴⁹ This disparity also referenced an emerging trend in media coverage which consistently saw a much higher proportion of editors back the Conservatives than the public or journalists more widely. According to 1977's Royal Commission on the Press, there was only a three per cent disparity in voting trends between journalists and the public, compared to a 12 per cent disparity between editors and the public.⁵⁰ This kind of discrepancy highlighted the state of flux that existed between editorial opinion and public opinion, along with the success of the *Sun* in gaining popularity via cultural interests, rather than traditional political allegiances. Whether this flux was a symptom of editors' unconvincing and reluctant approval for the government, or a signal of editors pulling their readerships in new political directions, it is difficult to say. However, it did raise questions about the influence of editors over both journalists and the public, despite the lack of compelling political choices.

⁴⁶ *Guardian*, 3 February 1974, p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Sun*, 27 February 1974, p. 1.

⁴⁸ *Sun*, 27 February 1974, p. 6.

⁴⁹ *Sun*, 13 February 1974, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Oliver McGregor, *Royal Commission on the Press (1976): Final Report* (Cmnd. 6810, 1976-1977), p. 98.

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Figure 5.2: 'For all our tomorrows', *Daily Mirror*, 28 February 1974, p. 1.

In contrast to the *Sun's* tepid response to the political stalemate which confronted Britain at the first of Britain's 1974 general elections, the *Mirror* adopted a committed position in Labour's favour. Its front page on election day, absorbed entirely by the slogan 'For All Our Tomorrows, Vote Labour Today' (Figure 5.2), which only offered an editorial explanation of 'the way ahead' on the following page.⁵¹ This, according to Goodman, had an 'astonishing impact' on the election, used as a poster by many Labour supporters, with 'more impact on voters than any other national newspaper on polling day'.⁵² Such a suggestion that one headline could decisively influence the general election pointed to the prevalence of floating voters at that time and the volatility of public opinion. While there are

⁵¹ *Daily Mirror*, 28 February 1974, p. 1.

⁵² Goodman, *From Bevan to Blair*, p. 149.

questions about the neutrality of the source in this case, the paper's confidence in the message was demonstrated by the duplication of that poster headline for October's general election.

Heath's snap election was regarded by many as an act of brinkmanship but the single issue, 'Who Governs Britain?', was perhaps Heath's greatest problem. While the Royal Commission on the Press adjudged that the coverage of the period was 'usually disapproving of industrial action' and 'supportive of the Government', facets of 1974's media response certainly brought into question such judgements.⁵³ In order for the narrow agenda of the campaign to be beneficial for the government's electoral aspirations, it seems probable that Heath needed to be campaigning from a much stronger position, particularly in terms of public impressions of his leadership style, against a union movement which failed, from Heath's point of view, to provide a more physical, foreboding threat to principles of democracy and governance.

The fact public support for strikes showed very limited change between 1966 and 1974, despite concern about the extent of union power, suggested that little had changed to tip the delicate balance.⁵⁴ Residual sympathy and solidarity with miners, based on a persuasive media narrative of victimhood and struggle, also undercut Heath's attempts to frame unions as a threat to national governance. As the *Guardian* aptly assessed, any Conservative attempt to portray the miners as against 'the people' or the national interest was perceived 'as the miners against the Government', where the public 'did not see much between them'.⁵⁵ This was exemplified in the election results. The language of conflict did not translate into a threat against the national interest, like earlier conceptions of 'war' in an industrial context had, and instead simply illustrated the lack of compromise between government and unions. If 1969 raised serious questions about Labour's ability to assert government power in the face of union pressure, 1974 had a similar impact on perceptions of Conservative trade union policy. As the *Guardian* said, neither party had 'produced an answer to the unlimited power to disrupt life and ultimately paralyse government' but simultaneously the country would 'not lightly forgive' the party 'unwilling to make a reasonable compromise'.⁵⁶

⁵³ Oliver McGregor, *Royal Commission on the Press: Analysis of Newspaper Content* (Cmnd 6810-4, 1976-1977), p. 212.

⁵⁴ De Boer, 'The Polls: Unions and Strikes', p. 127.

⁵⁵ *Guardian*, 8 February 1974, p. 12.

⁵⁶ *Guardian*, 3 February 1974, p. 8.

The Winter of Discontent: New Contexts and Debates

The final politically-orientated case study of this research is markedly different from those that have preceded it. The 'Winter of Discontent' described a series of public sector strikes in a number of essential services, including ambulance workers and grave-diggers, during the winter of 1978-79, one of Britain's coldest since the war. Whereas much of industrial relations coverage before 1978-79 is relatively unexplored, as this research has shown, James Thomas has reflected on the way 1979 has formed the 'centrepiece' of contemporary mythology which views the 1970s as 'a period of backwardness, anarchy and industrial militancy'.⁵⁷ Contemporary politicians have found this mythology to be immensely profitable for their own agendas. Outside politics, the winter of 1978-79 has been the focus of a number of interesting historical monographs which seek to 'move beyond the provocative and one-dimensional representations in order to understand the underlying complexity of the forces that shaped these events'.⁵⁸ However, as Colin Hay argues, there is a good case that this mythologizing process was not 'chronologically subsequent to, but simultaneous with, the events' and shaped they were lived and experienced.⁵⁹ Although these strikes were not essentially co-ordinated between different services and were far from nationwide, these strikes were 'packaged' by the media as symptomatic of a crisis of government. In this case, the question is 'not just the accuracy of that construction' but 'how the events were understood at the time'.⁶⁰ This section explores the structural changes to the media sphere, with a specific focus on the new political influence of the *Sun*, which transformed the forms and reception of industrial relations coverage, despite notable continuities. Beyond this, it analyses and reflects on the responses and behaviours of political leaders and union chiefs to these changes and their impact on the national response to the crisis.

In September 1978, five per cent of those polled felt that strikes were Britain's 'most urgent problem' but by January 1979, 53 per cent believed it to be the most urgent issue, which provided a clear indication of the anxiety surrounding the industrial situation.⁶¹ Figure 5.3 indicates how conceptions of some kind of nationally peculiar illness – endemic and contagious in nature – had become increasingly popular in the build up to the Winter of Discontent, as media concern grew.

⁵⁷ Thomas, "'Bound In By History'", p. 268.

⁵⁸ Tara Martin López, *The Winter of Discontent: Myth, Memory, and History* (Liverpool, 2014), p. 9. See also, John Shepherd, *Crisis? What Crisis? The Callaghan Government and the 'Winter of Discontent'*, (Manchester, 2013).

⁵⁹ Colin Hay, 'The Moment when "When" became "Now": Reflections on the Winter of Discontent after the Opening of the Archives', *Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute* 21 (2015), p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶¹ King and Wybrow, *British Political Opinion*, p. 267.

Although, the roots of this economic and industrial declinism were established during the 1960s, it was after Wilson's 1975 election success that this conceptualisation became part of mainstream coverage. The influence of the IMF crisis of 1976, as Callaghan's government was forced to borrow an unprecedented sum of money from the International Monetary Fund, should also not be underestimated in intensifying such anxieties. Although it was 'less traumatic' than the Winter of Discontent, it too formed an important watershed in economic terms, as the 'post-war consensus on how the economy should be managed broke down'.⁶² This context is crucially important for understanding the events of 1978-79, as well as the economic aspect of industrial relations more widely.

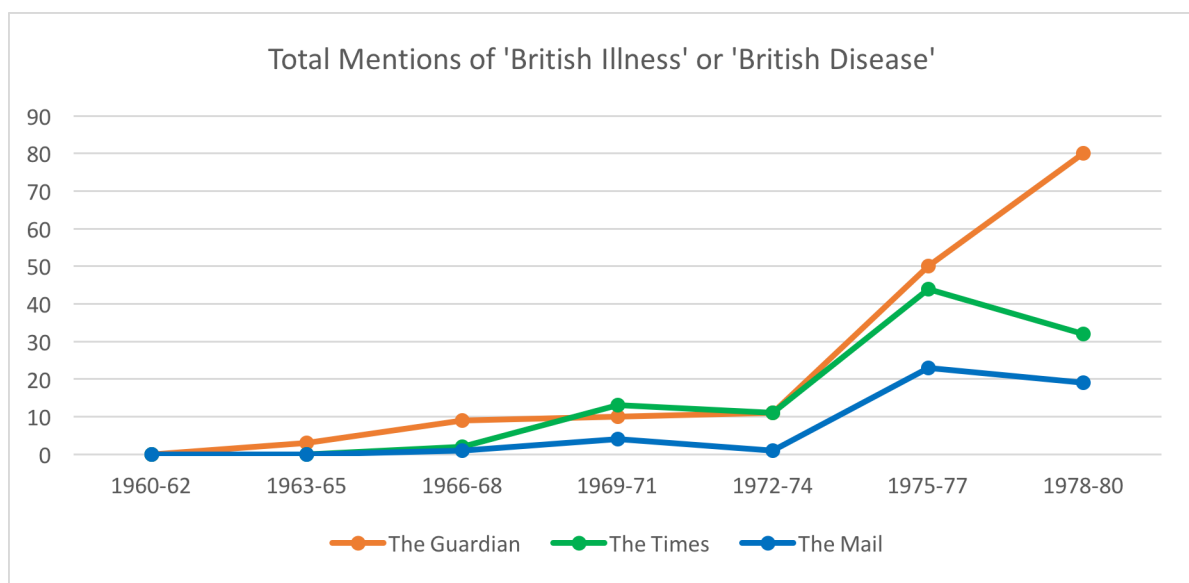


Figure 5.3: 'British Illness' and 'British Disease' in British Dailies (1960-80)

Whilst sceptical of the impact of the press on day-to-day public opinion, Larry Lamb, editor of the *Sun*, believed it was 'distinctly possible' that the *Sun* played an important part in deposing the Callaghan government in 1979 as the *Sun* 'was probably talking to most of the people who could be persuaded to switch political allegiance' rather than its competitors who were 'preaching to the converted'.⁶³ Although Lamb has proudly reflected on the success of the 'Winter of Discontent' branding, this was not the first time journalists had attempted to frame industrial action in this way.⁶⁴ In fact, this was the third 'Winter of Discontent' of the decade, with the phrase used during

⁶² Kathleen Burk and Alec Cairncross, *Good-bye, Great Britain: The 1976 IMF Crisis* (Avon, 1992), p. xi.

⁶³ Larry Lamb, *Sunrise: The remarkable rise and rise of the best-selling Soaraway Sun* (London, 1989), p. 161. Sir Albert 'Larry' Lamb (1929-2002) was the *Sun*'s editor for two spells from 1969 to 1972 and from 1975-1981. During his time at the paper, he oversaw the introduction of Page Three, as well as the newspaper's ascendancy to become the country's best selling newspaper.

⁶⁴ Lamb, *Sunrise*, p. 159.

1972's miners strike and the three-day weeks of 1974, when the impact of strikes was more widespread. Why did this label become so widely used and central to popular understanding of that winter, where it had failed to gain traction before? In previous cases cited by Dave Lyddon from the late 1960s and early 1970s, 'instances of mountains of rubbish and unburied corpses did not attract much opprobrium', which indicates that the mythology of 1978-79 was 'contingent on a particular set of economic and political circumstances'.⁶⁵ In light of these exceptional circumstances, it is important that this research seeks to situate this 'myth' and the ensuing crisis within the wider media context, in order to appreciate not just how the nature of industrial relations coverage changed to provide such a compelling construction, but also the threads of continuity and stylistic legacies that it built upon. In light of this, rather than covering primary sources already addressed by the likes of Colin Hay and James Thomas, the bulk of this section reflects on the relationship between the analysis from the vast collection of secondary material related to the Winter of Discontent and the trends and patterns of coverage that this research has already established. This case study concludes by assessing the TUC's response to changes in the media immediately before the events of 1978-9.

Media Change: The emergence of the *Sun*

The media context played a significant part in defining the Winter of Discontent from the confined chaos of 1974, specifically with regards to the new competition to the *Mirror's* dominance, provided by Rupert Murdoch's *Sun*. For James Curran and Jean Seaton, the period after 1974's general election marks the transition to a new period in newspaper history. Between the two winters analysed, the newspaper industry 'increased partisanship and centralised control', as a response to the 'growing polarization of British politics' and 'interventionist proprietors', with Murdoch as perhaps the most infamous example.⁶⁶ Following its re-launch, the *Sun* found great success in targeting younger audiences, while pushing a 'disrespectful, anti-establishment, entertainment-driven agenda' which 'dropped the serious ambition of the *Daily Mirror*'.⁶⁷ By 1978, the *Sun's* cultural popularity of the early 1970s had provided platform and audience for a 'new articulation of the sentiment and policies of the right' and the *Mirror*, finally beaten in the circulation stakes that year, found it increasingly difficult to resist the *Sun's* right-wing narratives.⁶⁸ Whereas the *Sun* had been 'solidly resistant to attempted Conservative Central Office manipulation' and had only

⁶⁵ Dave Lyddon, 'Striking Facts about the "Winter of Discontent"', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 36 (2015), p. 218.

⁶⁶ Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, p. 68.

⁶⁷ Martin Conboy and John Steel, 'From "we" to "me": the changing construction of popular tabloid journalism', *Journalism Studies* 11 (2010), p. 503.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

provided a 'grudging' endorsement of Heath in 1974, their position was much more transparent by 1978.⁶⁹ The *Sun's* decision to 'preach right-wing economics, day after day, week after week' would have or should have, in Lamb's words, driven customers 'back into the arms of the *Mirror*'.⁷⁰ However, the opposite happened because the *Sun* was interested 'not only in politics, but in beer and skittles'.⁷¹ The success of the *Sun's* political message, seizing upon the potential for political alternatives provided by Thatcher, was, at least initially, secondary to its cultural popularity.

It is significant that, for many readers of the *Sun*, this shift in political allegiance was not immediately discerned. According to polling from 1979, only seven per cent of its readers perceived its editorial line to be 'Pro-Conservative', while 48 per cent of *Sun's* readers thought of the paper as 'Pro-Labour'.⁷² Significantly, 45 per cent believed the paper had no political allegiance, which was a significantly higher figure than the readers of the *Mirror*, *Express* and *Mail*.⁷³ This perception of the paper reflected the *Sun's* powerful potential to convey influential partisan messages beyond conventional political boundaries under the sheen of popular consumerism.

Under commercial pressure from the *Sun*, the *Mirror* was frequently 'indistinguishable from the Tory press in its partiality', to the point where many readers were confused about the paper's political allegiances.⁷⁴ Goodman remembered Hugh Cudlipp's 1974 resignation from the *Mirror* as 'a trumpet call to a Fleet Street revolution'.⁷⁵ If this was the case, by the late 1970s that revolution was well under way. The language of trade union solidarity no longer found a footing within the *Mirror's* lexicon, as they argued that Moss Evans, the new TGWU General Secretary was not a 'crusader' but instead a 'pied piper', who lead members down a path to 'destruction'.⁷⁶ Once again, the presence of a Labour government appeared to decisively shape the paper's approach to union coverage. In that same front-page article, the emphasis was placed from the outset on Callaghan's trip to 'sunny Guadeloupe tackling the world's problems' and the implication of his ignorance to the problems of 'Bleakest Britain', where the *Mirror* too created a list of seemingly interconnected public sector strikes. The *Mirror* announced that Evans had 'declared war on British industry', where 'the effect will be devastating', as it declined to frame the strike as an issue between the TGWU and

⁶⁹ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 272.

⁷⁰ Lamb, *Sunrise*, p. 170.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁷² Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 158.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁷⁴ Thomas, "'Bound in By History'", p. 270.

⁷⁵ Goodman, *From Bevan to Blair*, p. 158.

⁷⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 8 January 1979, p. 1.

government.⁷⁷ As far as concepts of ‘the public’ were concerned, the *Mirror* sought to widen the perceived target of industrial action, to more than an internalised difference of interests between the industrial and political branches of the labour movement.

Geoffrey Goodman recalled the *Mirror*’s task, the ‘only voice’ presenting a ‘reasoned, balanced picture of an appalling state of affairs’, as an ‘impossible’ one, which took all of the skills the *Mirror*’s journalists possessed, and ‘many [they] didn’t’.⁷⁸ The *Mirror*’s attempts to mediate and moderate trade unionist’s responses, as seen in the mining strikes, became increasingly desperate, as they sought to protect Labour’s electoral interests. In late 1978, Mike Molloy, then *Mirror* editor, was asked by Callaghan to have a conversation with Moss Evans about the avoidance of pay claims over the coming winter but Molloy found this task to be a ‘hopeless’ cause, as Evans declined to make any promises.⁷⁹ Although Molloy recalled a warm relationship between the *Mirror* and Callaghan, he conceded that by 1979 the paper was ‘loathed by the far left’, including the IRA, and was nicknamed ‘the Running Dogs of Capitalism’ which was, according to Molloy, ‘perfectly true’.⁸⁰ Given the increasing militancy of trade unions during this time, it is unsurprising that the columns of the *Mirror* had waning influence over industrial action. Whereas the likes of Goodman had felt the *Mirror* had played a pivotal role in determining Britain’s political direction in 1974, it was forced to defer to the *Sun* by 1979, conceding its political agenda in the process.

Even the BBC was criticised for the way it was perceived to adopt the frames and lines of investigation which had been popular in the partisan press. This was despite the BBC’s establishment of a long-term consultative group on the subject, after an initial trial of two years, which took opinion from a broad range of unionists and industrial journalists. Norman Willis, then TUC Assistant General Secretary, at a meeting of the BBC’s Consultative Group on Industrial and Business Affairs, ‘expressed unease’ with the way the BBC had chosen to cover the winter’s events, particularly the way it had accepted the narrative of ‘crisis’, as framing it as one ‘was to take up an attitude towards it’.⁸¹ Hugh Williams, editor of the BBC’s *Nationwide* Programme, ‘acknowledged the validity of some of the points’ made by Willis, but did not think the use of crisis was ‘necessarily a misjudgement’ because many ‘ordinary people’ used the word and *Nationwide* was a ‘popular programme which

⁷⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 12 January 1979, p. 1.

⁷⁸ Goodman, *From Bevan to Blair*, p. 214.

⁷⁹ Molloy, *The Happy Hack*, p. 214.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁸¹ BBC Consultative Group on Industrial and Business Affairs, 2 July 1979, p. 2; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R78/77/1).

had to grab the viewer's attention'.⁸² John Cole, who also sat on this group, accepted that the media often 'took in each other's washing', with the events of 1978-79 being no exception, but that both major television networks were influenced more by 'the serious press than by mass circulation papers', in order to 'take a good look at serious issues'.⁸³

In a later meeting of the group, Andrew Taussig, Special Assistant to the BBC Director of News and Current Affairs, expressed a comparable matter to those raised against the unions' enthusiasm for documentaries during the 1960s. Taussig said that 'audiences very often did not want background features and analytical pieces' but preferred 'specific stories' about ongoing strikes.⁸⁴ It appeared that while the BBC had clearly made an effort to make sure it maintained its commitments to neutrality, it often, by the very nature of British media dynamics, absorbed many of the frames of reference utilised by the national media. In order for coverage to appeal to audiences and engage with their primary concerns, the BBC's coverage of the winter of discontent was forced to at least mention the predominant frames of reference.

Beyond the *Sun's* emerging popularity, strikes within the newspaper industry also had a significant impact on the attitude of journalists and, more importantly, editors. In 1978, strikes by printers at the *Times* forced the newspaper to close for almost a year, while strikes at the BBC were only avoided through a generous pay deal negotiated shortly before the events of the Winter of Discontent. John Cole had already developed concerns about the impact of strike action on the *Guardian's* 1974 election coverage, convinced that the union's 'follies washed off on the papers' attitudes to trade unionism as a whole'.⁸⁵ Reflecting on the impact of industrial action in newspaper production, Larry Lamb concluded that:

Anyone who had suffered as we had, physically, financially and emotionally, at the hands of the politically motivated thugs who, though few in number, had dominated so many Fleet Street branches for so long, could hardly be expected to support a political party which more and more seemed dedicated to the proposition that the trade unions were themselves an arm of government.⁸⁶

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁴ BBC Consultative Group on Industrial and Business Affairs, 22 October 1979, p. 6; BBC Written Archive Centre, (R78/77/1).

⁸⁵ Cole, *As It Seemed to Me*, p. 101.

⁸⁶ Lamb, *Sunrise*, p. 161.

This sort of attitude confirmed the significance of the newspaper editors' experience as consumers and employers, actively enduring industrial action, rather than purely as mediators and reporters of strikes. As print unions had become more militant, editorial attitudes had hardened. Moreover, this quotation provided clear evidence of the longevity of the binary perceptions of political and industrial picketing, and the supposed boundary between them, as a means of legitimisation. Whereas newspapers of the 1950s could criticise the busmen's political strikes as a worrying exception, strikes with political motivations, whether by miners, gravediggers or printing technicians, were increasingly understood as the norm. Strikes were perceived as inherently political, even when they had 'economic' motivations such as the rejection of pay restraint.

The TUC response: 'Strikes are more appealing than sex'

In stark contrast to the dynamic media landscape, the TUC's response to this rapidly shifting media atmosphere was ponderous. The TUC hierarchy clearly recognised the tabloid preoccupation with covering strikes, as evidenced in an article written by the TUC's Press and Publications Department in 1970 for the National Graphical Association's journal, in which it was adjudged that 'to some of the papers, strikes are more appealing than sex'.⁸⁷ The General Secretary of the National Society of Operative Printers Graphical and Media Personnel (NATSOPA), Dick Briginshaw, wrote to Vic Feather warning him of the 'illusion to believe that because Press reporters are often good trade unionists this is a safeguard' and the second 'illusion' of editorial freedom because of the influence of 'controlling witch-doctors', newspaper owners.⁸⁸ However, although the problem was highlighted attention at the 1971 Congress and resolutions were passed at the 1974 and 1975 regarding the issue, relatively little progress was made until the late 1970s, despite TUC awareness of the GMG's research.⁸⁹ The TUC's monitoring group eventually met in December 1978 and the first serious output from TUC monitoring was a critical and well-argued report on the coverage of the Winter of Discontent, although the increasingly complicated loyalty of the TUC to the incumbent Labour government discouraged members from publishing the report before the 1979 election. According to meeting minutes from March 1979, both Geoffrey Goodman and Terrence Lancaster had advised that while the report was worthy of publication, doing so before the election would 'merely draw attention to the difficulties experienced this winter and would not serve the purpose the Group

⁸⁷ TUC Press and Publications Department, 'The Developing Role of the TUC', September 1970; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292B/781.1/3)

⁸⁸ Dick Briginshaw to Vic Feather, 5 April 1972; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292D/786/1)

⁸⁹ TUC Paper on 'Monitoring the Media', 9 January 1978; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292D/786/3)

intended'.⁹⁰ Unsurprisingly, this blunted the impact of the TUC's research but illustrated the complex and compromised political position which hindered the TUC's approach.

Moreover, this emphasis on research, part of what Paul Manning describes as 'media pressure politics' and a common strategy for trade unions worldwide, was underpinned by a number of hurdles for the TUC in pursuing the media more directly.⁹¹ One company wrote to the TUC to offer 'television acclimatisation courses' for unionists, in order to help unionists present their 'cases effectively and authoritatively' during television interviews.⁹² Once this letter was forwarded to the TUC General Secretary, he suggested that only a 'small pilot scheme might be worth considering' and preferred 'some quiet enquiries' to be made to the BBC about assistance in this regard.⁹³ When the company's proposal was discussed amongst TUC staff, it recognised the problem of 'noisy, aggressive shop stewards all talking at once' on television but felt this would have to be 'put up with from time to time'. In another case, a former employee of the BBC wrote to Jack Jones, then General Secretary of the TGWU, convinced that the trade union movement was in 'desperate need' of 'able publicity' for its 'much misrepresented cause', a need which he was willing to support, given that the BBC in particular were not 'willing to tackle the subject of industrial relations in the proper analytical manner'.⁹⁴ Although Jack Jones forwarded Glyn Jones's offer onto Len Murray, TUC General Secretary, Murray's response lacked urgency, offering to have a chat with Jones 'if at some time you are in the vicinity with some time to spare'.⁹⁵

These two examples, amongst many similar ones, provide a clear illustration of both the TUC's hesitancy to confront such problems, along with the organisation's apparent dependence on long-established links with the BBC. This relationship, which bordered on deference at times, persisted despite concerns from its own former employees about the BBC's ability to represent the union movement's case appropriately and effectively. To compound this problem, the TUC continued to push a media agenda to the BBC that was of diminishing attraction to the increasingly competitive,

⁹⁰ TUC Media Monitoring Group, *Media Coverage of Industrial Disputes Jan-Feb 1979*, 24 April 1979; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292D/786/4)

⁹¹ Paul Manning, *News and News Sources: A Critical Introduction* (London, 2001), p. 175.

⁹² Christian Benzing to Tom Jackson, 21 May 1970; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292B/787.35/2)

⁹³ Vic Feather to Tom Jackson, 'Tuition in Broadcasting', 10 June 1970; ; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292B/787.35/2)

⁹⁴ Glyn Jones to Jack Jones, 13 February 1974; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292D/786/1)

⁹⁵ Len Murray to Glyn Jones, 8 March 1974; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292D/786/1)

ratings-driven television sphere. In drafting questions for a meeting with BBC representatives, intended to 'explore ways in which closer contact can be established', the TUC asked the BBC to consider 'more programmes in which trade union spokesmen give information broadcasts on matters of trade union concern', with topics such as 'the Employment Protection Act', 'Health and Safety at work' and 'Industrial Democracy'.⁹⁶ Although this sort of accommodation and collaboration was perhaps the best strategy for the TUC to employ in such a toxic media atmosphere, it showed little awareness of broader public interests or the commercial pressure on BBC directors.

Explaining the trade union movement's hesitancy to tackle these problems is more difficult and was likely about more than limited financial resources. Although finance would have influenced the TUC's ability to counter negative coverage through a nationwide advertising campaign, it does not explain the reluctance to engage with the issues through other, less demanding, means. In a 1977 statement at a special TUC conference on the media, Len Murray hit on a central problem for trade union media coverage which was that union members continued to 'obtain their impressions of the Movement and information about it from the media first and from their own official sources later', despite good internal communications.⁹⁷ Murray urged that the TUC could no longer regard itself as 'a club or a secret society whose affairs are closed to the outside world' but that did not mean it had to 'accept passively' the way unions were reported in the press and urged the need for training.⁹⁸ Whether Murray could have expected to have a considerable impact on such attitudes is certainly dubious, given the erosion of centralised TUC authority since the late 1950s. However, Murray's statement suggested that there was growing concern amongst the TUC's hierarchy that union communications had been too insular or introspective as a result of an underlying scepticism and animosity towards the mainstream media, referring to those in the wider movement who felt there was a 'conscious conspiracy' by the media against the labour movement.

Callaghan's role in perceptions of crisis

The political climate changed significantly in the period between 1974's strikes and the unrest of 1978-79. 1974 ushered in another Labour government confident that it could resolve industrial tension through the heralded Social Contract, and provide the leadership that Heath had lacked in an increasingly fraught economic situation. By 1978-79, economic policy change prompted by the

⁹⁶ TUC Finance and General Purposes Committee, Coverage of Industrial Matters: Proposed Meeting with BBC Representatives, 20 May 1974; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292D/786/3)

⁹⁷ Len Murray, 'Trade Unions and the Media – TUC Conference', 17 February 1977; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292D/786/3).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

IMF crisis had 'both intellectually and practically demolished consensus politics', as the government wrestled with inflation and internal division through public sector cuts.⁹⁹ The relationship between Labour government and the unions steadily broke down as the compulsory incomes policy triggered an 'ultimate disintegration which was damaging both in terms of individual strike action and consensus politics', a process for which 1978-79 symbolised the previously 'unthinkable' and final straw.¹⁰⁰ The contrast between these two periods of industrial unrest was significant, not for a change in government, but a radical change in Labour's policy approach.

However, just as in 1974, the significance of personality politics in defining the coverage of the Winter of Discontent should not be underestimated. As Hay highlighted, the tabloid media juxtaposed 'the activity and decisiveness of Thatcher with the complacency, arrogance and indecision of the Prime Minister', including the false attribution of the 'Crisis? What Crisis?' response to Callaghan, a phrase which became part of the 'new political lexicon'.¹⁰¹ The *Mail* devoted an entire page to unpicking 'the quotes of the crisis' from union leaders and Labour politicians, described as 'the mad, sad things they said while Britain went mad', and included four less-than-complimentary pictures of Callaghan across the page.¹⁰² Similarly, the *Express* published a full-length Cummings caricature of an emaciated and cowering Callaghan, accompanied by the accusatory headline 'NOTHING UP HIS SLEEVE' (Figure 5.4).¹⁰³ As this research has shown, the personalisation of politics was of increasing and long-established significance to industrial relations coverage, having a decisive impact on public perceptions on the likes of Frank Cousins, Barbara Castle, and Edward Heath. In this regard, the focus on personality was nothing particularly new. However, this did not mean that Margaret Thatcher's emergence as a forceful political personality was any less significant, as she capitalised on the media's preoccupation and increasing public concern.

⁹⁹ Martin Holmes, *The Labour Government, 1974-79: Political Aims and Economic Reality* (Basingstoke, 1985), p. 182.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁰¹ Hay, 'Narrating the Crisis', pp. 270-271.

¹⁰² *Daily Mail*, 31 January 1979, p. 6.

¹⁰³ *Daily Express*, 19 January 1979, p. 1.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 5.4: 'Nothing up his sleeve!', *Daily Express*, 19 January 1979, p. 1.

Aside from emphasising Callaghan's geographical detachment in Barbados, the *Mail* sought to isolate 'the ostrich Prime Minister' from the public in terms of perception and mentality, as 'the only man in Britain who does not see a crisis', as he had 'petulantly' dismissed the crisis as 'parochial hysteria'.¹⁰⁴ The *Mail* intensified criticism of Callaghan's leadership by contrasting him against his own 'iron-fisted' Chancellor, Denis Healey, who 'barged into the union-Government furore last night'.¹⁰⁵ The determination to isolate Callaghan from the industrial situation extended to his relationship with his own colleagues, seemingly disconnected from the priorities of his political

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Mail*, 11 January 1979, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ *Daily Mail*, 12 January 1979, p. 1.

allies. A common complaint or inference during 1974's general election was a lack of democratic alternatives, that few could see the advantage of one party over another in dealing with the 'trade union problem'. In such a context, Thatcher's commitment to the conviction politics which Heath had deserted in 1972, to much ridicule, was powerful in remoulding the media landscape. In February 1979, in the midst of the supposed crisis, Thatcher enjoyed a 10 point surge in approval ratings as leader of the Opposition to a height which Heath had not experienced in that role since 1966, while Callaghan endured dissatisfaction from 58 per cent of respondents, not suffered by a Prime Minister since Heath in 1971.¹⁰⁶ Although personal approval levels returned to normal after the strikes, it appeared that this episode had an important impact on the way the public perceived Callaghan's strength of leadership.

Newspaper content and the balance of coverage

With the structural influences established, which partially account for the Winter of Discontent's exceptional influence, it is important to further illuminate the patterns of coverage of the Winter of Discontent. There were important continuities in the approaches employed in reporting industrial news, although exogenous pressures intensified the communication and perception of these conventional features. The cumulative influence of focussed coverage over the previous decade should not be underestimated in contributing to this climax of political tensions.

The specific sectors where industrial action took place made media coverage in 1979 particularly powerful. The strikes primarily took place in industries with a long history of public and press preoccupation. As the GMG reflected in 1976, television and tabloid coverage, as opposed to the 'quality papers', had developed a 'highly specific focus upon chosen disputes within some sectors' which meant that there was a 'tendency to overstate contextually the significance of disputes isolated in this way'.¹⁰⁷ This was particularly true when the popular press failed to provide updates on dispute progress or its resolution. Moreover, the effect of this narrow focus was intensified by the disproportionate front-page coverage provided to the 1978-79 strikes. Between the beginning of December 1978 and the end of February 1979 (the peak of industrial hostility), the *Express*, *Mail* and *Mirror* devoted between 43 per cent and 46 per cent of their front-page lead stories to either industrial action itself or issues directly related to strikes, such as pay claims. In January 1979 specifically, this percentage was much higher, with more than two thirds of the *Mirror's* front-page headlines devoted to these issues. This represented a kind of intense scrutiny which the industrial

¹⁰⁶ King and Wybrow, *British Political Opinion*, pp. 189, 191, 206, 208.

¹⁰⁷ Glasgow Media Group, *Bad News*, p. 190.

sphere had rarely experienced before. Even where strikes were not the focus of front pages, lead stories were primarily focussed on the IRA bomb threat or the winter's infamous blizzards, enhancing narratives of assault and confrontation.

Although explaining the imbalance of industrial focus was complex, the GMG suggested that much of the focus on transport, communications and public services, as opposed to their long-established interest in the car industry, was derived from a 'concern for the inconvenienced consumer of goods and services' which provided problems for the production of coverage which did not 'implicitly, at least, blame those groups who precipitate action that, in one way or another, is defined as "disruptive"'.¹⁰⁸ Essentially, labour interference in patterns of consumerism was established as a driving force behind the media's industrial agenda long before 1978. This interest was hardly surprising given the tabloids' status as vehicles for consumption: the *Sun* regularly placed material encouraging consumption 'at the centre of its editorial agenda' and both the *Mirror* and the *Sun* encouraged its readers to 'define themselves by what they consumed'.¹⁰⁹ As Lyddon has already established, industrial strife in the sectors under scrutiny during the Winter of Discontent was nothing new. In the case of grave diggers, strikes had 'always happened', including the pre-war years, and the 'dirty jobs' strike in 1970 posed a much greater threat to public health than 1978-79, in the absence of arctic conditions.¹¹⁰ As this research has shown, the 1958 bus strike, although coordinated in a very different political climate, was also principally covered as an issue of widespread public inconvenience, indicative of a thread of continuity to media attention. In many ways then, the Winter of Discontent built on these preoccupations, at a time when threats to consumerism were high on the media agenda. The specific conditions and circumstances gave the focus of the industrial agenda new significance.

Beyond the specific focuses of coverage, there were key similarities in the emphases of reporting between 1978-9 and the industrial coverage which had preceded it. In the case of 1975's Glasgow Rubbish Strike, 'the framework used concentrated on issues other than the conflict between Glasgow Corporation and their employees' with a clear focus on its status as a health hazard, which was 'established as the initial focus of the coverage, even before the dumps had been created'.¹¹¹ BBC1 made use of library film of rubbish dumps from a previous strike, seven weeks before the

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁹ Dick Rooney, 'Dynamics of the British Tabloid Press', *Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture* 5 (1998), p. 105.

¹¹⁰ Lyddon, 'Striking Facts about the "Winter of Discontent"', pp. 212-214.

¹¹¹ Glasgow Media Group, *Bad News*, p. 245.

Corporation announced a health hazard existed.¹¹² The media's tendency to make predictions in order to reinforce 'moral panics' has been underlined by Stanley Cohen, who contended that these predictions are commonly fulfilled by media reports, even if it means coverage of 'non-events', as 'discrepancies between expectations and reality are resolved by emphasizing those new elements which confirm expectations'.¹¹³ Despite 1978-79's record cold temperatures curbing any real threat, ITV reporting of the dustmen's strike shared the same emphasis. Rather than providing any detail of the grievances, and while accepting 'officially there is no health hazard', ITV reports from February broadcast shots of rubbish cluttering parks and noted that health officers had laid rat bait. ITV highlighted 'the many pavements that are already partly blocked, not only with more hygienic plastic bags but also with cardboard boxes dripping with food scraps', showing close-ups of the most unpleasant cases.¹¹⁴

Similarly, a focus on 'voxpops' and assimilating the public's thoughts on strikes was nothing new to television coverage. During the winter of 1978-79, voxpops were collated to reflect public distaste for the inconvenience caused by the rail strike, with a focus purely on their challenges in getting to work than on the strike itself.¹¹⁵ A few days later, ITN also provided voxpops to punctuate their report on 'panic buying', again reflecting a focus on the inconvenience to consumers, despite the fact supermarket business had not risen 'as much as they had expected'.¹¹⁶ Early research found this was common thread of coverage as early as the 1950s, and it was certainly commonplace by the 1970s. The GMG's study found that the majority of voxpops on television news occurred in the industrial relations field, with the use of experts below average, along with a 'tendency to seek "photogenic discord" which characterises industrial coverage', as opposed to business news where experts were used 'with relatively frequency' and spokesmen for management outnumbered labour spokesmen.¹¹⁷ In terms of both patterns and focuses of coverage, the Winter of Discontent showed considerable continuity from previous cases, which capitalised on public interest and expectation.

Stylistically and linguistically there were other important continuities, in both press and television, but the political context and controversial nature of public sector strikes gave these linguistic conventions new meaning. As the research on the 1960s in particular reflected, morality had become an important part in delegitimising strike action and this aspect intensified in the coverage

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹¹³ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, pp. 26-27.

¹¹⁴ *ITV Evening News*, 3 February 1979.

¹¹⁵ *ITV Evening News*, 9 January 1979.

¹¹⁶ *ITV Evening News*, 12 January 1979.

¹¹⁷ Glasgow Media Group, *Bad News*, p. 138.

of 1978-79. However, although concepts of conscience and greed were already well established, these absorbed new meaning in the face of strikes amongst hospital workers and ambulancemen. This language was particularly pertinent during industrial action on Britain's children's wards as the *Mirror* published a front page plea, 'Don't let the children suffer', evoking the themes of victimhood which had been utilised by the same newspaper in favour of, rather than against, strikers in 1974.¹¹⁸ The *Mail* depicted the same strikes as reflective of the 'callousness shown towards patients by pickets'.¹¹⁹ One nurse interviewed by ITN at Great Ormond Street hospital explained that she had torn up her NUPE membership card because she did not feel she could do her job 'in all conscience' while she belonged to a union which was 'trying to disrupt care'.¹²⁰ The prominence of her interview, compared to striking unionists who were merely quoted, reflected an imbalance to the coverage, while her use of language illustrated the pervasiveness of such moralised motifs during the strike. In the case of the ambulance strike, ITV commentary suggested that such a strike, 'born out of anger', was 'something that their consciences had never allowed before'.¹²¹ This coverage further demonstrated a trend apparent in the tabloids that the traditional allegiances and loyalties of the British public for brave nurses, a similar one to the respect for the miners that was present in 1974, could now be utilised to buttress criticism for industrial action.

¹¹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 2 February 1979, p. 1.

¹¹⁹ *Daily Mail*, 7 December 1978, p. 1.

¹²⁰ *ITV Evening News*, 7 February 1979.

¹²¹ *ITV Evening News*, 19 January 1979.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 5.5: 'The Sick Men at the Gate', *Daily Mail*, 7 December 1978, p. 1.

Along with gravediggers, this rash of hospital strikes meant that issues of morality could be shaped into powerful issues of life and death, with trade unions as the greatest threat. The *Mail* even drew parallels between union 'bully-boys' and 'Hitler's brown shirts' (Figure 5.5), in reference to their attitude towards strike-affected cancer patients.¹²² This not only reflected the merciless attitude of strikers but also anxiety about the authoritarian and anti-democratic power exerted by unions at picket lines.

¹²² *Daily Mail*, 7 December 1978, p. 1.

Black and Pemberton have rightly highlighted that Stanley Cohen's theory of moral panics, given its focus on groups that are considered a threat to societal values, has, despite its problems, a 'broader relevance' to studies of the 1970s, beyond Cohen's purely cultural emphasis.¹²³ This is clear in a number of aspects, beyond the simple creation of ominous predictions. Cohen theorised that 'the very reporting of certain "facts" can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety, indignation or panic'.¹²⁴ When this analysis is juxtaposed against the research conducted by James Thomas to highlight the deliberately exaggerated or oversimplified the reports of the Winter of Discontent, it is clear what an important impact this may well have had on the situation. Thomas has highlighted how only a sixth of lorry drivers went on strike, only two and a half per cent of schools were closed in the UK due to the caretakers' action, and the number of days lost in strikes was relatively minor, far exceeded by previous episodes and the engineering strikes under the new Conservative government later that year.¹²⁵ Again, this was not particularly novel, as exaggeration and simplification were rising trends in the new tabloid scene, but the boundaries were pushed to a new level in the way strikes were now applied to matters of life and death. Even the reporting of verifiable facts were problematic, such as the 50 cancer patients sent home due to hospital strikes, as they were framed under controversial headlines such as 'Life or Death Picket', alongside interviews with infuriated doctors who insisted it was 'inevitable' that short-term absences would mean 'some people will lose their lives'.¹²⁶ Similarly, the links drawn between strikes in disconnected areas were already apparent in 1975, as the dustmen's dispute was linked to the ambulance controllers' dispute as early as the second day, and this trend to continued.¹²⁷ ITN used their coverage to place strikes in different sectors together in one report, starting with schools, moving through to strikes in care homes and ending with cemeteries, playing on the moralised 'life and death' narratives already established in the press.¹²⁸ This integration of separate strikes into a wider union 'conspiracy' was a central principle to the crisis narrative.

In the same vein, the media's evocation of conflict motifs was nothing new, particularly through introspective language which reoriented the position of 'the other' from foreign competitors to the 'enemy within', as was evident during the 1974 miners' strikes. The Royal Commission on the Press concurred that by 1977 there was a clear tendency for 'conflict themes to be more frequently

¹²³ Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton, 'Introduction. The benighted decade? Reassessing the 1970s', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), p. 13.

¹²⁴ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, p. 7.

¹²⁵ Thomas, "'Bound In By History'", p. 270.

¹²⁶ *Daily Express*, 25 January 1979, p. 1.

¹²⁷ Glasgow Media Group, *Bad News*, p. 246

¹²⁸ *ITV Evening News*, 30 January 1979.

invoked than others'.¹²⁹ However, while many had commented on the miners' discipline regarding physical violence in 1974, there were now new concerns about the physical threat posed by large-scale industrial action. The attendance of miners at the year-long Grunwick strike in 1977, described by Margaret Thatcher as the 'Ascot of the Left', crystallised concerns about trade union respect for law and order, as industrial action at a film-processing works attracted media attention for violent confrontations.¹³⁰ The *Times* argued that an assault on a police officer at Grunwick illustrated a lack of respect for police authority and threatened Britain's 'social equilibrium'.¹³¹ More broadly, as Richard Clutterbuck analysed, the 'major lessons' from the Grunwick episode concerned the law, particularly the 'strong public reaction against the interference of students and other politically motivated demonstrators' in industrial conflict.¹³² Clutterbuck's research on the 'growth of political violence' in 1977 encapsulated the sense of public anxiety about such trends in popular culture, not just in industrial relations.

The influence of other issues, most notably football hooliganism and the punk movement, intensified public concern about violence. Although the TGWU attempted to exert pressure to get The Sex Pistols dropped from their record label, the punk movement was associated with the same phenomenon as trade unionists, when 'the punk message of anarchy, pop and violence occasionally seemed very literal due to the few incidents where anarchy and violence were made explicit'.¹³³ Stuart Hall noted how the British media at that time simplified and stigmatised the explanations for football hooliganism, in order to 'whip up public feeling about it', and legitimise strict law and order agendas.¹³⁴ The threat posed by industrial action in 1979 applied to law breaking beyond basic violence. Following Arthur Scargill's public endorsement of out-lawed secondary picketing, the *Mirror* declared this as approval for 'the rule of the mob', as Scargill's comments made frontpage news under the headline 'Defy the Law'.¹³⁵ Industrial action was not commonly violent during the Winter of Discontent but the right-wing press, evidenced by the *Express's* coverage of a lorry union 'terror squad' who assaulted a van driver, capitalised upon those infrequent examples.¹³⁶ In this context, the language of war and confrontation absorbed new significance. Headlines which referred

¹²⁹ MacGregor, *Royal Commission on the Press: Analysis of Newspaper Content*, p. 146.

¹³⁰ Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (New York, 1995), p. 398.

¹³¹ *The Times*, 24 June 1977, p. 14.

¹³² Richard Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony: The Growth of Political Violence* (London, 1978), p. 223.

¹³³ David Simonelli, 'Anarchy, Pop and Violence: Punk Rock Subculture and the Rhetoric of Class, 1976-1978', *Contemporary British History* 16 (2002), p. 134.

¹³⁴ Stuart Hall, 'The Treatment of Football Hooliganism in the Press', in R. Ingham (ed.), *Football Hooliganism: The Wider Context* (London, 1978), p. 34.

¹³⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1979, p. 1.

¹³⁶ *Daily Express*, 18 January 1979, p. 8.

to the lorry drivers' 'stranglehold on Britain's ports' were purely metaphorical but the violent connotations of such phrasing made the threat of lorry drivers against the national interest all the more foreboding and antidemocratic.¹³⁷

The national interest and audience positioning

In 1978-79, strikes were understood to be targeted at the national interest. This was unlike 1974, where the language of war was used to refer to a conflict between unions and government and generally resisted application to conceptions of the wider public. Hay has commented on the noteworthy positioning of the public, apparent in the likes of the ITV coverage and in headlines. An important part of the readership's decoding of media texts, particularly apparent on this occasion, is the tendency to 'actively position ourselves as subjects within the narrative'.¹³⁸ Hay cites the potential for readers to identify with the 'we' or 'us' in stories, positioned against an other, 'a collectivity of potential victims threatened by the irresponsible, macabre and self-serving actions of a homogenous band of militant activists'.¹³⁹ Even the *Mirror*, from its left-leaning perspective, utilised such a device to argue that pickets had 'got a stranglehold on our industrial life and they are tightening it every hour'.¹⁴⁰ This sort of phraseology positioned the unions against the public by referring to its violent threat against a collective interest. Further on, the same article argued that winning the dispute was all that mattered to the transport workers, 'nothing else', including 'the wage-packets of fellow workers' or 'the country' and 'certainly not the Labour government'.¹⁴¹ This was further evidence of the attempts to expand the strike's threat, beyond conventional political antagonisms. The *Mirror's* loyalty to supporting the interests of the Labour Party, combined with the rapidly declining position of the trade unions in face of such media criticism, ensured that the paper was forced to isolate the unions from its own interests or those of its readership. The extrication of Labour interests from the plight of James Callaghan was perhaps impossible for the *Mirror* but the toxicity of union action made the simpler isolation of the union movement, despite the complex loyalty between both sides, almost imperative in order to defend the *Mirror's* political agenda.

The significance of this kind of audience positioning filtered into television reports as well. ITN's report of strikes in Southwark in mid-January argued that, in bad weather conditions, 'the last thing the people of Southwark needed was this strike', separating the unions' decision to strike from 'the

¹³⁷ *Daily Mail*, 13 January 1979, p. 1.

¹³⁸ Hay, 'Narrating Crisis', p. 262

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹⁴⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 18 January 1979, p. 2.

¹⁴¹ *Daily Mirror*, 18 January 1979, p. 2.

people of Southwark' more generally.¹⁴² Although this was a much less obvious example of prejudicial audience positioning than the kind found in the press, with the television industry legally bound to a more neutral agenda, it nevertheless reflected the continued isolation of unions from the public. Although Hay rightly recognised potential resistance to such subject positioning from readerships (and by extension, audiences), there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this resistance may not have been as strong in 1979 as it commonly would have been in, for example, 1958.

As a whole, this research has indicated the slow dislocation of trade union members from the 'public', generally associated with 'the national interest'. Such a process referred to both the apparent political gap between the two as well as the quantity of union members isolated, as extremist minorities were increasingly seen to be more dominant within the trade union movement. Moreover, there was a growing concern about the breakdown of conventional class ties to political parties, or the 'traditional class-party nexus'.¹⁴³ Parties could no longer assume support for their policies based on the socio-economic background of the electorate, as class issues became less influential on party loyalties which, by the mid-1970s, were in discernible flux. In 1978-79, this disconnection had become something of a rupture, allowing the media to frame strikes in particularly powerful ways, as well as politicians. For example, the *Mail* devoted a page to publishing the script of a televised speech by Margaret Thatcher which had insisted that the country should be 'one nation or no nation', but reserved judgement for the industrial action by 'the wreckers amongst us who don't believe in this', 'directed at the public to make you suffer'.¹⁴⁴

In conclusion, the events of the winter of 1978-79 not only symbolised the crisis of an over-reaching Labour government, shown once again to provide ineffective relief against powerful unions, but also the intense power and influence of the national media. Undoubtedly, in the five years between the two case studies analysed here, a great deal changed in order for industrial strife in public services, which had strong historical precedent, to have such a clear impact on public perceptions of governance and power. Although it is clear that trade union militancy and combativeness played an important part in this transformation of attitudes, with the rank and file less committed to defending Labour's reputation, the changes to the media landscape during the interim should not be underestimated. The *Mirror* went from a key role in the outcome of the 1974 election to the

¹⁴² *ITV Evening News*, 23 January 1979.

¹⁴³ Ivor Crewe, Bo Särilvik and James Alt, 'Partisan Dealignment in Britain 1964-1974', *The British Journal of Political Science* 7 (1977), p. 134.

¹⁴⁴ *Daily Mail*, 18 January 1979, p. 6.

challenges of a peripheral role in the Winter of Discontent, where it became difficult for the paper to mediate union action or resist the language and frames utilised by the increasingly popular *Sun*. The majority of this powerful coverage built on the legacies of media coverage from as early as the 1950s.

However, common patterns of coverage, as evidenced through the use of conflict motifs and moralised language, either acquired fresh meaning thanks to the evolving political context or were taken to greater extremes than had previously been the case. The dislocation of trade unionists, understood in broad terms despite the minority of extremist influence, from wider conceptions of the British public or the national interest only allowed criticism to be more distinct and hyperbole more widely accepted. The wider trade union movement's refusal to show the same restraint as in 1974, further exemplified the fractured nature of left-wing politics. Meanwhile, the TUC wrestled with its own insecurities and cynicisms regarding the national press, and only began to formulate a clear strategy for media research, rather than positive engagement, on the eve of the Winter of Discontent. In such a context, the provision of new political alternatives by Margaret Thatcher, following a period of political stalemate under Heath, was particularly attractive.

Chapter Six – Britain’s ‘bureaucratic Imposition’ and new economic priorities *Economic Futures, 1970-79*

Aside from the ‘headline-grabbing events’ of the Winter of Discontent and the miners’ strikes, contemporary commentators ‘never had the feeling of writing in the midst of panic’ but saw ‘people groping with the novelty of the situation and searching for new understandings’.¹ While there is plenty of value in research which questions the reality of the 1970s as a decade of decline, the purpose of this research is not to evaluate economic facts but public perceptions of the economy and their cultural impacts. Despite the rise of post-materialist social movements, Mark Abrams’s 1974 polling research found that the key change in the values of British society was ‘a greater emphasis on the terminal value of a comfortable life, and on the instrumental value of more money’, across all age groups, while maintaining an egalitarianism which was ‘both tinged by envy and held in check by deference towards their traditional “betters”’.² The continued emphasis on living standards and economic prosperity increased the pressure on the position of trade unions. Figure 6.1 represents the degree of public pessimism that surrounded the economy under Labour, despite a brief recovery in the 18-month period prior to the ‘Winter of Discontent’. Aside from that period, nearly every poll found that more people expected a deterioration in Britain’s economic fortunes than an improvement.

¹ James E Alt, ‘The Politics of Economic Decline in the 1970s’, in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), p. 27.

² Mark Abrams, ‘Changing Values: A Report on Britain Today’, *Encounter* 43 (1974), pp. 32, 38.

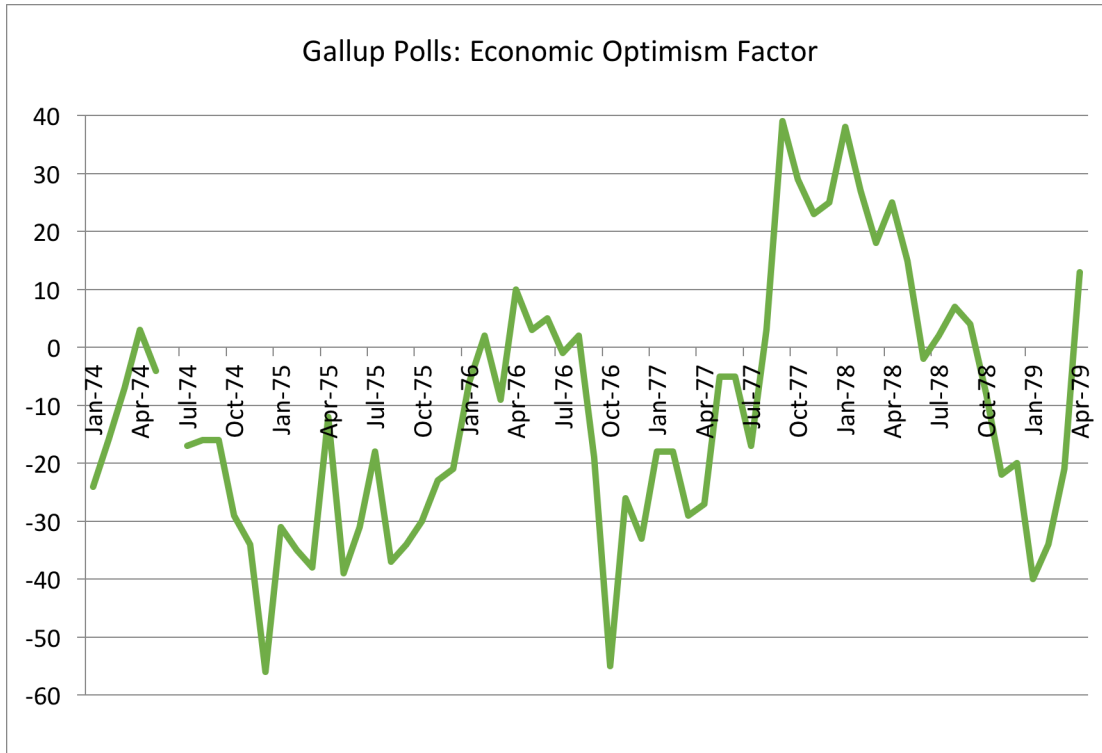


Figure 6.1: British Economic Optimism

Source: Wybrow and King, *British Political Opinion*, p. 312-314. The 'Optimism Factor' is based on the deduction of 'Deteriorate' responses from 'Improve' responses, to the Gallup Poll question 'Do you consider that the general economic situation in the next twelve months is likely to improve?'

The repeated cases of industrial strife at Ford and newly nationalised British Leyland automotive companies, along with the two miners' strikes of the early 1970s, provide key examples through which to explore perceptions of the relationship between trade unionism and the economy. Both Ford and British Leyland experienced intense and persistent industrial strife during the 1970s which threatened these companies' fortunes in an increasingly competitive market. In 1975 British Leyland, a largely unsuccessful merger of multiple companies including BMC, was nationalised by the Labour government, following the advice of the Ryder Report. This represented a final attempt to rescue it from bankruptcy and stabilise the future of British car manufacturing. Meanwhile, Ford continued to deal with the problems of strikes from the late 1960s, and in the latter part of the decade showed a willingness to contravene the government's wage policy in order to pacify trade unions and maintain levels of production. Through these contrasting case studies, this research explores the burdens on government to intervene in industry to control inflation and unemployment, and the responses of the media to this intervention.

The primary motivation for economic anxiety was inflation. In 1973, as Britain wrestled with economic recession, the *Guardian* described inflation as ‘an obsession for the 1970s’.³ Just as commentary about British productivity had exerted pressures on the position of trade unions during the 1960s, this new preoccupation with inflation encouraged further scrutiny of the labour movement. According to Tomlinson, the press of the early 1970s not only shaped the media agenda around inflation but also supported a perspective which linked this inflation problem with the ‘peculiar recalcitrance of British union behaviour, however difficult this focus on a national cause was to reconcile with the international scope of the problem’.⁴ This chapter seeks to understand the tensions this intervention caused for the relationship between the media and the government, as well as media perceptions of the relationship between government and trade unions. It reflects on how changing priorities in economic outlook influenced perceptions of government involvement in industry, as widespread unemployment became a reality of British life. Moreover, this chapter explores the broader themes of this research established so far, from understandings of British exceptionalism and its declining status in world trade, to the boundaries between the ‘political’ and the ‘industrial’ which now encompassed industrial policy-making. Finally, this section of the research reflects on the pressures that these themes and issues placed on concepts of working class solidarity and ideas of ‘social conscience’, at a time when industrial action was seen to have greater impact on day-to-day life, beyond simple headlines in newspapers. It also assesses attempts by the press to mediate these relationships, as they sought to buttress their political agendas.

Inflation and Public Perception

The following three figures (6.2, 6.3 and 6.4) indicate a number of important trends which illuminate perceptions of inflation and the cost of living. The first, depicting public perceptions of the government’s most important problems, as indicated by Gallup Polls, reflects the strength of public concern about the cost of living, driven by inflation. At the beginning of the 1970s, there was a great deal of flux in perceptions of the country’s problems. From the end of 1973, as Edward Heath wrestled with the problems of inflation and struggled to convince the country of his leadership, the cost of living was consistently perceived as the country’s greatest priority, only surpassed by other concerns during periods of intense industrial crisis, as clear from the miners’ strikes and the winter of discontent.

³ *Guardian*, 1 October 1973, p. 23.

⁴ Jim Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Postwar Britain* (Abingdon, 2000), p. 86.

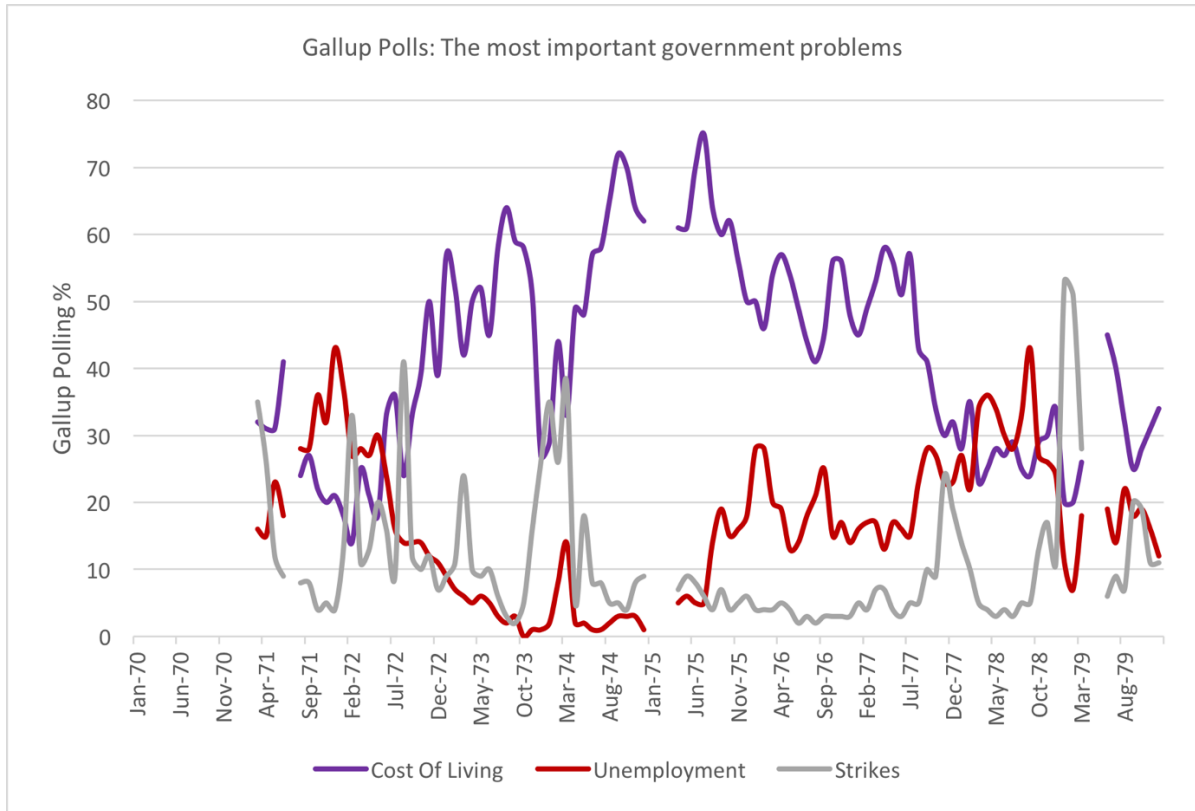


Figure 6.2: Government problems according to Gallup polling (1970-79)
 Source: Wybrow and King, *British Political Opinion*, pp. 264-267.

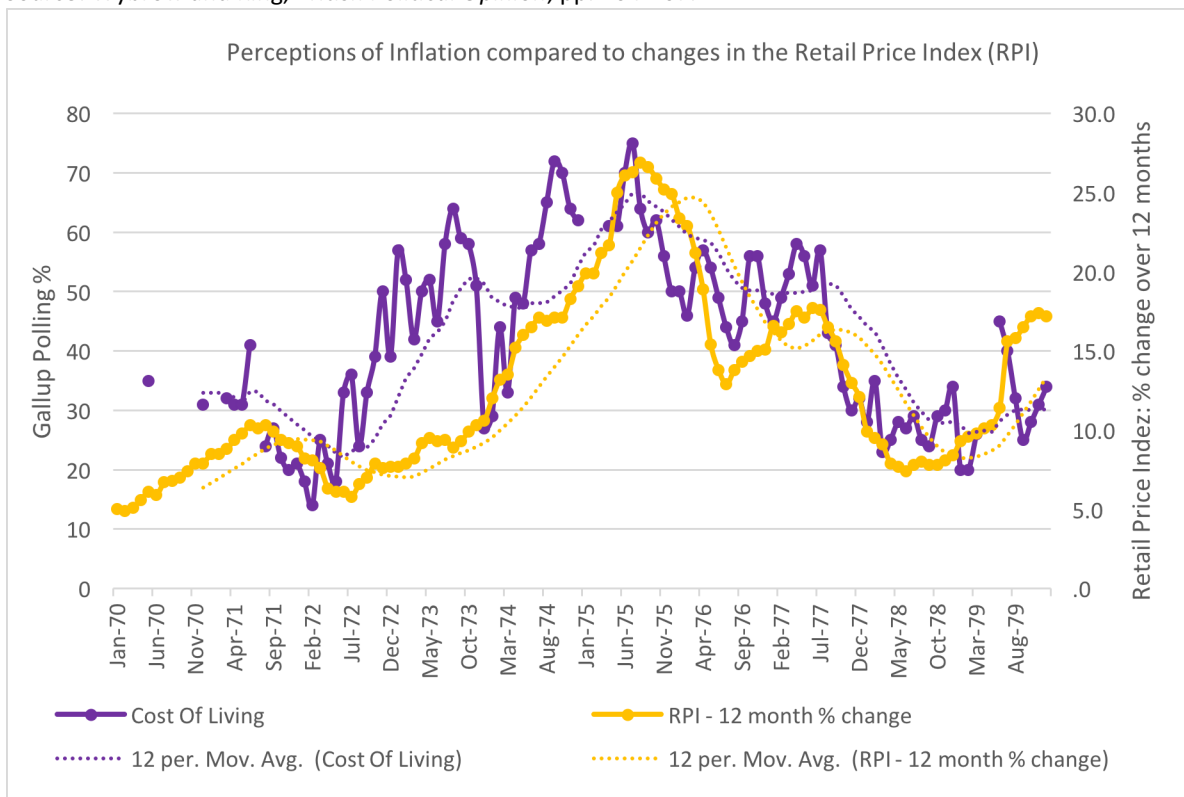


Figure 6.3: Perceptions of the cost of living problem and the Retail Price Index (1970-79)
 Source: Wybrow and King, *British Political Opinion*, pp. 264-267. RPI data from the Office of National Statistics website, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/timeseries/czbh/mm23> - [Accessed 1 December 2017]

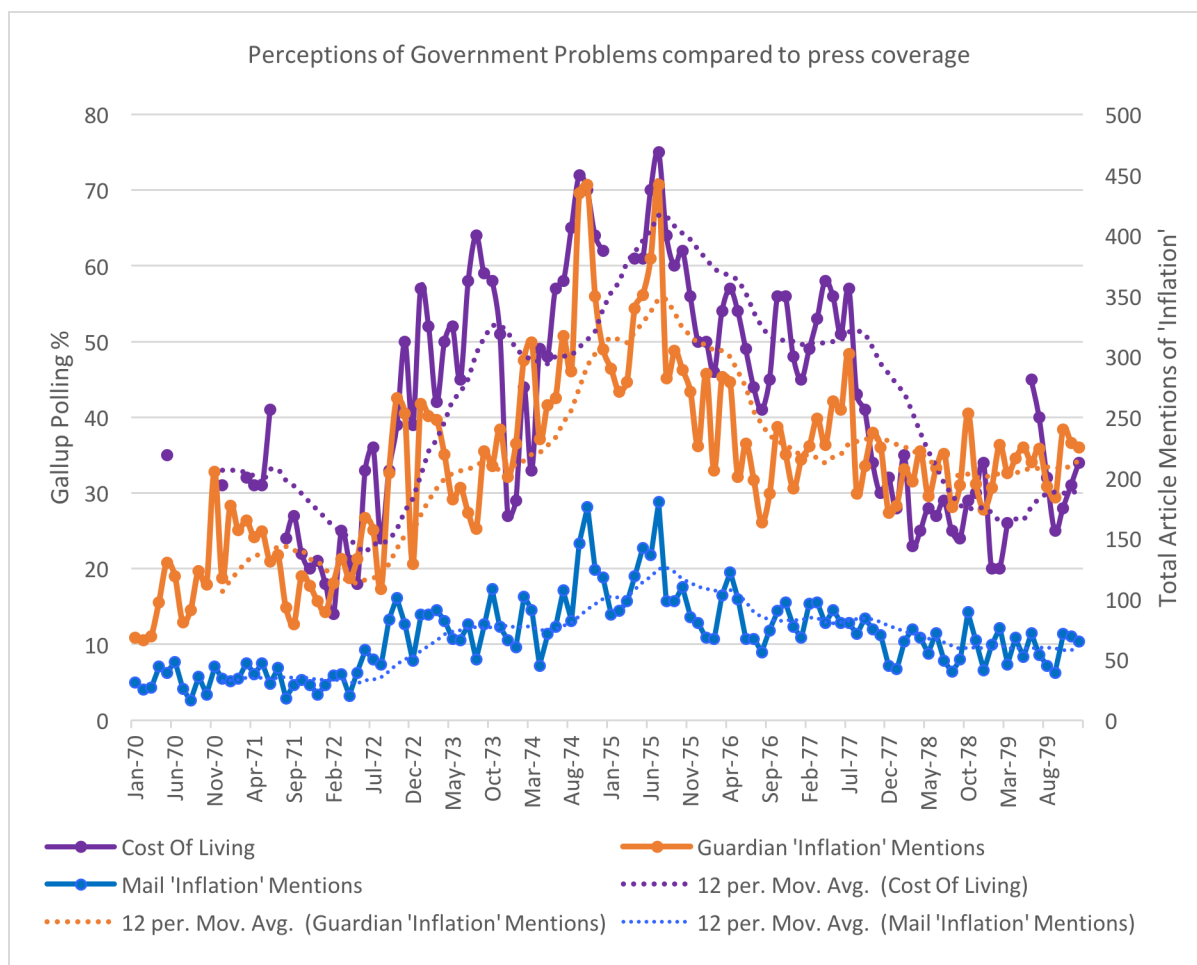


Figure 6.4: Perceptions of the cost of living problem and press coverage of inflation

The latter two graphs (6.3 and 6.4) compare this polling data on the cost of living to, firstly, the Retail Price Index (RPI) as an indication of the actual ‘reality’ of inflation problems, and, secondly, the *Guardian’s* coverage of inflation, as determined by total article mentions of ‘inflation’ each month. The first of these figures indicates the way public concern about inflation and the cost of living rose much more quickly in the first part of the 1970s than actual increases in RPI. Although both peaked at a similar time, in the summer of 1975, concern about inflation soared in 1973 before RPI showed considerable change, and spiked again in 1974, despite no sudden crisis in rates of inflation. Conversely, comparing these spikes in public concern to the *Guardian’s* coverage, as a broader indicator of press coverage, there is a much clearer correlation. As Tomlinson noted, the ‘deployment of apocalyptic notions about the effects of inflation was widespread in the 1970s’, and began ‘well before its peak in 1975/76’.⁵ In November 1974, 64 per cent of those polled were ‘dissatisfied’ with the future facing their family. By 1975, 95 per cent of those polled by Gallup expected a year of rising prices and 85 per cent expected a year of ‘economic difficulty’ for the

⁵ Jim Tomlinson, ‘The politics of declinism’, in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), p. 45.

country.⁶ While panic about the economy was an episodic phenomenon, generalised anxiety about the future of the British economy was a constant issue, as narratives of economic decline were normalised. The correlation is apparent in the relative volatility of both coverage and public concern, including the increase in interest between the two miners' strikes, despite the relative stability in RPI, as well as the spikes in concern in 1974 and 1975.

While this data does not on its own provide information on the nature or intent of industrial relations coverage, it does provide important context for understanding the influence of the British press. The data are indicative of the media's power to mediate and generate public concern. In their analysis of the declining popularity of trade unions during the 1970s, P.K. Edwards and George Sayers Bain adjudged that 'regardless of how far unions cause inflation, of how far they are solely responsible for strikes, and of how far strikes really damage the economy', there were 'strong grounds' to conclude 'inflation and strikes are associated with union power, and union popularity declines as a result'.⁷ This chapter explores the media's role in the development of these associations between inflation and union activity.

The continued emphasis on responsibility

The language of responsibility which had been a constant feature of newspaper coverage of trade union action began to change in emphasis, as expectations of the centralised leadership of trade unions continued to decline. There was a growing feeling amongst the press that while some groups of workers might have had 'reasonable cases in normal times', they had failed to appreciate that these were not normal times, and disputes that the economy 'could once take in its stride may now be the straws that break its back'.⁸ This kind of judgement, evoking concepts of justice and common interest, linked closely to the patterns of moralised language which had been established under the Labour government of the 1960s but the language now had more apocalyptic undertones. However, the commentary of newspapers, particularly the *Times*, increasingly suggested that unions could not be deterred from strikes, and was indicative of the perceived futility of union reform and government intervention. This placed greater demand on the role of the public in resisting union demands. Initially, the *Times* commended a perceived 'improvement in psychology' in 1970 which forced managers to 'rein in the demoralized pressure which had made this year so dangerously inflationary' and claims beyond the 'bounds of respectability' had meant there was 'nothing

⁶ Neeltje Wiedemayer, 'Do People Worry About the Future?', *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 40 (1976), p. 388.

⁷ P.K. Edwards and George Sayers Bain, 'Why are Trade Unions Becoming More Popular? Unions and Public Opinion in Britain', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 26 (1988), p. 323.

⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 6 January 1975, p. 2.

unnatural about resisting them'.⁹ It believed that the 'endless slippage of petty concessions' could only be halted by an appeal to the country's determination, even if that meant Ford had to take a 'multimillion pound loss' or enduring a prolonged fuel strike because there was 'no discouragement to strikes like the knowledge that people are determined to see the matter through.'¹⁰ This framing once again separated writer and reader from the position of the unions and suggested that the language of 'responsibility' had shifted, as a result of the severity of the economic situation and disappointment with the response of both unions and government. Such determination was the only way to restore 'the balance between strikes and the national interest' and failure to do so would be spell the country's acceptance of inflation'.¹¹

Fatalist Warnings: 'Remember Weimar'

Rather than the German example being used as a contemporary motivation for industrial improvement, as had been the case in earlier industrial coverage, its dictatorial past was now used as a threat to strike-prone Britain. The *Mail* used several pieces in 1972 to warn against the perils of wage increases and their relationship with inflation, directly addressing 'those who persist in asking for more than they have earned', who were told to 'Remember Weimar'.¹² The *Mail* even led with an opinion article entitled 'Do we want a return ticket to Weimar?'¹³ Whereas Japan and Germany were once seen as healthy competitors, Britain's relationship with these two countries was now framed in defeatist and fatalistic terms, primarily as a result of Britain's propensity to strike. The *Times*, in the following year, attempted a more optimistic framing, as it cited Britain's 'healthy export performance', 'heavy home demand' and the devaluation of the pound which had provided Britain with 'a greater competitive price edge over foreign manufacturers', but its coverage fundamentally focussed on a 'golden opportunity for the industry' which was slipping away 'ungrasped'.¹⁴ This kind of framing placed industrial relations and the production line as the primary factor in Britain's possibly terminal decline on the world stage.

The *Mirror* made attempts to query the prevalence of the perception that Britain was uniquely challenged by its strike record, despite the scrutiny prompted by British Leyland's largely unsuccessful nationalisation. Initially, the *Mirror* made significant attempts to reject the 'strikes kill the car industry' narrative, as it highlighted the industry's inherent insecurity of 'slump, boom,

⁹ *The Times*, 20 November 1970, p. 13.

¹⁰ *The Times*, 10 February 1973, p. 17.

¹¹ *The Times*, 20 October 1975, p. 19.

¹² *Daily Mail*, 19 June 1972, p. 6.

¹³ *Daily Mail*, 15 May 1972, p. 6.

¹⁴ *The Times*, 21 September 1973, p. 17.

slump, boom, loping each other like the Blackpool “Big Dipper” but this argument waned as scrutiny on the industry increased.¹⁵ Instead, it increasingly sought to undermine the suggestion that the British car industry’s strike record was anything exceptional. Geoffrey Goodman, leading criticism of the dominant frames of explanation, queried if the image of the British car worker as a strike-happy, unproductive, overpaid worker’ was a ‘fair one’, given that productivity levels in America, Japan and Germany were ‘coming closer to the British level’, where absenteeism was a particular problem.¹⁶ Goodman, whose new eponymous opinion column illustrated the centrality of industrial relations to the media agenda, reflected on this criticism of industrial relations as a symptom of Britain adjusting to a new position in international trade. He argued that Britain had been ‘slow to recognise that we are no longer at the centre of the Industrial universe’ and, contrary to public perception, there was ‘nothing unique about Britain’s so called “industrial sickness”’, which would ‘eventually, spread to every industrialised country’.¹⁷ The *Guardian* even went as far as to describe inflation as ‘a disease of prosperity as much as of poverty, and the more people have to lose the more frightened they are of losing it’, as it attempted to stress Britain’s relative and continued affluence.¹⁸

However, given the entrenchment of British exceptionalism, a constant feature of media self-assessment, this sense of perspective on Britain’s position in the world was difficult to establish more broadly. Even though the *Times* recognised labour problems for Britain’s competitors at Renault, ‘torn apart by a major strike’, Citroen and Fiat, troubled by ‘continuous labour difficulties’ - the kind of trends that Goodman had been keen to raise in the *Mirror* – it still offered ‘fuller cooperation of the labour unions’ as British Leyland’s best chance for survival.¹⁹

This belief in British exceptionalism, despite waning pride in British industry, also provided further hurdles to explaining Britain’s declining fortunes in international manufacturing. Despite dwindling sales, a significant proportion of the right-wing press struggled to accept criticisms of the quality of British cars which, as has already been discussed, had existed since the Second World War, and only seemed to be intensifying in nature. The *Mail* claimed that Britain made ‘brilliant cars’ but associated problems with ‘reliability, durability and availability’ solely with the lines of production, labour and unions, rather than design or resources.²⁰ The *Express*, as it confronted the ‘humiliating fact that over half the vehicles sold here are made abroad’, argued in 1977 that there was ‘nothing

¹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 6 March 1970, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1973, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 16 March 1971, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Guardian*, 14 January 1973, p. 8.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 3 June 1971, p. 23.

²⁰ *Daily Mail*, 20 October 1976, p. 6.

wrong with British cars' compared with rivals and cited supply as the 'crunch of the British problem'. What caused the supply shortages which rendered British car companies uncompetitive? 'The reason boils down to one word. Strikes.'²¹

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 6.5: 'Can our cars ever catch up?', *Daily Express*, 1 October 1977, p. 10.

The prevalence of this perception was remarkable given the fact that, in the case of British Leyland before its fateful nationalisation project, 'if productivity had improved, strikes had been eliminated, investment guaranteed, marketing rationalised and overmanning reduced, the problem would still have remained while the product range remained so inadequate' but this issue with Leyland's product range was 'not deemed worthy for public comment', by either government, or as it appears from research of coverage, the majority of the media.²² The *Sun* did recognise the problem of 'wrong and shoddily finished models' from British Leyland but placed emphasis on the problem of 'over-manning and feather-bedding' as the most 'fatal' of mistakes.²³ It seems clear that when the influx of investment was unsuccessful, the persistence of industrial strife and over-manning at British Leyland became the media's primary frame of explanation for Leyland's decline.

Shallow coverage and the problems of public image

The *Mirror's* response to criticisms of the performance of the workforce also took on a psychological element. The modernisation of assembly lines which had prompted anxiety about unemployment in the 1950s, was now viewed by some as potentially problematic for those now in employment, around newly optimised assembly lines. The *Mirror* reflected on the frustrations that arose from the boredom of an automated production line, which was seen as particularly problematic for the car

²¹ *Daily Express*, 1 October 1977, p. 10.

²² Holmes, *The Labour Government 1974-79*, pp. 49-50.

²³ *Sun*, 25 April 1975, p. 2.

industry, under the same kind of threatening headlines which had typified 1950s coverage of automation – ‘The day of the robot...’. Geoffrey Goodman pondered if there was a manual job in modern industry ‘as back-breaking, monotonous, spiritually and mentally unrewarding as a job on a car assembly line’.²⁴ Significantly, this concern about the welfare of workers was driven by the search for explanations for industrial strife in the industry. The *Mirror* suggested the ‘real villain’ of car strikes was such problems, and asked if the assembly line system ‘ought to continue unchanged much longer’, despite the paper’s recognition of the fact that abandonment of assembly line methods by any one company would render it ‘uncompetitive’.²⁵ The persistence of scepticism about automation and shaken confidence in Britain’s industrial future amongst the left-wing press resulted in this issue being reshaped to explain one of the great problems of modern British industry.

Notably, this sympathetic perspective on the pressures on workforces in automated assembly lines remained fairly marginal, unlike the widespread sympathy that miners had benefitted from during the strikes and absenteeism of the 1960s. While the language of sympathy for miners had drawn on mining’s ties to Britain’s glorified industrial past, workers in the car industry struggled to gain such status and respect. This was partly because of the industry’s inextricable link to industrial strife, that there was ‘something about the British motor industry... which drives otherwise sane and responsible people to the most ludicrous and suicidal confrontations’, and also because their work was not considered either brave or essential in the way mining had once been considered – and 1973’s oil crisis had reminded.²⁶ In a period where employment itself was seen by many commentators as reward enough, and moralised rhetoric made maximum productivity essential at all costs, it is easy to see why such a deep understanding of the psychological motivations behind industrial discontent failed to gain traction beyond the commentators sympathetic to the labour movement. Even the miners, after two nationwide strikes, found a much less responsive and sympathetic media atmosphere. In the judgement of Milton Shulman, writing for the *Express*, there was still a ‘surprising amount of sympathy’ but this was ‘trickling away fast’.²⁷

According to evidence from the TUC archives, the trade union movement was well aware of the image problems workers in the car industry suffered, although this was a difficult issue to tackle. The TUC recognised in its report of media coverage of the Winter of Discontent that some professions

²⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1973, p. 11.

²⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1973, p. 11.

²⁶ *Daily Express*, 20 October 1978, p. 8.

²⁷ *Daily Express*, 21 February 1974, p. 8.

received 'more sympathetic coverage than others'. It adjudged that, while some popular groups of workers such as nurses enjoyed coverage which was sensitive to their financial concerns, others could expect coverage to focus on 'an average pay figure and a percentage claim, which in journalistic terms is far less likely to arouse sympathy than a "human interest" story showing an individual worker'.²⁸ Car workers most certainly fell into the latter category, as the press kept a constant check of each round of negotiations in percentage terms and personal stories were few and far between. This kind of archival evidence suggests that, consistent with other patterns of media engagement, the TUC struggled to come to terms with and contest the representation of workers and failed to mobilise any kind of serious response to such image issues on behalf of those working in the car industry.

Industrial strife and 'The British in Looneyland'

As the British economy struggled, themes surrounding pride in British industry shifted in industrial relations coverage, as Britain confronted its changing position in the international economy. If, as Tomlinson has argued, 'allegations of economic decline have been given much greater force by their linkage to declining world status', a narrative which naturally fits the 'cultural and political pessimism for the right', media coverage of the car industry contributed to such a representation and, in the process, directly implicated trade unions in decline.²⁹ ITV's reporters asked workers at British Leyland if they would be 'slightly bothered that a Japanese company would get a foothold into the British car industry, an even bigger one than they have already', indicative of past attitudes towards the maintenance of British manufacturing, but the message 'from the shop floor' was summarised as 'if the money's right, they'll do it'.³⁰ Such questioning reflected media concern with attitudes towards British industry amongst its workers, although the response was a reminder of the public concern about rising wages and the cost of living. The *Mail* was now forced to concede, that although ten years previously the idea of Japanese cars being assembled in Britain would have meant 'all patriotic hell' would have broken loose, 'feelings of relief' were now prevalent. The *Mail* insisted that the public should 'thank heavens somebody from abroad finds it worthwhile to shack up with a company like Leyland'.³¹

²⁸ TUC Report – Media Coverage of Industrial Disputes January-February 1979, 24 April 1979; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292D/786/4)

²⁹ Tomlinson, 'Thrice Denied', p. 248.

³⁰ *ITV Evening News*, 3 April 1979.

³¹ *Daily Mail*, 18 May 1979, p. 6.

The nationalisation of British Leyland in 1975 placed pressure on the relationship between government, media and trade unions. While both Ford and Leyland struggled with ongoing industrial conflict, this was framed in very different ways, largely as a result of their differences in ownership. On the part of the labour force, there were concerns amongst the press, across the political spectrum, that workers had a more relaxed attitude towards taking industrial action because of the government's involvement in the enterprise. British Leyland was regarded by the *Mail* to be the victim of a deliberate 'Sting' by the unions, which involved waiting for public funding before descending into 'carefree anarchy'.³² The moralised implication of industrial blackmail directed at a publicly funded company was a key component of the *Mail's* criticism of Leyland's nationalisation, as 'no temporary adverse factor' could 'disguise the endemic unwillingness of Leyland workers to make significant and sustained improvements'.³³ Although the *Mail* conceded that some workers at Leyland may have had 'plausible grievance', unions had failed to appreciate that 'transcending sectional demands for distributive justice is the common interest of survival', and strikes could 'only hasten the day of reckoning'.³⁴ Leyland's nationalised background this sort of near-apocalyptic framing placed the unions sectional interests against those of the country. This further illustrated the vulnerability of unions in nationalised industry to public scrutiny and criticism. The *Times* argued that the 'chief reason' for industrial unrest at Leyland was that the 'disputants know perfectly well that they do not put Leyland future in jeopardy' because of the Government's commitment to 'keep the place open, whether there are disputes or not, and for that matter whether anybody in this or any other country wants to buy the goods they produce'.³⁵ Such coverage framed the government's unpopular policy decision as the inspiration of industrial action amongst the workers of an industry that was allegedly naturally predisposed to shop floor militancy.

The *Mirror* recognised the problematic relationship between the government's determination to save Leyland and the attitude of workers in the car industry, although it phrased it in less sinister terms. It accepted that Leyland would not be allowed to 'sink without trace' but that was 'precisely the point which some – though not all – British Leyland workers, shop stewards and even some of the management are counting on'.³⁶ This sort of assessment alluded to the *Mirror's* doubts about government policy in this field, despite its wider political commitment to Labour. Although the *Mirror* phrased its anxiety with qualifications about the diversity of attitudes to strikes inside car

³² *Daily Mail*, 31 August 1976, p. 6.

³³ *Daily Mail*, 11 September 1979, p. 6.

³⁴ *Daily Mail*, 29 August 1978, p. 6.

³⁵ *The Times*, 27 September 1977, p. 14.

³⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 2 March 1977, p. 2.

factories, this concern about the attitudes of workers to public ownership permeated discussions of other struggling companies. In coverage of Chrysler's 1975 'suicide strike', long before the climax of tensions at Leyland, the *Mirror* insisted that if strikers at Chrysler were 'banking on the Government to bail them out they had better think again because one nationalised motor company was the 'very most that Britain can afford'.³⁷ There was a clear fear, even amongst those sympathetic to trade union concerns that unions may try to trap the government into making further unpopular interventionist policy decisions. This illustrated the complexity in navigating the relationship between a Labour government, which the newspaper supported, and the trade unions, which still accounted for a significant proportion of the *Mirror's* readership.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 6.6: 'Jim Reads the Riot Act' (The British in Looneyland), *Sun*, 2 March 1977, p. 2.

The significant expense of Leyland's nationalisation directly tied the public interest with the future of Leyland. This was used to significant effect by the right-wing press. According to the *Sun*, industrial strife which put the 'British in Looneyland' was not only problematic for the government but also 'humiliating' for the taxpayer (Figure 6.6).³⁸ This kind of emotive reference placed the case at Leyland close to the public's damaged pride in British industry and, more significantly, the cost of living. At the climax of tensions at Leyland, it framed the choice as an issue of 'your money or your Leyland', a 'monstrosity' that was 'constantly fed with more and more of the working man and woman's money'.³⁹ This article placed the future prospects of Leyland as directly at odds with the prosperity of working people, despite the major role that Leyland played as an employer – a primary motivation for the government's investment in Leyland. This coverage was indicative of the

³⁷ *Daily Mirror*, May 13 1975, p. 2.

³⁸ *Sun*, 2 March 1977, p. 2.

³⁹ *Sun*, 1 October 1977, p. 2.

increasing tendency for the press to oversimplify the tensions in complex industrial issues. More significantly, the right wing press's coverage of British Leyland's management and the government's interventionist economic strategies provided evidence of what Stuart Hall terms as the perceived 'contradiction between "the people", popular needs, feelings and aspirations – on the one hand – and the imposed structures of an interventionist capitalist state', or a 'bureaucratic imposition'.⁴⁰ This tension in public understanding had strong links to rising anti-collectivism. This framing of government's interests against those of the people, was a consistent feature in media coverage of trade unionism, and was also evoked in coverage of industrial relations at Ford.

ITN coverage of events at Leyland provided a more nuanced perspective but it also tapped into these themes of governmental mismanagement and union sabotage. Perceptions of waste and mismanagement were only intensified by ITN's focus on surplus, depicted in the many lines of cars being stored on former airfields. Early news coverage of the situation at Leyland had placed emphasis on motivations of strikers, which had prompted reporters to ask Scanlon if 'there was some kind of union conspiracy to wreck British Leyland'.⁴¹ This provided evidence of a background to the union 'sting' accusations which arose after nationalisation. However, as these shots of surplus cars appeared on television screens in 1978, the reporter suggested that this quantity of cars meant Leyland could no longer blame production and posed that if these could not be sold they would 'only serve as a monument to a national disaster'.⁴² This coverage framed the situation at Leyland as an issue of national importance and, more significantly, illustrated a shift in media scrutiny from issues of production, which had directly implicated the labour force, onto Leyland's management, under nationalisation.

As this research has established, the press continued to be critical of what it believed to be political motivations behind strikes, as opposed to industrial ones. The *Guardian*, increasingly critical in its assessment of the labour movement, condemned the strikes at Leyland, putting them down to a matter of principle, which 'like drugs, are occasionally needed but... the car industry has an overdose, and that can be fatal'.⁴³ However, the cynicism about the motivations of workers also extended to the role of the government, allowing industrial policy to be delegitimised in similar ways to union action. This trend tied to growing discomfort about Labour's relationship with the labour movement, in particular the TUC. The *Express* summed up the intent of British Leyland, dubbed

⁴⁰ Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', p. 17.

⁴¹ *ITV Evening News*, 26 February 1970.

⁴² *ITV Evening News*, 16 February 1978.

⁴³ *Guardian*, 27 March 1976, p. 12.

'British Lossmaker', as a company which operated on 'political rather than managerial principles', where the government's apprehension about plant closures and company restructuring would 'have no place under competent management'.⁴⁴ The criticism that government was using public money to further its own political interests, rather than the commercial interests of the company, bore interesting parallels with the well-established distinction made between the political and industrial strikes and illustrated further anxiety about the political significance of industrial relations in contemporary Britain. Political interference in the industrial sphere was no longer a criticism reserved for trade unions and this had important economic implications.

Economic Priorities: Employment versus Inflation

In the media's discomfort with the government's protection of jobs, there was further evidence of the implications of changing attitudes towards employment. This research has already established the significance of, and the media's preoccupation with, soaring inflation but this had a knock on effect on attitudes towards unemployment. Peter Hall has highlighted a shift in economic policy, or policy 'paradigm', initiated in the early 1970s, where 'inflation replaced unemployment as the preeminent concern for policy makers', particularly after a string of Labour policy failures undermined the government's authority.⁴⁵ While Margaret Thatcher's election is seen as the greatest symbol of the shift, the industrial context of the 1970s provided an important platform for these ideas, illustrated through the media's grudging acceptance of unemployment in the contemporary economic climate and the public's increasing prioritisation of anti-inflationary measures. In September 1975, respondents to a Gallup Poll were asked which issue the Government should give greater attention to – curbing inflation or reducing unemployment – 61 per cent believed the former should be the government's policy priority.⁴⁶ The fact that the same set of polling data suggested that unemployment should be the trade unions' 'most urgent problem' illustrated the problems for the trade union movement in fulfilling public expectations of its role in the British economy.⁴⁷

The *Mail* hoped that the time was approaching when 'every other consideration – of jobs, of wishing to have a purely British stake in the motor industry, of votes even – will be brushed aside in view of

⁴⁴ *Daily Express*, 23 January 1978, p. 10.

⁴⁵ Peter Hall, 'Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain', *Comparative Politics* 25 (April 1993), p. 284.

⁴⁶ Gallup, *Gallup Polls: Volume 2*, p. 1449.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1447.

the mounting cost'.⁴⁸ The first of these points, jobs, appeared to be the overriding concern for the government in the case at Leyland and underpinned another important debate in British economics at the time, as unemployment soared. The *Times* recognised that closures of Leyland's problematic car division would turn 'the West Midlands with its marginal seats into an industrial disaster area', which rendered the 'political and practical arguments of letting things drift on downwards', 'only too obvious' to the government.⁴⁹ The *Times* coverage of the situation at British Leyland suggested a lack of bravery from government which had 'shrunk from the political and psychological consequences' of allowing Leyland to run down 'until there was a better balance between demand and capacity', largely because of the social impact of such a decline.⁵⁰ While this emphasis on over-manning did not explicitly target the policy of trade unions, being principally an issue of nationalisation and government policy, it did have implications on the position of the labour force more generally and issues with management continued to be marginal.

In the face of continued problems at Leyland, the *Mail* pondered if Britain could 'do without a motor industry altogether', in order to return to 'what we are good at – being a nation of shopkeepers'.⁵¹ This sort of question underlined popular disillusionment and frustration with the car industry, and hinted at a change in attitudes towards the significance of manufacturing for British prestige. Under the headline 'learning to live with unemployment', the *Mail* warned against the creation of 'artificial jobs' which could take Britain 'from crisis to crash', as 'economic realism' compelled Britain to confront the fact it could not keep its young people in 'worthwhile' employment.⁵² This position on the maintenance of employment also began to spread across the media spectrum, as the *Guardian*, in its criticism for the government's involvement at Leyland, warned against 'setting out to protect existing jobs in existing firms at all costs' because mass market car production was 'probably an industry with a limited future in the industrial world'.⁵³ Such concerns about 'artificial' employment underlined anxiety about the distorting impact of government intervention in industry and its political intentions.

The *Times* exacted its criticism on the role of trade unions in causing unemployment, as it suggested that 'many good trade unionists have gone on strike this year in order to get themselves the sack' which was part of 'the process of destroying the full employment policy which has been maintained

⁴⁸ *Daily Mail*, 29 June 1978, p. 6.

⁴⁹ *The Times*, 14 September 1978, p. 17.

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 1 March 1977, p. 15.

⁵¹ *Daily Mail*, 9 November 1978, p. 6.

⁵² *Daily Mail*, 25 July 1975, p. 6.

⁵³ *Guardian*, 20 February 1975, p. 10.

since the war'.⁵⁴ The *Express* described the unions as 'great machines for the production of unemployment through pricing their members out of jobs', the kind of framing which directly linked unions to unemployment, not just lost production and failing industry.⁵⁵ The paper even went as far as to link the two issues in the simplest terms – 'one man's excessive wage rise is another man's unemployment'.⁵⁶ According to this perspective, not only was employment drifting from the centre of economic policy concern, this was *at least partly* a result of the attitude of unions and their apparent willingness to strike.

Wage restraint at Ford and the realities of policy

The other prominent case study for analysing the nature of media coverage of trade unions in the motor industry is Ford. Consistent with their experience of the 1960s, Ford continued to deal with industrial unrest, which was alleged in front page headlines to have 'cost Britain the chance of having a new £30 million Ford factory'.⁵⁷ As a private company, its relationship with the government was very different and this had important implications for the way industrial relations at Ford were treated by the media. When Ford granted a 17 per cent pay increase to workers, which contravened the government's rigid five per cent pay policy, this decision was framed in diverse ways, as a consequence of contrasting political agendas. The *Express* felt that efforts to 'compel Ford to observe a mystical figure of five per cent' was like 'ordering water to run uphill', which indicated the perceived futility of the government's attempts to curb wages.⁵⁸ According to the *Express*, in granting a wage increase which treated government policy with 'blatant contempt', Ford had been forced to 'choose between satisfying its workers or satisfying the government'.⁵⁹ The *Sun* empathised with the frustration of workers, branding their demand for more wages as 'entirely understandable', as the paper directed criticism at the 'morale-sapping rigidity' of the pay policy which meant that 'regardless of effort or special skills – virtually every worker gets the same increase'.⁶⁰ This coverage framed Ford's action as a matter of satisfying working class interests against government interests, rather than, as had been conventional for coverage of wage settlements, the interests of unions against those of the nation. Conservative criticism of the government's interventionism dictated the right-wing press's position on industrial settlements.

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 19 March 1971, p. 21.

⁵⁵ *Daily Express*, 10 August 1977, p. 10.

⁵⁶ *Daily Express*, 31 January 1973, p. 6.

⁵⁷ *Daily Express*, 23 February 1971, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Daily Express*, 25 September 1978, p. 8.

⁵⁹ *Daily Express*, 21 November 1978, p. 8.

⁶⁰ *Sun*, 25 September 1978, p. 2.

The extent of this support for the interests of the British car worker hit such heights that the *Sun* even went out of its way to emphasise groups of workers who had made a settlement under the terms of the government's policy. At the peak of tensions at Ford and Leyland, Vauxhall workers decided not to strike against their company's four and a half per cent pay offer which the *Sun* branded as a famous victory for 'common sense', as the company could not afford any more. Aside from using this wage agreement as a way to show shop stewards, proponents of the strike, as 'out of touch', the *Sun* suggested that such a rejection of strike measures had shown that 'if you tell the British worker the truth there is a good chance that he will react in a responsible way'.⁶¹ Such an article illustrated the willingness of the working-class *Sun* to highlight success stories in its opinion columns, in a way which was less comfortable for the middle-class papers, in order to encourage scrutiny of the government's pay policy. The agreement at Vauxhall could be used to undermine the supposed necessity of a statutory wage policy. Given the confidence of such articles, it is no coincidence that this was the year that *Sun* established itself as the forerunner of the British tabloids and firmly nailed its colours to the Conservative's mast, much to the delight of Conservative strategists.⁶²

According to the *Mail*, as Ford had endured a strike allegedly inflicted by previous attempts to abide by the government's rigid pay policy, Ford had 'suffered enough'.⁶³ The government's threat of sanctions against Ford was the 'unacceptable face of economic fascism', which handicapped 'the go-getters', in Ford, and cossetted the 'dead-lossers', British Leyland.⁶⁴ Along similar lines, the *Sun* used the language of victimhood which had previously been to support the miners' case in favour of Ford. In a front page article, it described Ford as the 'victim' of the government's 'hypocritical and absurd charade', and a punishment which was 'about as logical as putting an old lady in charge for being mugged'.⁶⁵ This same opinion article on the sanctions against Ford, entitled 'Big Jim's Cop Out', was consistent with the *Sun's* continued personalisation of the failures of the government and its desire to pit Margaret Thatcher against ailing 'Big Jim'. More significantly, this article highlighted great frustration with the discriminatory application of the policy and this was used by the right-wing press to undermine the legitimacy of the government's authority. Callaghan's sanctions policy was referred to as having the 'morality of Mussolini' where the principle of 'selective enforcement of

⁶¹ *Sun*, 25 October 1978, p. 2.

⁶² Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 76.

⁶³ *Daily Mail*, 22 November 1978, p. 6.

⁶⁴ *Daily Mail*, 29 November 1978, p. 6.

⁶⁵ *Sun*, 29 November 1978, p. 1.

Callaghan's code' was deemed repulsive and unlikely to be applied to pay claims in nationalised companies or the trade unions – 'Will the TUC be made to answer for allowing huge code-busting increases for its officers? Not on your life!'.⁶⁶ The suggestion that the government was using its own pay codes, without the backing of democratic legislation, to further its relationship with its allies but to the detriment of successful private companies, directly undermined its social democratic values.

Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 6.7: 'Surrender!', *Sun*, 10 October 1978, p. 1.

However, despite other articles by the *Sun* that alleged that the strike at Ford had 'demolished' impressions of a special relationship between government and unions, this was part of a wider trend of clashes surrounding the government's pay policy (Figure 6.7).⁶⁷ Coverage illustrated a continued

⁶⁶ *Sun*, 29 November 1978, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Sun*, 10 October 1978, p. 2.

discomfort about the government's soft attitude towards unions, in its failure to punish unions for the contravention of the pay policy. The case at Ford was likened to a mugging and it was clear who the 'mugger' was in this analogy – the unpunished unions. This discomfort also tied to widespread frustration with the government's expectation that profitable companies should endure strikes to suit the government's political agenda. Anxiety of this kind had also been apparent at Leyland, where it had been suggested that the government's involvement had nullified the deterrence against trade union action, with the company virtually assured of survival. Both cases helped to contribute to a perception that the government's intervention let unions get off scot-free, whilst the taxpayer and profitable companies shared the burden. This scrutiny of government policy fed into the press's own business matters, with many newspapers dealing with varying degrees of industrial strife, either with printers or the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). After the *Sun* had been forced into a short-term closure due to a dispute with the NUJ, it lamented that the paper's 'room for manoeuvre was severely limited by the provisions of the Government Pay Policy', and declined to place emphasis on the nature of the dispute with the NUJ or the wider motives for the strike.⁶⁸

In this context, the response of the *Mirror* to Ford's actions was predictable, as it attempted to bolster the position of the government, despite some reservations about the sustainability of the pay policy's rigidity. Rather than this being a matter of workers against the government, the *Mirror* concluded that Ford had chosen to 'put their interests before the country's' and had 'left the Cabinet little choice but to invoke sanctions against them' because 'to continue to buy the company's cars as though nothing had happened – will look like complete surrender'.⁶⁹ The *Guardian* framed the settlement in very similar terms as it declared that what was in Ford's interest 'was not necessarily good for Britain', and warned readers of a 'national mood of complacency about inflation', striving to convince them that the social contract was still Britain's 'best hope'.⁷⁰ The kind of deal at Ford underlined the 'paradox of free collective bargaining' which took 'no notice of the wider national interest' and was 'underlined by the decision of the transport workers' executive council to vote £150,000 to the election funds of a Government and simultaneously arm up to torpedo the principal policy – control of inflation – on which that Government seeks re-election.'⁷¹ The implication of the *Guardian's* line of argument was that the relationship between the TUC and a Labour government would always be under strain unless the labour movement showed greater respect for the government's attempts to control inflation. In contrast, the *Guardian* had

⁶⁸ *Sun*, August 5 1978, p. 2.

⁶⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 28 November 1978, p. 2.

⁷⁰ *Guardian*, 5 October 1974, p. 10.

⁷¹ *Guardian*, 24 September 1978, p. 13.

initially suggested that the Heath government should be 'less obsessed with inflation' so it could 'at last go for economic growth and with it expansion of the social services', indicative of the way the press's attitudes to inflation and wage bargaining were shaped by their support for the incumbent government.⁷²

Social tension and the fissiparous society

With increasingly attitudes towards the prevalence of unemployment and most outlets focussed on the impact of wage increases on inflation, heightened social tension was a prominent theme to media coverage, albeit not always along traditional fault lines. As Claydon has explored, the preoccupation with political motivations inside the trade union movement did not change. In many ways they intensified, particularly with the personalised coverage of militant shop stewards such as British Leyland's Derek Robinson, known in media circles as 'Red Robbo'. Coverage of events at Leyland, including unofficial protests against the dismissal of 'Red Robbo', showed how the 'narrative of political extremism and irresponsible militancy among shop stewards' continued into the 1970s, despite frequently incoherent argument.⁷³ It is noteworthy that the personalisation of trade union coverage was reshaped around the 'militants' on the shop floor, rather than the likes of Frank Cousins and prominent union leaders, as had been the case in the 1950s. However, while this continuity of political divisions was important for understandings of power inside the trade union movement, broader social fracturing, which had an impact on notions of class and collectivism became more significant.

Traditional class division, contrary to earlier predictions, remained a prominent issue in industrial relations coverage. The *Mail*, in keeping with its traditional allegiances, was concerned with the situation of the middle classes. It felt the middle classes' 'only reward for accepting responsibility is an ulcer and an increased tax demand', and queried why they should 'back British industry when their money could be more profitably spent on an antique snuff box'.⁷⁴ In demanding action from the government against the TUC, the *Mail* insisted that 'no anti-inflation strategy will work unless most of us – not just the middle classes – are prepared to take a real drop in living standards', which alluded to the belief that the middle classes had experienced greater sacrifices than the unionised working classes. This sentiment of middle class injustice fed into the broader narrative about the negative impact of industrial strife on patterns of consumption.

⁷² *Guardian*, 3 May 1971, p. 12.

⁷³ Claydon, 'Tales of Disorder', pp. 23-26.

⁷⁴ *Daily Mail*, 3 April 1974, p. 6-7.

In response to such narratives, the *Guardian* warned against the perceived tendency of government to ‘bash unions’ in its attempts to counter inflation.⁷⁵ It became concerned that a ‘new sense of social or national purpose’ was significant, in order to avert ‘class war’.⁷⁶ Alistair Hetherington recalled that John Cole had ‘objected to the implication that we were simply trying to pick the most reliable team of economic managers’ because ‘the social purposes and power base of each party were as important’, as far as he was concerned.⁷⁷ The fact Cole felt the need to challenge such assumptions in political decision making reflected the dominance of economic policy, and the preoccupation with inflation, over social policy, which linked to the increasing acceptance of unemployment as a necessary evil of economic recovery. His columns reflected concern that Britain was succumbing to ‘a mood which rejects a national solution to anything and places greater emphasis on personal economic salvation’.⁷⁸ The *Mirror* warned of the possible impact of a ‘poverty boom’, as the gap ‘between the “haves” and “have nots”’ began to increase.⁷⁹ It is clear then that class issues were very much on the public agenda as increases in living standards began to decline.

However, while the persistence of traditional class tensions should not be ignored, pressures on Britain’s affluence and economic prosperity caused much more complex divisions which concepts of ‘class’ or divisions on party political grounds did not address, particularly with regards to working class identity. Social division in this period with all its nuances, including cases of unconventional solidarity or cohesion, was conceptualised by the *Guardian* as the ‘fissiparous society’: ‘as class divisions crumble – more slowly in Britain than anywhere else in Europe – new divisions open up to take their place. There may have been two nations in Disraeli’s day. There are more than two now.’⁸⁰ This fracturing process, beyond the breakdown of the ‘class-party nexus’, placed new pressures on the position of unions, as media coverage further isolated them from their conventional allies, which formed part of a wider trend of detachment from conceptions of the public or the nation.

While the *Mail* sought to highlight the negative experiences of the middle classes as a result of industrial insecurity, this was not the whole story. Although Tomlinson has highlighted the ‘apocalyptic’ tone to public discussion of the economic situation and the advocacy of ‘extreme’ solutions, he noted that the ‘chattering classes in the mid-1970s embraced with great enthusiasm

⁷⁵ *Guardian*, 3 May 1971, p. 12.

⁷⁶ *Guardian*, 27 February 1974, p. 12.

⁷⁷ Hetherington, *Guardian Years*, p. 334.

⁷⁸ *Guardian*, 15 November 1973, p. 16.

⁷⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 19 February 1974, p. 2.

⁸⁰ *Guardian*, 21 January 1974, p. 10.

the notion of Britain's decline'.⁸¹ This is clear from coverage of the *Guardian* which referred to people enjoying a 'camaraderie of adversity' which was 'nostalgic and fun'.⁸² The 'end of the hyperrazmataz' had prompted Britain to be more thoughtful about its use of resources.⁸³ According to this social commentary, often scathing in tone, the British middle class had a 'peculiar passion for austerity' and the experiences of industrial unrest had 'aroused a strange sort of masochistic delight', indicative of a broader discomfort with patterns of affluence and consumerism. The moralised language of productivity and wage restraint had also permeated attitudes towards consumerism and affluence, indicative of the irregularity to public attitudes. Of course, this did not necessitate open approval for the miners' strike but indicated a certain degree of tolerance, clear from opinion polls, which perhaps would not have been clear from the likes of the *Mail's* claims of middle class injustice.

As Lawrence Black has suggested, and this evidence on middle class attitudes supports, the 1970s need to be 'understood as more than just a shift to a more individualistic market society' because, while the economic context was significant, 'it did not determine its politics or culture'.⁸⁴ However, it is important to understand why this period has often been understood in such terms and the coverage of industrial relations provides some indication of the strains placed on notions of collectivism and working class solidarity. The *Guardian* theorised that it was 'fun' for affluent middle class Britain to endure the pressures of a three-day week when they were guaranteed a five-day income.⁸⁵ Although there was enjoyment in the conditions of austerity, this was partly as a result of its impermanence and insulation from genuine poverty. When it came to the lower paid, relationships with striking workers and attitudes towards events such as the three-day week were much more problematic. According to media commentary, some of these fault lines emerged, or threatened to emerge, between the strongly unionised and the lower paid, between public sector workers and those working for private companies, and, in the context of supposed economic decline, between the employed and unemployed. Such tensions were narrated and analysed in contrasting ways by the media, as they attempted to shape public opinion.

The contrasting media responses between the cases of industrial unrest at Ford and those at British Leyland, already analysed, generated tensions in the perceptions of what public workers should

⁸¹ Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline*, p. 88.

⁸² *Guardian*, 10 January 1974, p. 12.

⁸³ *Guardian*, 24 December 1973, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Black, 'An Enlightening Decade?', p. 176.

⁸⁵ *Guardian*, 10 January 1974, p. 12.

expect, in contrast to their private company counterparts. The government appeared to find it increasingly difficult to manage the expectations and settlements in industries outside the public sector and newly nationalised companies. On the one hand, the likes of the *Guardian* argued that a major motivation for the miners' strike had been the bitterness amongst public sector workers created by watching car workers in private companies 'racing ahead of them'.⁸⁶ The *Times* conceded that industrial workers in public service who had 'fared comparatively badly' would feel 'particularly sardonic about the consequences of Mr Henry Ford's personal odyssey of criticizing Britain' and the settlement at Ford would intensify public service suspicion that 'private industry can always in the end opt out of the Government pay policy by exhortation'.⁸⁷ These kinds of perceptions were not without merit as low-paid public sector workers were the most squeezed section of the working classes during the 1970s, as inflation had an impact on both wages and welfare.⁸⁸ Such bitterness may well have been intensified by the kind of agendas advanced by the *Mail* which, in its criticism of public sector spending, argued that the government had to 'hold down pay awards in the public sector, where it is effectively the paymaster', while it adopted a much more relaxed attitude to wage rises in productive private companies.⁸⁹

Union representation and concepts of morality

The moralised language which had been used to great effect for the miners' cause, was also used to address the supposedly damaging influence large unions were having on the fortunes of underrepresented groups of workers, which also undermined notions of working class solidarity. Despite the strength of public opinion in the miners' favour, which ultimately helped their battle against the Heath government, there was anxiety that, particularly in the case of the 1973-74 strike, the miners were excessively demanding in their claims. The *Sun*, self-professed allies of the miners, questioned Britain's 'equality of sacrifice' when an overtime ban meant the basic pay packet of miners lay 'untouched' despite the fact they were the people who 'brought Britain face-to-face with doom'.⁹⁰ Although Goodman used his column in the *Mirror* to insist that several recent claimants had done 'rather better than the miners' and the largest increases would apply to a small minority, there was a common suggestion that the NUM might disregard the implications of their action.⁹¹ Criticisms of sectional interests were not reserved purely for the NUM but were applied to the more powerful unions in general. In its attacks on hospital strikes in March 1973, the *Mail* said weaker

⁸⁶ *Guardian*, 28 January 1972, p. 10

⁸⁷ *The Times*, 2 April 1971, p. 17.

⁸⁸ Tomlinson, 'The politics of declinism', p. 47.

⁸⁹ *Daily Mail*, 24 June 1975, p. 6.

⁹⁰ *Sun*, 15 December 1973, p. 2.

⁹¹ *Daily Mirror*, 28 January 1974, p. 4.

unions that hospital workers belonged to could not 'win anything worthwhile by continuing to strike', despite the fact 'many hospital workers are not being paid a living wage', because 'strong unions', citing miners and car workers, who 'usually pave the runway for inflation to take off are running a slow bicycle race'.⁹² This reflected the fact that criticism of the sectional interests of strong unions was not just reserved for the peak of national wage claims, at a time when the *Mail* supported Heath's interventionist policies, but was a criticism of the power of unions to dictate the wage market at all times. The *Guardian* was critical that the TUC had failed to reflect the movement's 'social conscience', as 'undiluted competitiveness' had jeopardised the futures of the lower paid and elderly which the unions had 'traditionally stood to defend'.⁹³ This kind of account used moralised language of union solidarity and tradition in criticism of the unions, despite common complaint that the unions had failed to adapt to modern industrial conditions. The *Mirror* also took a moral approach to arguing against free collective bargaining, concerned that the lower paid had become 'worse off compared to highly paid workers', who 'like the upper classes, have gained and held advantages through better education, better housing and better social conditions'.⁹⁴ This kind of framing played on conventional class animosities to emphasise the disparity between union members and the division of interests inside the labour movement. Such perceptions of power and influence of large unions in determining the economic prospects of its members may go some way to explaining that, despite negative media coverage, trade union membership continued to rise until the turn of the decade.

Rather than purely an issue of 'differentials' and 'equalities of sacrifice', increased unemployment meant that the impact of wage disputes on companies could be placed in much starker terms, as Callaghan did in pursuit of buttressing his wage policy – a point not lost on the *Mirror*. During a period of intense scrutiny on events at British Leyland, the *Mirror* encouraged worker co-operation by repeating Callaghan's implicit threat that 'the real differential now has become the difference between having a job – and being in the unemployed queue'.⁹⁵ A return to 'straightforward jungle warfare', the *Mirror's* chosen framing of free collective wage bargaining, would not only lead to a wider gap in wage differentials but would prompt the creation of a 'third group' which would get 'nowt but employment pay'.⁹⁶ There was an important implication, indicative of the negative portrayals of Britain's economic future, that other strong striking unions should be grateful for the

⁹² *Daily Mail*, 14 March 1973, p. 6.

⁹³ *Guardian*, 7 September 1970, p. 10.

⁹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 13 April 1971, p. 10.

⁹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 2 March 1977, p. 2.

⁹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 12 February 1977, p. 2.

work they received, with a lack of guarantees about the future of those jobs, particularly in the miners' case. Just had been the case in the 1950s, under the influence of Walter Reuther, the press continued to insist that unions should change their priorities during negotiations, 'to put greater emphasis on claims for more leisure (longer holidays and shorter working time); for better fringe benefits such as pensions, and welfare schemes', and insisted that this was not 'pie-in-the-sky stuff'.⁹⁷ However, with inflation so high on the media agenda and people concerned, above all, about the cost of living, the encouragement of this kind of reorientation, which had been argued during Britain's period of affluence, became even more difficult.

Media Moderation

It is clear that left wing press appeals for moderation from unions, the NUM and more widely, had a political agenda behind it. Geoffrey Goodman warned that the miners were at risk of 'overplaying their hand' by sending the government to the polls 'with the probable result of a substantial Tory victory' and a 'much more entrenched Conservative government in power'.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, there were concerns that the miners' strikes went beyond 'political point-scoring', as the paper urged the miners to make a deal with the government which would 'show that the miners are not indifferent to the fact that nearly a million of their fellow workers are out of a job'.⁹⁹ Two days later, they were urged to 'Grasp the Olive Branch', as the newspaper commended Heath's willingness to meet with the TUC and ask for 'precise guarantees'.¹⁰⁰ In a similar vein, the *Guardian's* concerns about the plight of the lower paid was frequently used to buttress their case for supporting the government's wage policy. Rather than being purely for anti-inflationary purposes, much was made of the security it could offer weaker unions and less organised groups. Moreover, while the wage policy was the responsibility of government, this kind of mediation by the Labour-supporting press offered the opportunity to reallocate or at least share responsibility for the maintenance of the wage policy with the unions by increasing scrutiny on their willingness to accept the government's terms. In a similar way, the *Mail* had initially supported a wage freeze during Heath's period of economic intervention, having argued that it was necessary so that 'the people at the back of the queue can get a look-in', insistent that a compulsory freeze would be met with gratitude that 'somebody is doing something at last'.¹⁰¹ Concern for vulnerable elements of the working class was much less prevalent when the Conservatives offered opposition to Labour's wage freeze. While coverage of working class

⁹⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 31 January 1973, p. 19.

⁹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 4 January 1974, p. 7.

⁹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 9 January 1974, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 11 January 1974, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ *Daily Mail*, 4 November 1972, p. 6.

relationships offered an important insight into social anxieties, contextual evidence suggests that attempts at mediation of these tensions by the press were not solely noble in intent.

Paul Hartmann's 1979 study concluded that the influence of the press had made it 'more difficult for members of the working class to become aware of their common interests and conscious of the importance of class relations within their society'.¹⁰² Archival evidence suggests that the impact of industrial relations coverage on societal and class cohesion caused anxiety amongst those in the TUC. In 1977 Len Murray attempted to address the 'many examples of blatantly bad reporting' which portrayed industrial issues as 'primarily responsible' for Britain's economic plight and poor reputation abroad. More significantly, Murray highlighted the limited media understanding of the problems facing unions in times of 'great technological change and economic stress', where inflation and unemployment threatened the 'ordinary families' that the labour movement sought to represent, while 'any suggestion that something over the odds may be sought by unions is immediately highlighted' by the media, as he reserved particular criticism for the press.¹⁰³ It seems unlikely that the decision to speak publicly about these issues was simply a symptom of the TUC's well-documented failure to respond to media pressure on trade unionism's reputation. Although this focus on industrial unrest and provocative wage claims was not a new trend, as this research has already attested, it is evident that these patterns were of particular concern to the trade union movement at a time of national anxiety about the inflationary impact of wage claims and the cost of living. Such a statement reflected the intense difficulty of the TUC to convince the public of its desire and ability to defend the general interests of working people, as a collective group, rather than the sectional demands of strong and militant unions. Comprehensive media scrutiny of industrial unrest was a major hurdle in this aim.

Overall, the overlap of this research's central threads, politics and economics, reflects the centrality of industrial relations in British media culture at this time, as well as the increasing role of the state in industry. The intervention of the government in industrial relations was increasingly unwelcome, building on scepticism about productivity initiatives from the 1960s. Not only did the government's approach to industrial relations inflame tensions between unions and government in the settling of wage policies, but, arguably more significantly, government intervention in companies, public and private, was seen to be counterproductive to industrial peace on the shop floor, as well as the

¹⁰² Paul Hartmann, 'News and Public Perceptions of Industrial Relations', *Media Culture and Society* 1, (1979), p. 270.

¹⁰³ Len Murray, Introductory Statement to the TUC 'Trade Unions and the Media' Conference, February 17 1977; TUC Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MSS.292D/286/3]

competitiveness of British industry. The right wing press was consistently and persuasively able to portray the political interests of the Labour government as antithetical to those of the British taxpayer and raised questions about the willingness of the government to reward genuine success in industry. Nationalisation had undermined confidence in British management of industry, despite continued faith by some newspapers that the product line was adequate. This perception of industrial mismanagement was particularly problematic due to the continued perceptions of the 'British disease' and the complex relationship between Labour and the TUC.

As far as the portrayal of unions was concerned, they continued to be directly implicated in Britain's rising inflation and its failing industry, as myths about their peculiar willingness to strike continued to shape media narratives. Influential elements of the media continued to be frustrated by the sectional interests of individual unions, despite the country's economic plight, and their perceived lack of 'social conscience'. There was increasing concern that government involvement at both Leyland and Ford had let unions off the hook, as they were seen to make the most of the Labour government's electoral instability and its complex ties with the TUC. Soaring inflation encouraged widespread acceptance of some degree of unemployment, in a crucial change in economic outlook, which had further negative implications for the labour force and expectations of the union movement to defend its members' interests. Where the labour force did find support from media outlets, this was largely inconsistent, and was often implemented in order to pursue or undermine a certain political agenda.

As far as the media was concerned, the nature of newspaper debate reflected the emerging influence of the *Sun* as it sought to reshape language around the priorities of its growing working class readership, and provide the foundations for Margaret Thatcher's political success. The tabloid *Mail* found a stronger voice, indicated in its cautionary references to Weimar Germany and union conspiracies at Leyland, albeit in a very different way to the *Sun*. The lukewarm reception for government intervention in industry from the *Mirror* and the *Guardian* illustrated the degree of uncertainty about Labour's response to perceived decline amongst its supporters. The *Mirror*, implicated in Labour's decreasing popularity, found it increasingly difficult to appeal to the concerns of its established readership, as conventional social conflicts evolved and the influence of industrial correspondents, like Goodman, waned.

Whilst political militancy continued to be a popular theme of press coverage of trade unionism, this period was more notable for the fractures that threatened to appear along new fault lines, beyond

traditional concepts of class, and ultimately undercut notions of solidarity and social conscience amongst the labour force. The preponderance of unemployment opened up possible divisions between the employed and unemployed, the growing militancy and bargaining power of the major unions provided questions about the status of weaker organized groups, and the inconsistencies of political intervention frustrated public sector workers, as their private company counterparts enjoyed wage increases. The fractured portrayal of the working class in coverage of trade union affairs not only dislocated trade unionists from their traditional roots, which allowed them to be more easily singled out by the media, but also fed into patterns of cultural consumerism, placing emphasis on the working class individual. Such coverage helped to support the strategy of the *Sun*, now so influential in the press arena, as the 'populist champion of down-to-earth pleasure-seekers, as opposed to the humourless intellectuals, do-gooders and officials who sought to intervene in and disrupt the lives of ordinary working-class readers'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Bingham and Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, p. 188.

Conclusions

Reflecting on Labour's 1979 election defeat, in conversation with *Mirror* journalist Geoffrey Goodman, Len Murray, former General Secretary of the TUC, termed the events of 1979 as a 'fragmentation of trade unionism' that forced him to 'question [his] assumptions and all the things [he] had always worked for'.¹ Murray's description of fragmentation reflected a gradual and contingent process, which applied not only to trade unionism's relationship with the Parliamentary Labour Party but the ultimate disintegration of consensus in British politics. The decline in public support for trade unions was intensified by the mediation of press and latterly television, as patterns of partisanship and tabloidization played an influential role. From the mid-1970s, the new tabloid culture shifted decisively against them.

Three key factors combined to generate this change in trade unionism's status. Firstly, the fragility and decline of the left-wing media, as well as a lack of strategy from the TUC, left the labour movement without a voice in the mainstream media. This was particularly problematic as the Labour Party wrestled with the tensions between representing its party and the nation. Secondly, broader social change damaged the basic collectivist assumptions that trade unionism was built upon, as society became more individualistic and consumer-orientated. Thirdly, the resurgence of the right-wing media, led by the *Sun* and the tabloid *Mail*, was important in undermining trade unionism's position. The success of its rhetoric was demonstrated in its ability to permeate supposedly neutral news providers such as the BBC.

A significant element of union demise was the disintegration of the left-wing media's response to the political pressure on the unions. This was indicated initially by the *Herald's* slump in sales and eventual closure, and subsequently the *Mirror's* declining power and appetite for trade union issues. The *Mirror* struggled to deal with the popular impact of the *Sun* in redefining industrial relations coverage. This degradation of left-wing media authority made the TUC's prospects of challenging prevalent themes and frames of coverage difficult, even if they had been able to provide a more convincing response to the changing media landscape. The archival evidence has suggested that the charge of 'fatalism' on the part of the unions is an unfair one, given the continued discussions about publicity both inside the TUC and with media representatives. In 1974, the miners' strategy was directly influenced by the impact negative coverage could have on the strike's success and Labour's election campaign.

¹ Goodman, *Bevan to Blair*, p. 219-220.

However, it is clear why such negative impressions of trade unionism's approach to publicity have been so widespread. Where the TUC attempted to improve its image, deeply held scepticism about the motives of the press undermined its actions. Both the TUC, in its discussions with the BBC over educative programmes, and the *Herald*, in its commitment to 'serious' news, demonstrated a lack of understanding about popular tastes. The perceived public demand for 'emergency coverage' and simplified narration masked the complexities of the trade unions' role in British industry and the movement struggled to respond directly. The decision to research and report on, rather than intervene in, the Winter of Discontent coverage epitomises the TUC's approach.

Wider media trends undermined the core relationships and accepted attitudes, referenced by Murray, which trade unionism's positive status had been built upon. As time went on, concepts of a cohesive British public identity became problematic and the media often cast trade unionists outside or against such interests. As the realities of Britain's changing place in the world economy became apparent, accounts of rivalry with old enemies became less compelling and the appeal of nostalgia faded. Instead, this rhetoric was orientated around the relationship between unions and the national interest. As far as international competitors were concerned, they now came to be understood as the potential saviours of British manufacturing. Moreover, the media's binary distinction between moderates and militants, established in the 1950s Cold War context, changed balance across the period, so as to define increasing numbers as extremists and underplay the role of moderating influences. This was part of the media's growing discomfort with the disintegration and destruction of the boundaries between the industrial and political: a pattern that was firmly established by the late 1960s. The media frequently attempted to reconstruct, conjure or recall this out-dated demarcation as a means of delegitimising politicised industrial action. The process of politicisation in the industrial sphere was almost exclusively portrayed as desirable for fulfilling unions' aims and thus instigated solely by union representatives, despite direct involvement in industrial matters from the likes of Wilson, Heath and Castle. Significantly, this gradually permeated the way left-wing newspapers also understood trade unions' political role. While the *Mirror* had been keen to embrace trade unionism's politicisation under a Conservative government in the 1950s, this soon changed. Its influential coverage of the 1960s and early 1970s often only intensified perceptions of the union's political threat, as it sought to bolster the position of the government. The *Guardian* was more discerning in its position on Labour policy, as a primary critic of Labour's attempts to ground wages, but it too became critical of the political motives of trade unionism.

Notions of working-class collectivism and solidarity, initially used by the media to exert pressure on the principles of trade unionism, became increasingly difficult for organised labour to negotiate, as their appeal declined. Sections of the centre-left sought to distance themselves from traditional class identities in order to broaden their appeal, or represent a 'national interest', and respond to changing perceptions of what it meant to be 'working class'. Simultaneously, the Labour government, which was often called on to intervene in industrial planning and wage management, was increasingly seen as an ineffective or interfering force in industrial issues. The complex relationship between nationalisation and industrial action, which stemmed from cynicism towards the Attlee government's nationalisation programme, through to the extensive financial commitments to British Leyland, gradually undermined media support for Labour's attempts to support Britain's key industries. The Leyland case allowed the media to suggest that the union's involvement in the company was exploitative, whilst also arguing that Labour's investment was motivated by the party's electoral interests, rather than those of the nation. These two forces combined to cloud Labour's identity and hinder its attempts to provide unifying answers to Britain's industrial problems.

The *Sun* was particularly successful in responding to, and stimulating, this change in cultural attitudes, as it sought to provide messages to transcend conventional class boundaries. Its influence was initially established by its broader entertainment provision but it gradually gained a footing in political discourse. Under Larry Lamb's editorship, it was a primary driver in ensuring that, as the left-wing media's messages fragmented, the right-wing press converged on powerful patterns of industrial coverage. This primarily consisted of an intensification of established narratives, indicative of the cumulative impact of industrial relations coverage, as coverage became more uniform in style. Over the course of the period, reports of trade unionism were simplified and shortened to skim over the intricacies of strikers' motivations. Newspapers published sensationalised headlines that highlighted the impact of industrial action on daily lives, typically through rising prices, diminished supplies or redundancies. The emphasis on everyday life was one of the key ways in which newspapers regularly sought to mobilise public support for its industrial agendas and purposes, even at times of supposed apathy or indifference. Likewise, the growing personalisation of coverage, part of the cult of celebrity which permeated wider entertainment coverage, also affected industrial relations coverage. This tendency applied to coverage of both politicians and trade unionists, often focussing on matters of personality and appearance, and placed responsibility for broader structural problems at the feet of individuals. The power of this coverage was ultimately demonstrated in the personalised criticisms of James Callaghan to emphasise a supposed crisis of authority. Overall,

these trends in tabloid journalism helped editors and journalists to maintain public interest and influence opinion but they often masked the realities and problems within British industry.

The emergence of this consumer age was not a phenomenon that news organisations simply promoted or commented on. The press had to engage directly with these trends in order to survive in an increasingly competitive market. This meant newspapers had to make sure they were successful sources of entertainment to maintain a commercial image to appeal to popular tastes and the demands of advertisers. These demands inevitably contributed to issues of simplification and personalisation in industrial relations coverage. Most significantly, the clamour for improved living standards and the increase in shop floor activity had a direct impact on the media's relationship with press and production unions. It is clear by the late 1970s that the financial strain on media organisations caused by industrial action, indicated by events at the *Times* and the BBC and directly referenced by Larry Lamb, caused an important shift in editorial attitudes.

As the media became more forthright in its partisanship, the media's frames of explanation for Britain's supposed decline gradually converged and contracted in their range and variety. This was particularly true amongst the press but these convergences gradually permeated television coverage, despite the BBC's consultation with trade unionists and its commitment to neutrality. By the end of the period, problems with industrial productivity and competitiveness were broadly explained as a failure of the labour force and the indiscipline of unions, despite the many other shortcomings of British industry. This convergence in the frames of explanation simultaneously placed pressure on the union movement, whilst absolving government and employers from responsibility.

This research has provided a more holistic understanding of the varied motivations for specialised and unbalanced media scrutiny of British industry. The media's preoccupation with manufacturing industries was significant in the proliferation of the decline narrative and reflected struggles to adjust to Britain's loss of status in this field. As Tim Claydon's work demonstrates, the motor industry bore the brunt of criticism, disproportionate to the number of strikes experienced. The influence of militant shop stewards in stimulating strikes was a key focus and provided an important platform for the media to divide strikers from the public interest. Research by the Glasgow Media Group suggested that trade unionism's disruptive threat to Britain's emergent patterns of consumption was a significant influence on levels of industrial scrutiny. This research has suggested that, beyond the cases in the mid-1970s, the influence of disruption to production and inconvenience to

consumers was so significant as to prompt newspapers to request compromise on wage agreements, even at the expense of government policy. Moreover, as with the balance of particular industries, this research has established the imbalance in television coverage also applied to the interviews and sources used. Repeatedly, media coverage focused on workers and their representatives, or sometimes customers or patients, rather than employers and management. Given the continued dialogue amongst trade unionists about the problematic image of trade unionists provided by such coverage, and the continued lack of scrutiny of managerial roles in Britain's industrial demise, this was another important influence in the decline of the status of the trade unions.

The increased partisanship of newspapers was particularly important as the dominant understandings of the management of the economy evolved. The 'post-materialist' turn of the media, to encourage unions to turn their attention away from simple wage increases and towards greater rights and security for workers, seems to have been primarily motivated by an anxiety about the so-called wage 'leap-frog'. Strikes and high wage demands were predominantly understood as a cause of inflation, rather than a response to the rising living costs which newspapers regularly reported. As inflation became a greater problem for the British economy in the 1970s, the British media, symptomatic of a broader change to the 'policy paradigm', became more relaxed about the prospect of so-called 'temporary unemployment' as a means of stemming inflation. This shift in attitude placed significant pressure on the trade unions, as the labour force became increasingly anxious about the future of their jobs. This was particularly true in manufacturing industries after early experiences of modernisation and automation.

Morality was a common thread to debates over wages and the economy, despite this change in emphasis, and its influence gradually intensified over the period. Jim Tomlinson's work explores how the government used ideas of morality in order to 'manage the people' and curb wage expectations.² This thesis has expanded on the themes of this work to illustrate how these ideas were utilised by the press, initially as a means of delegitimising supposedly excessive wage claims. It was given new meaning by Labour's 1960s productivity drive, as government rhetoric had a long-term impact on the narratives of the media. By the 1970s, the tabloid press infused morality with greater emotive influence, particularly during the 1978-79 strikes where coverage emphasised the threat to lives and communities. Gradually, moral language was employed to denounce industrial

² Tomlinson, 'Reinventing the "moral economy"', p. 356.

action, regardless of the terms of strikers' demands, and its power was indicative of the influence of impact-orientated coverage.

Morality was one of a number of themes that were malleable and were regularly shaped, often incoherently, to suit a media organisation's broader political agenda. Industrial action in the mining industry was dealt with rather differently to other industries for the majority of the period, despite widespread 'absenteeism' and public scepticism about nationalisation, partly because of respect for the miners, which deemed them 'justified' or 'deserving' in their pursuit of higher wages or better conditions. These kinds of specific attitudes towards groups of workers, bound in complex moralised rhetoric, were rarely explained or made explicit but were ad hoc and underpinned by complex social assumptions. A further indication of such inconsistencies was found in notions of British exceptionalism, which were simultaneously bound in nationalistic satisfaction and, on the other hand, negative declinism. Symptomatic of British attempts to adapt to its new position in the international economy, this inconsistency placed significant pressure on the role of organized labour, through debates about productivity and the 'British disease', despite many similar experiences abroad. This shifted media focus away from the justified scrutiny of the design and quality of British products, and the management of manufacturing, which was generally considered to be unproblematic, or often sources of British pride.

The greatest indication of the inconsistency of coverage was the fact a media organisation's position on industrial action was often dictated by their views on the incumbent government. Contrary to popular perceptions, the British media did not universally denounce all forms of industrial action, and were often sympathetic to miners' grievances, even if they opposed the nature of their protest. Where media organisations opposed the incumbent government or their industrial policies, striking unions could expect greater support or sympathy for their position, albeit with important caveats. Similarly, as concerns grew about the stifling impact of strict pay policies on productivity, the right-wing newspapers were increasingly supportive of 'deserving' attempts by unions to defy voluntary wage restraint. This flexible perspective on industrial action is significant, given common assumptions about right-wing media attitudes towards trade unionism. However, by the same token, left-wing newspapers would sometimes be more critical than their right-wing counterparts of particular strikes, as seen with the 'red scare' of the 1966 NUS strike, in order to provide support for the Labour government. Moreover, inconsistencies and incoherencies were not reserved for columnists and editors, but pollsters and their respondents too. This made the job of policymakers

increasingly difficult, as they attempted to navigate these forums of opinion while the rhetoric of union conflict intensified and media partisanship became more common.

Media coverage of trade unionism, along with the Troubles in Northern Ireland, underpinned the portrayal of Britain as an 'ungovernable' nation, as the Winter of Discontent symbolized an 'ideological failure to which the only answer was the neoliberal alternative'.³ This was the key ingredient in making the 'manufactured crisis' of the tabloid press so successful. 1979 represented the final annual increase in membership and trade unionism would never attract the same attention as it had during the 1970s. Industrial relations faded from the political agenda and the influence of trade unionism over British politics was punctured. As this research has highlighted, the media demand for control and reform of the union 'problem' was not new in 1979, but perceptions of the correct solution had changed.

In the years that followed, it became clear that the fractured left-wing of British politics lacked the ability to resist the dominant frames and presented 'no major drive to build an alternative understanding of what had gone wrong' in British industry.⁴ These trends undermined opposition to Conservative policies of deindustrialisation which further damaged the position of working-class trade unionism. Where industrial unrest did occur, the right-wing tabloids continued to intensify their pressure on trade unionism, which in turn became more radical in its forms of action. In the case of the 1984-85 miners' strike, the miners' concerns about the economic impact of large-scale pit closures were largely ignored by the media in favour of a focus on Arthur Scargill, the supposedly despotic leader of violent miners. In continuance of conflict motifs, their undemocratic action was posed against the police, respectable representatives of law and order. Although coverage of this defeated strike symbolised a significant change in public moral status for the miners, many of the themes to coverage represented considerable continuity with strike reports of the 1970s. The industrial tensions of the 1980s formed a coda to the battles played out in the 1970s.

³ Thomas, "Bound in By History", p. 273.

⁴ Greg Philo, 'Political Advertising, Popular Belief and the 1992 British General Election', *Media, Culture & Society* 15 (1993), p. 413.

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