

Q&A: Trade unions

Labour is locked in a civil war with the trade unions, who founded the party and still fund it today. But what exactly are trade unions? Are they still relevant in the modern world?



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United we stand: British workers call for better conditions during the 1926 General Strike © DM

Q What exactly is a trade union?

A Trade unions are organisations made up of employees in a particular sector or industry. Their main purpose is to represent workers' interests to their employers in negotiations or disputes: pushing for improvements like better workplace conditions, more training, higher pay, shorter hours or greater job security.

Q How do they do that?

A The most famous, public and controversial trade union tactic is industrial action such as strikes, when a union instructs its members to refuse to work. But strikes are only supposed to be used when other methods have broken down: more commonly they resolve issues through collective bargaining, where union representatives and employers work together to thrash out a contract that serves the interests of both parties. Unions might also provide legal or technical advice to their members or pay for their representation in court or tribunals using the membership fees of the rank and file.

Q How did trade unions come about?

A To answer that you have to go back to the Industrial Revolution, when millions of European labourers were moving to cities to find work in the new factories. The conditions they endured were frequently horrific: starvation wages, overcrowded houses, fatal epidemics.

Even children were often made to work 12 hours per day for 6 days each week.

Q And so they formed trade unions?

A Yes – but not without fierce opposition from the ruling classes. Partly that was just economics: most bosses didn't want to spend any more on their employees than they had to. But there was also a widespread fear of the disruptive political potential of organised labour. Karl Marx and other socialist revolutionaries believed that a united working class would be capable of overthrowing capitalism and introducing a society in which everybody was equal.

Q Well that didn't quite work out, did it?

A No. And in fact, in Poland for example, unions were instrumental in actually ending Communism. But trade unions did gain political power in Western Europe by forming social democratic parties to represent the class interests of working people. In the UK that happened in 1900, when the Trades Union Congress passed a motion resulting in the creation of a Labour Party. Just like the SPD in Germany or the Socialists in France, Labour is rooted in trade unionism.

Q But that's all changed now, right?

A Not completely. Around a quarter of the Labour Party's funding still comes from trade unions (money which unions receive in subscriptions, or membership

fees, from workers). Theoretically, this is because Labour is still the party that claims most closely to represent the interests of ordinary working people. However, the relationship between Labour and the unions is increasingly strained.

Q How come?

A During a recent scandal it was alleged that the union Unite was having too much influence on selecting Labour's election candidates. That ignited a broader row about the role of unions in the party, with critics accusing them of being corrupt and undemocratic institutions. The unions themselves have threatened to slash party funding.

Q But are trade unions even relevant today?

A That's the big question. They're certainly in decline: union membership has fallen from 13.5 million Britons in 1979 to 6.5 million today. A new working culture in which many regularly switch between employers and even industries is a challenge to trade unions, as is the decline of traditionally unionised industries like manufacturing.

Q So trade unions are on their way out?

A Not necessarily. Union members still get paid on average 12.5% higher than non-unionised workers, and win their members around £300 million each year in compensation for mistreatment at work. When you start your career, you might consider joining a trade union yourself.

► Q&A: Trade unions

YOU DECIDE

Would you join a trade union?

ACTIVITIES

Research either the Matchgirls' Strike of 1888, the General Strike of 1926 or the Miners' Strike of 1984 and briefly describe its causes and consequences.

WORD WATCH

Industrial Revolution – In the 18th Century, technological developments like steam power and mechanisation made it possible to produce goods far more efficiently than ever before. That in turn led to rapid social change as workers moved to urban areas to work in factories. This brought enormous economic benefits but also forced many people into terrible conditions. It was arguably the biggest social upheaval since the invention of farming.

Karl Marx – A political philosopher and historian who believed

that human societies were dominated by struggle between the powerful classes and those who served them. Marx thought that capitalism would inevitably collapse and be replaced by a society controlled by working people.

Social democratic – Socialism is a political ideology which proposes that the wealth and goods a society produces should be cooperatively owned and distributed among all who contribute to its production. Some socialists believe that this should be achieved by revolution, but social democrats aim to make their country gradually more equal through democratic means.

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 **NOTES**

