

**Trade Union collective  
identity, mobilisation and  
leadership – a study of the  
printworkers' disputes of  
1980 and 1983**



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Collective identity and strategic choice – a  
study of the printworkers' disputes of 1980  
and 1983

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
of the University of the West of England, Bristol for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Bristol Business School,  
University of the West of England

2021

## **Declaration**

I declare that this research thesis is my own, unaided work.  
It is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University of the West of England,  
Bristol for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Nigel Costley

Date



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## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Professor Stephanie Tailby, Professor Sian Moore and Dr Mike Richardson for their continuous encouragement, support and constructive criticisms.

## **Abstract**

The National Graphical Association (NGA) typified the British model of craft unionism with substantial positional power and organisational strength. This study finds that it relied upon, and was reinforced by, the common occupational bonds that members identified with. It concludes that the value of collective identity warrants greater attention in the debate over union renewal alongside theories around mobilisation and organising (Kelly 2018), alliance-building and social movements (Holgate 2014).

Sectionalism builds solidarity through the exclusion of others. Occupational identity is vulnerable to technological change. This model neglects institutional and 'associational' power, eschewing legal protections in favour of collective bargaining and ignoring alliance-building in favour of sovereign authority. The development of large conglomerate unions has placed membership unity over sectionalist solidarity but membership and its density in workplaces have fallen ([Trade Union Statistics](#)).

This thesis concludes that the capacity for strategic choice by union leaders depends upon the union's leverage with employers and its ability to mobilise collective action within and beyond the workplace. These rely on strong collective identity of workers as demonstrated by the NGA in its 1980 national printing campaign.

The series of employment laws, launched in 1980, has constrained strategic options available to union leaders but the thesis argues that the technology and non-union labour rather than new laws were the critical factor in the NGA's defeat in the 1983 Messenger dispute. The loss of positional power exposed the weakness of associational (or coalitional) power when the NGA looked to the TUC and union allies for aid.

It argues that the forces that had made the union organisationally strong prevented it from taking alternative routes to survive or to transform itself in the face of fundamental technological change. Yet this should not lead union strategists from paying more attention to the value of sectional occupational identity in the mobilisation and organisation of workers.

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## Introduction

Britain's trade unions are among the oldest in the world. They have a long and complex history (Clegg 1985, Cole 1924, Flanders and Clegg 1954, Hutt, 1962, Hyman 1975, Webbs 1896), with a matrix of organisational models and attitudes towards relations with employers. Workers are mobilised into unions around a common cause and shared interest and the boundaries of their union membership are based on the occupations and sectors covered – the clue is in the title, trade union. The number of unions has declined through amalgamations<sup>1</sup> a process that has placed broader membership unity ahead of occupational identity and with it, as the study will explore, more emphasis on political and associational power.

The decades immediately after the Second World War witnessed fierce argument over trade union reform (Barrett, Rhodes and Beishon 1975, Donovan 1968). It was a period in which unions, for good or bad, were at the centre of economic life and national politics and when union leaders were household names. Conservative governments led by Margaret Thatcher from 1979, however, launched a new offensive against union power (Dorey 1991, 1995). This coincided with wider developments in global capitalism, while the British governments' economic and industrial relations policies profoundly influenced the direction of industry restructuring and societal change. The 1980s were marked by industrial unrest and high unemployment in which the powerful battalions of trade unionism were ultimately diminished and union membership fell. This study looks back at this turning-point in the fortunes of trade unions with a focus on the role of sectional collective identity as the basis for organisational strength.

Much has been written about trade union decline, the causes and the possible options for renewal (Freeman and Pelletier 1990; Hyman 2007; Boxall and Haynes 1997; Frege 2003, 2004; Undy, Fosh, Morris, Smith and Martin 2011; Undy 2008;

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<sup>1</sup> TUC statistics

Metcalfe 2005; Bryson, Ebbinghaus and Visser 2011). The debate has included the scope and capacity for unions to make strategic choices and the options available to them including models of mobilisation and identity. The capacity of unions to take and implement strategic decisions – and the choices they make – is influenced by the industrial, political and legal environment, the nature of the leadership and the democracy of each union (Hyman 2007). The legal framework covering organised labour has swung between restriction and reform, repression and regulation (Donovan 1968, Wedderburn 1986, 1987, Fosh and Littler, 1985). Trade unions have responded in a variety of ways - confrontation, containment and compliance - at different times, with varying results.

This thesis focuses on the National Graphical Association (NGA) and the way this union sought to deal with fundamental technological change and the introduction of legislation that outlawed its traditional approach to disputes. In 1980 the union embarked on a national campaign for advances in pay and hours for members before the forces of hostile legislation and economic depression set in (Gennard 1990). In 1983 the union faced Eddy Shah, a maverick employer who bypassed union involvement using new technology, non-union labour, the police and the new employment laws. This was the first real test of the Government's approach to trade union reform and the first measure of trade union resistance to the laws (Dickinson 1984, Gennard 1984, 1990, Marsh 1992).

This doctoral research has uncovered archives from the time including confidential correspondence between government departments and with the police. Conservative Party papers and the minutes of the NGA National Council have been opened. Together with a range of newspaper accounts, Trades Union Congress (TUC) and NGA records, photographs and ephemera, the research builds up a comprehensive account of the contrasting disputes.

The thesis examines the extent to which the union's success in the 1980 dispute strengthened the "aura of uncontestability" (sic) of the NGA and led to failures to fully assess the changed circumstances by 1983 (Gennard and Hayward 2008: 4). It uses case studies to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the sectional nature



of the union. The strong collective bond members had to the union proved a key ingredient in the manner the leadership directed its 1980 campaign and in its outcome. Such features left it vulnerable, however, in conducting itself in the 1983 dispute. The principal participants have been interviewed including activists and union officers. Despite the defeat in 1983 and the chain of events that followed, most union participants interviewed largely stand by the strategy and action taken. They believed if it had not been Shah who used the new laws against them, it would have been another employer soon after. They spoke more freely about ways the union evaded the full impact of sequestration and the organisation of the picket line in ways previous accounts were unable to capture.

The employer, Eddy Shah, interviewed for this research, remains proud of the role he played in utilising new laws to aid his determination to bypass union restrictions. He was, and remains, an independent figure and refutes any suggestion that he was part of a government-inspired conspiracy.

The literature on the Messenger dispute includes a contemporary account by Mark Dickinson (1984) entitled *To Break a Union*. His detailed study highlights the pivotal significance of the dispute but he was unable to interview Shah himself and it was too soon for him to access government, police and union archives. This thesis fills in many of the gaps and tests Dickinson's conclusions that the dispute was a crusade against the NGA by the employer with the union let down by the TUC and the rest of the labour movement. Gennard wrote *The implications of the Messenger Newspaper Group dispute* (1984) and *History of the NGA* (1990) in which he highlights the critical role the dispute had in establishing the authority of the new employment laws, with all their impediments and restrictions for unions. He sought to play down the defeat for the union and felt other employers would draw back from following Shah's example, but he warned about a divided trade union movement and a climate in which "small unrepresentative employers push their own economic advantage at the expense of the best traditions of British industrial relations (Gennard 1984: 19)". This study will reflect on these conclusions.

Other scholars who have considered the significance of the Messenger dispute include McIlroy (1991: 70-71) who believed the police response banished the mass picket. Evans (1985: 147) argued the Messenger dispute showed how the police and courts could break a union financially and physically. Dunn (1985: 99-102) highlights the impact of the dispute on secondary action and the closed shop while Fosh and Littler (1985: 14-16) summarised the importance of the outcome for industrial relations and union power.

McIlroy and Lloyd took different views on the dispute in *Marxism Today* (February 1984). McIlroy saw the defeat as a betrayal by the TUC despite the strong ground on which the NGA stood. Lloyd disagreed, arguing that a fight over the closed shop was wrong although he acknowledged how the NGA established “one of the most complete and successful forms of workers’ – or more accurately, union – control in the country (p.33)”. The nature of NGA power and these arguments about its defence are weighed in this thesis.

Other literature to cover the 1983 Messenger dispute does so as part of its role in heralding subsequent events; for example, Bain (1998), Richardson (2003) and Lang and Dodkins (2011). Goodhart and Wintour chart the launch of Shah’s *Today* newspaper in *Eddie Shah and the Newspaper Revolution* (1986) and stress his role as “interloper” able to “unlock the door to the newspaper of the future (p.x1v)”. A similar line is taken by Andrew Neil (1997) and this is an aspect considered in the case study in Chapter 8.

The significance of the dispute in 1983 is now overshadowed by the conflicts that followed, when unions were banned from Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in January 1984, the miners’ strike of 1984/5 and the battle at Wapping between the print unions and News International. The sequencing of these events has led to the conclusion that the Conservative Government had a pre-determined course of action (Lyddon 2009) and that there was a planned step-by-step onslaught on union power (Dorey 1991, 2014). It is possible, however, that the strategy was more opportunistic, with government building new layers of regulations rather than the careful enactment of a premeditated programme.

Moreover, and critically, there is a need to take into account the strategic choices taken by union leaders at the time.

### **Union fortunes**

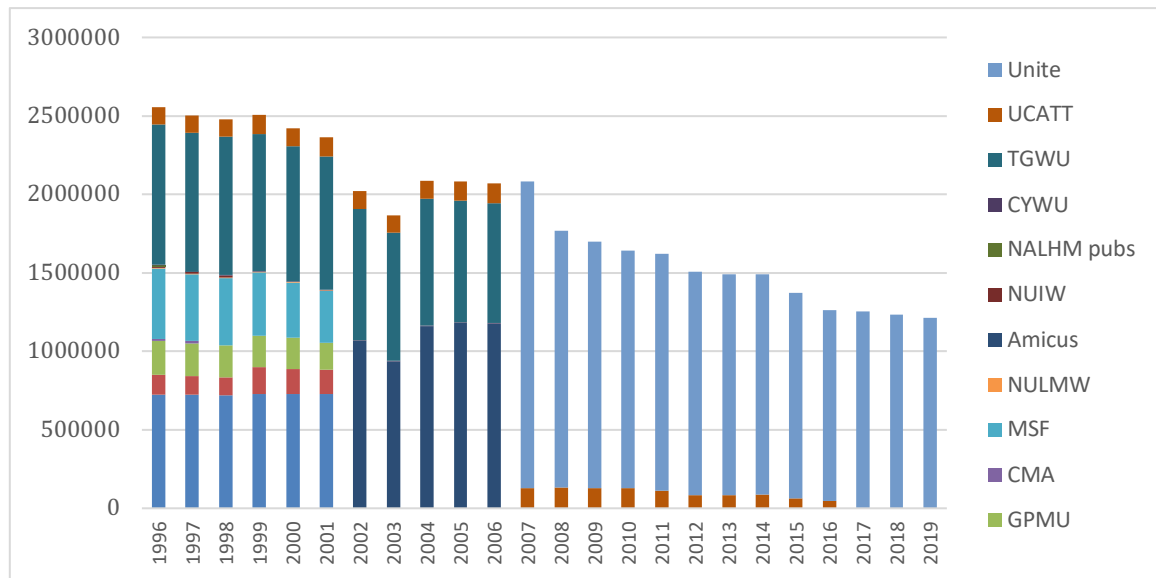
Trade union membership contracted substantially through the 1980s and 90s, falling from around 13 million in 1980 to 7 million in 2000. The number of unions halved during the same period<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, the rate of membership decline stabilised and in recent years has shown small growth. Scholars (Undy 2018, Murray 2017, Ibsen and Tapia 2017, Lévesque 2010, Heery 2003, Dörre, Holst 2009 et al) have written about the nature of trade union decline and possible options for union renewal. Craft unions were undermined by the decline of their 'craft' but there appears to be an assumption in the literature around union renewal that the organisational model exemplified by unions such as the NGA has had its day. This research studies the nature of this model, its strengths and weaknesses.

The UK transformation of employment relations was one of the most dramatic shifts of power in a wider development of neo-liberalism around the western world (McIlroy 2011). This research traces the fortunes of the NGA, now absorbed, along with many other sectoral unions into *Unite the Union*. This large, conglomerate union is now central to the future of British trade unionism but consistent membership decline to date has defied various organising initiatives.

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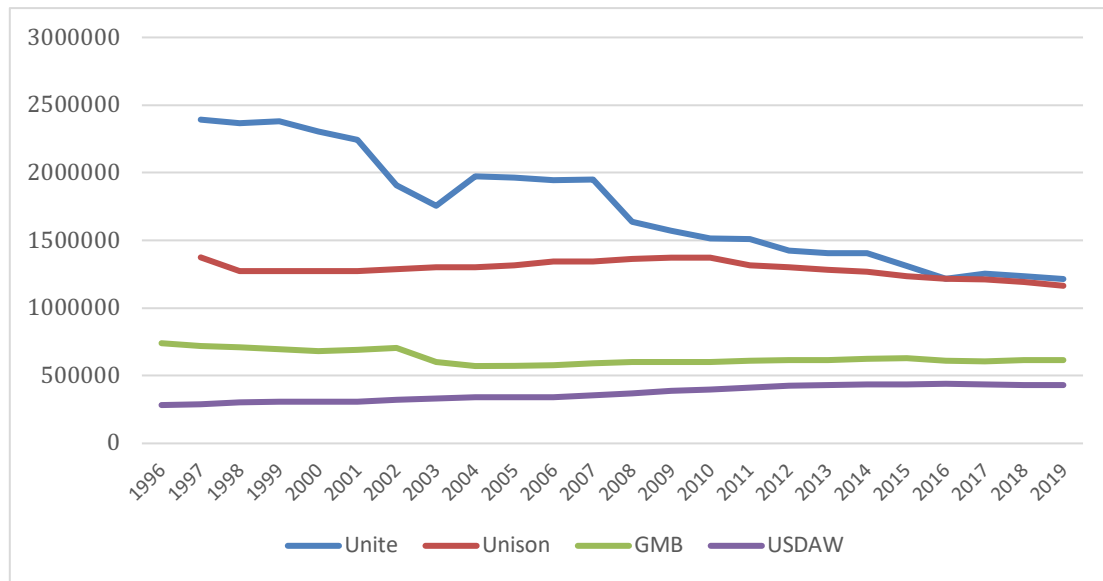
<sup>2</sup> Government and Certification Officer figures

Figure 1.1 Unite the Union membership – source TUC



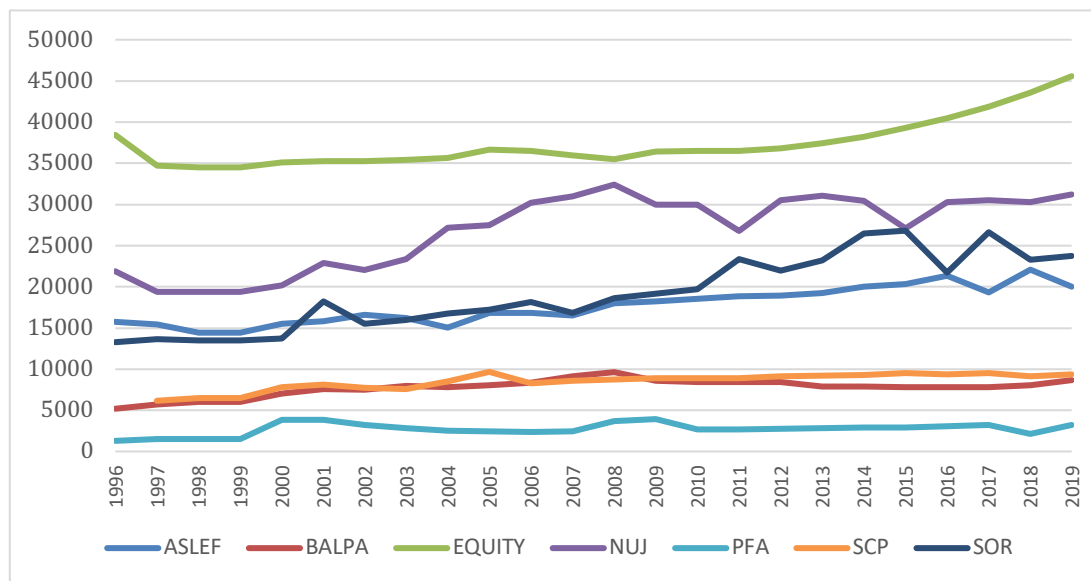
Unite is a combination of unions, some in diminishing sectors or occupations. Yet the issue is whether its decline can be attributed exclusively to industrial change. This study questions the nature of collective identity and whether large general unions offer the common bond developed by many of their component parts. The research examines the legacy of craft unionism and what lessons they may hold for unions today and for the future. Has the large general union approach lost what has been described as ‘social capital unionism’ (Jarley 2005, Hyman 2015), and ‘relational unionism’ (Saundry and McKeown 2013) in which sustained membership contacts, with union reps and with each other, generate strong social networks that mobilise workers in times of need and sustain unions in periods of relative calm, a key feature of craft unionism?

Figure 1.2 Largest unions – source TUC (excludes NEU)



Britain's trade union movement has developed into a few large unions with numerous smaller ones dedicated to particular sectors and professions. The latter have much in common with former craft unions in seeking to maintain common identity and bonds around the occupation (Bain 1970, Spoor 1967). Some occupational or craft unions that survive retain powerful industrial leverage and are willing to use it; in the rail industry for example (Darlington 2012, McIlroy 1990). Others have strong occupational or professional identities and loyalties, such as in health, education and the creative sector. These unions have managed to sustain and even grow membership in a manner the large general unions have not. For all the hostile environment, many niche unions have survived well building a professional identity and pride (Smale 2017).

Figure 1.3 Unions based upon a narrow occupational identity – source TUC



A sense of identity is clearly an important aspect of building an effective membership organisation and although recognised by scholars from the Webbs (1920) to Hyman (1975) it has not featured strongly in the debate over union renewal such as the focus on mobilisation theory (Kelly 1998) and social movements (Simms, Holgate and Heery 2013).

### The research project and my own experience

In 1981 I was elected as the youngest full-time officer of the NGA. I had been an apprentice compositor and ‘served my time’ to become a ‘journeyman’ in the printing trade and a member of the powerful craft union. Like those before me, I was ‘educated’ by the Father of the Chapel (FoC) and other members about the role, values, customs and importance of the union. When I joined the NGA, it was stressed that I was joining a privileged society. The union had been involved in my selection as an apprentice and the chapel had already intervened on my behalf to ensure I attended college to fulfil my apprenticeship qualifications (Lee 1979). The union supported me when the firm closed and made sure I got transferred to another company to finish my apprenticeship. This was a typical experience for craft print workers in the way the union intervened in the labour market and assisted workers in and between jobs.

By the time I was 'banged-out' (the noisy and masculine ritual that accompanies the completion of an apprenticeship) the proud traditions and customs of the union were being undermined by fast-changing technology. These developments coincided with the election of the Thatcher Government that had a central aim of curbing trade union power. The NGA's control over labour in the national newspaper industry made it a particular target in such a project.

In 1980 the NGA took the initiative and launched a national campaign to win substantial rises in minimum pay and a reduced working week. As an FoC in a commercial printer in Gloucester, I led actions to press the employer to improve the national agreement. The union successfully set employer against employer and achieved significant improvements for its members. The action came just ahead of the advancing storm. Government economic policies deliberately squeezed the monetary supply which led to a steep rise in unemployment (Matthews and Minford 1987). I became an elected full-time officer and most of my time during the first few years was spent handling redundancies and factory closures. At the same time technology in printing was advancing rapidly and new businesses were emerging unaccustomed or unwilling to accommodate trade union restrictions (Cockburn 1983). I was proud of the traditions of the union, its collective sense of solidarity, its discipline around a repertoire of industrial tactics that supported members even in small businesses as well as workplace power in larger ones. But these methods of operation were under threat from technological change and political action.

### **The Messenger experience**

The Messenger dispute was not only a major challenge to the NGA and its closed shop control of the labour supply but it was the first major test of the Thatcher Government's new employment laws (Dunn 1985). Shah was the first employer to pursue legal action using the new legislation that led to large fines and sequestration of the union's assets (Fosh and Littler 1985). The research reviews the conflict using newly available documentation, visual representation and interviews with the key participants. The conflict tested the Government's espoused policy of non-

intervention in industrial relations. The study considers why the NGA chose to escalate a dispute with an employer of only a few of its members and one who was able to circumvent its traditional industrial tactics.

The unprecedented legal action Shah took against the union threatened its very survival and without wider backing from the trade union movement the NGA backed down. The study argues, however, that the laws were not the critical factor in the union's defeat. The union's traditional industrial tactics were beaten by a self-reliant employer who was able to utilise new technology operated by non-union labour. The business was able to bypass secondary action by the union and, aided by a police force strengthened by the government for the purpose, produce newspapers without the NGA.

The study will argue that the factors that made the NGA a powerful collective force hampered its ability to take decisions that might have avoided the defeat. Those factors, however, can provide lessons for unions in building membership support. The study examines the characteristics that limit the capacity for strategic choice and determine membership growth or decline. It re-evaluates the craft union model for a modern age. Hyman (1975) for example, acknowledged that unions were not class organisations, uniting all workers, but were established on narrow trade interests. This sectionalism has been discussed by scholars as to whether it builds or weakens wider class solidarity (Barou 1947, Bain 1970, Hobsbawm 1978, Kelly 1988, Lane 1974) and is a feature running through trade union histories<sup>3</sup>.

To help analyse the issues drawn from the NGA case studies, the thesis uses a theoretical framework of trade union power resources. This will highlight the range of resources unions can deploy, especially a craft union such as the NGA. It will help demonstrate how the changing circumstances of the early 1980s in technology and

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<sup>3</sup> Examples used for this study include: the history of the Brushmakers Union (1847); Bakers' Union (1977); National Union of Boot and Shoe Operators 1874-1957, Fox (1958); London Society of Compositors, Howe and Waite (1948); hosiery unions, Gurnham (1976); agricultural workers, Groves (1948) and Wynn (1993); shop workers, Hoffman (1949); Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen, Mortimer (1960); Blacksmiths, Tuckett (1974); Typographical Society, Musson (1954); National Graphical Association, Gennard (1990); Graphical, Paper and Media Union, Gennard (1990); National Association of Local Government Officers, Spoor (1967); Association of Correctors of the Press, Shane (1954); Transport and General Workers Union, Coates and Topham (1991).



legislation led the union's leadership to seek new ways to lever influence with limited success.

### **Research Questions**

This research sets out to answer the following questions:

- What factors underpin positional and organisational power and how did the changing environment of the early 1980s impact upon them?
- What was the NGA's capacity for strategic choice and how far did legal, political and technological change constrain it?
- What new knowledge can be gleaned from the NGA case as to the role of the state and police in industrial relations?
- Where did decision-making lie within the NGA between national, branch and chapel levels and were there tensions between them?
- Does a constant tension exist between rank-and-file members and their union leaders?
- To what extent was the NGA's strong collective occupational identity and solidarity based on sectionalism and how far was this a constraint in its survival?
- What contribution do the features outlined above add to the wider debate over the future of trade unions?

### **Thesis structure**

**Chapter Two** of this study considers the relevant literature and theories defining the nature of trade union power and how it is underpinned by the collective identity of workers. It considers the theories around trade union organisation within the framework of collective identity. *Positional power* provides the raw leverage for unions and helps build and is strengthened by *organisational power*. The chapter studies how this model of organisation influences the nature of leadership, membership participation and democracy. Discussed is the relationship between positional, organisational, institutional and associational power. The chapter considers these tensions in regard to the strategic choices made by union leaders

and helps set the context for the case study research. The study reviews the role of ideology as a secondary factor in shaping union values and strategy. It asks whether and to what extent unions are independent actors or are 'path-dependent' as secondary bodies (Offe and Wiesenthal 1980), largely at the mercy of strategic choices made by the employer and state.

Craft unionism has been criticised for being sectional and divisive (Lane 1974), but strong common bonds build solidarity and help the union develop a range of additional benefits and 'social capital' (Jarley 2005). These offer advantages for union membership beyond the immediate workplace or relationship with the employer and the study reviews the literature around these issues.

In **Chapter Three** the research looks in more detail at the nature of craft unionism, especially in the printing industry. Some of Britain's oldest unions came from printing and the study looks back at their formation and the traditions they established. The skilled unions enjoyed a considerable degree of positional power and leverage to influence the employer and regulate the labour market. The closed shop was a key feature of skilled printing unionism but one that offered benefits to the insiders through the exclusion of others less skilled, especially women (Cockburn 1983). The study examines the importance of welfare support particularly for out-of-work members. The support mechanisms were a substantial benefit of membership and they protected working members from the undercutting effects of unemployment (Musson 1954).

Arising from such exclusion, **Chapter Three** considers the sectionalism of craft unionism. Any trade union, by definition, covers a section or a group of workers and therefore has dividing lines with those in other groups. Sectionalism can lift other groups if the benefits achieved for one section knock-on to others but it can also exclude them as employers 'buy off' the more powerful group. Yet, to what extent does this model sacrifice associational power through coalition-building and social movement alliances? Another key area reviewed in the chapter is the role of employers in post-war industrial relations especially in printing, an industrial process where the technology had changed little since the late Middle Ages. How did a union

model based upon strong collective identity influence that employment relationship?

**Chapter Four** surveys the political and legal context for the disputes in the 1980s. Industrial relations and trade union reform had been contested issues of public policy for several decades. The trade union movement had successfully resisted reform but the Conservative Government of 1979 came to power with a fresh determination to reduce trade union power in the light of lessons from previous failures.

The study examines the nature of a largely voluntarist approach to trade unions for much of the twentieth century. This 'hands-off' concept is the background to the introduction of legal reforms, but also the response by trade unions anxious to preserve their freedoms.

Having reviewed the debates over trade unionism and industrial relations, **Chapter Five** explains the methodology of the research. It specifies the reasons for the study into the contrasting printing disputes of 1980 and 1983. It justifies the use of archive material, photographs and oral testimony from those close to the events. The research gained access to previously confidential materials and closed archives. It contains interviews with the key participants and is able to provide details not available to earlier writers.

**Chapter Six** studies the 1980 national printing dispute instigated and conducted by the union's leadership, especially its Assistant General Secretary Tony Dubbins who is interviewed. It was a strategic campaign, directed from above and not through rank-and-file pressure, against employers timed to forestall the worsening economic climate, technological advances and hostile legal reforms. The chapter demonstrates how the campaign was launched and directed by the leadership relying on the organisational strength built up through the strong collective identity of the union.

The study contrasts this offensive campaign with the 1983 conflict between Messenger Newspapers and the National Graphical Association. Just three years after its successful 1980 campaign, the NGA faced a range of pressures coming from

technological, economic and legal change. **Chapter Seven** discovers how the strategic options available to the union were reducing rapidly and the leadership was forced to defend the union's status on a number of fronts. The dispute with Eddy Shah and his Messenger Newspaper Group involved just six striking NGA members but it escalated into a major confrontation culminating in a threat to hold a national strike covering the entire printing industry and even calls for a general strike.

**Chapter Seven** traces the dynamics of the dispute, when and why decisions were made – or not made. It considers how such a small dispute escalated in the way it did and questions the role of collective identity in providing the impetus for the action in defence of its members' interests. The research raises questions as to whether the dispute was a premeditated conspiracy by the employer in league with the government or whether the new laws set the context within which independent employers were enticed into challenging union power. It asks whether 'the Left', including those within the NGA, were looking for an opportunity to challenge the laws and repeat the triumph over Ted Heath's 1971 Industrial Relations Act. Or was the battle over Messenger Newspapers an industrial dispute that spiralled out-of-control? Participant testimonies reflect on the conduct of the dispute, the tactics used on both sides – mass pickets and police response - and the unprecedented use of sequestration.

**Chapter Eight** uses photographs and ephemera to highlight the events of the dispute and confirm the testimony provided by the interviews. **Chapter Nine** studies the shift from positional power, exposed as toothless in the face of an employer utilising new technology staffed by non-union labour, to associational power through appeal to the TUC.

**Chapter Ten** discusses the aftermath of the dispute. Controversy within union circles remains to this day around the apportioning of responsibility for the Messenger dispute defeat. The chapter looks at the consequences for the NGA, unions more generally, industrial relations in printing and for government's trade union reform programme. The step-by-step approach to industrial relations by successive Conservative governments continued apace after the period examined by this

research. The role that legal reforms have played in determining trade union fortunes is the subject of debate and is examined by this research.

**Chapter Eleven** identifies the conclusions of the study. It returns to the main research questions posed in this introduction. It draws out lessons from these disputes and the fall-out for trade unions. In the search for strategic options that unions can adopt to revitalise their fortunes there has been limited attention to strong occupational identity. The study concludes that this is a vital ingredient in the formation of strong trade union organisation and more research should focus upon this aspect and how the risks of damaging sectionalism can be reduced.

## **Union identity, power and strategic choice**

### **Introduction**

Trade union combination is the most obvious foundation upon which workers can seek to influence their working conditions (Hyman 1975). Their formation has been based largely upon occupational and sectoral interests and the purpose of this chapter is to set out a theoretical argument framework for the research. The study lays stress on the importance of collective identity and its relationship to union purpose, power, leadership and democracy. It explains why strong bonds of identity are required to build continuous associations and what power unions can deploy for what purpose. Union power is the leverage workers have in changing the position of their employer (Webbs 1920).

‘Positional’ power is the ability of workers to disrupt the production process or the delivery of services. This can be achieved through structural leverage in the workplace or through restricting the supply of critical skills through the marketplace (Schamlz and Dörre 2020). To act upon such power unions require organisational power such as the leadership capability, collective discipline etc. Unions help define the interests of their members and the status of the occupation in order to maximise the leverage over employers. This study looks at the way strong occupational identity bolsters positional power but also how it is vulnerable to technological change. Its exclusive nature may negate alliance-building with other unions and wider coalitions beyond the workplace. The concentration on internal solidarity around sectional skills risks sacrificing wider alliances and ‘associational power’ (Hyman 1975, 1987, 2007; Hodder and Edwards 2015; Boxall and Haynes 1997 Undy 2008; Müller-Jentsch 1988).

In this study, associational power is not the bond between individual members but that gained from alliances with external partners such as other trade unions, community and campaign groups. Sometimes described as ‘societal’ and ‘coalitional’ power, it is the strength gained from the cooperation and joint work with other organisations, within and outside the labour movement. ‘Institutional’ power is that

derived from the legislative and regulatory framework within which the union operates. In a voluntarist industrial relations environment, strong unions preferred their reliance on positional power to legal remedies (Minkin 1991: 7). As the research will explore, with this undermined, unions have little choice but to use other means of leverage to protect their members.

Hodder and Edwards (2015: 843) offer a model to describe the 'essence' of trade unions, which they define as the "complex interaction of identity, ideology and purpose". This chapter will set out the argument that of these, occupational identity has been the central common cause for most trade unions. In doing so, it sets the context for the research and the case studies that demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of such a model of organisation.

The chapter examines the arguments around collective identity, union leadership and democracy. High levels of membership participation can provide a power resource but potentially can hamper a leadership's ability to direct strategic decisions. Such issues were raised by Michels in his seminal work in 1915 reissued in 1962. Considered in this chapter is a union's capacity for strategic choice and what options are open to the leadership.

The nature and form of strategic choice for union leaders between conflict or cooperation with employers is considered as is the question of whether this arises through rank-and-file pressure or leadership prerogative (Phelps-Brown 1986, Darlington 2018). It does not follow that a union based upon strong occupational identity adopts any particular orientation towards employers. Such decision-making is influenced internally by leadership ideology (Hyman 2007), internal democracy (Michels 1962) and micro-political factors, such as personality characteristics (Blissett 2013).

### **Union purpose and effectiveness**

Unions offer a medium within which workers can form a common position and act collectively to influence or pressure employers in order to protect or improve the conditions of their working lives (Webbs 1920). For Hyman (1975) union purpose is

to exert, collectively, control over conditions of work and employment which workers are unlikely to possess as individuals. Unions seek to reset the balance of economic power between employer and worker, through collective power resources.

The Webbs' (1920: 1) definition of trade union purpose for workers was to maintain or improve the conditions of their working lives. This sets a context where unions have both a defensive and an offensive posture. It also concentrates attention on the structure of trade unionism. This contrasts with (Hyman 1973) who stressed how unions expressed and imposed the collective will of workers. Davis (1941) described unions as being defensive organisations, to preserve a standard already enjoyed. To establish an association for this purpose would require a shared sense of threat from the employer, state or other groups of workers. Flanders and Clegg (1954) wrote of union purpose as the 'sword of justice' for working people and (Kelly 1998) highlights collective identity mobilised around a common sense of justice.

Freeman and Medoff (1984) asked: *What do unions do?* They weighed the balance between the 'monopoly' power of unions in the market with the positive benefits of union power and voice in the workplace. They exposed the tension between unions as socially valuable yet in conflict with the interests of private business. Their study sought to objectively quantify the economic, social and political impacts, negative and positive, of trade unions and they concluded that an economy is not a simple 'zero-sum' game in which there are winners and corresponding losers. They addressed the argument that benefits secured through union power were paid for by wider society through higher prices or fewer jobs. A wage rise extracted by industrial action for one group of workers does not mean a redundancy or a price rise for others. Collective bargaining has been a tide that raises all boats even if it suppresses excessive profits. The gains from collective bargaining, in Freeman and Medoff's conclusion, outweighed the losses especially through a more equal society with unions acting as redistributive agents in economic and political power terms.

There are costs of collective organisation to workers by way of membership subscriptions and risks of employer victimisation (Child 1967) but these are offset



through mutual protection and additional benefits to membership. The likelihood of counter-actions such as anti-union measures and victimisation is reduced by offering added value to employers such as the benefits of collective voice (Freeman and Medoff 1984). These can include improved employee relations and reduced management effort on individual grievances.

Hyman (1973, 1975, 1987, 2001, 2007) stressed the class basis for trade unionism and its purpose in representing the working class in its adversarial relationship with capitalist employers. Group consciousness is not necessarily an expression of class consciousness yet might point the way to broader solidarities. The nature of class can be seen in different ways, in sociological, political or economic terms. It can be defined in terms of perceived status within society: 'blue-collar' or 'white-collar' workers or based upon salary levels. Many unions, whether formed around craft or on industrial lines, seek to serve the supervised and the supervisors (Lepie 2018).

Hyman (2001, 2005, 2007) stresses how the values and identities of unions are embedded through the rhetoric of 'adversarialism' – 'them and us'. Yet for many craft unions their founding objectives stressed the building of good relations with employers in the same trade. Musson (1954: 30) stressed the moderate and conciliatory attitude towards employers of the early typographical societies. Hyman (1975: 44) found it rare for craft societies to undertake serious initiatives to change conditions other than the occasional 'wage movement'. Phelps-Brown (1986) cites the Minority Report of the Royal Commission of 1869 in which the Master Printers of London declared there had been no rise in wages for compositors between 1810 and 1866. He found that sectors with the strongest, richest and most extended unions had wages and hours of the greatest permanence and the fewest disputes.

If mobilisation relies upon shared grievances (Kelly 1998) it suggests that such collective identity must be oppositional. Hyman's (1975) Marxist analysis argues that workers assert control only at the expense of the employer. Whilst the principal purpose of the union is to pursue the collective interests of workers this does not preclude shared objectives with employers. While there is a tension between the buyer and seller of labour, there can also be mutual self-interest (Musson 1954).

Scholars have studied the added value of collective organisation to the employer and state (Taylor 1994, Pohler and Luchak 2015). A number of writers including Freeman and Medoff (1984) and Hodder and Edwards (2015) believe that unions contribute to productive efficiency and press managers to improve systems. While unions might stress the benefits and seek to lessen the 'cost' of organisation employers will prefer to develop these themselves and not have to deal with a trade union if they have the choice (McIlroy 1990). Those unions able to organise workers with positional power present employers with little choice other than to recognise their place within the labour process. Bryson, Gomez and Willman describe the "two-faces of unionism" (2010: 43), reiterating Freeman and Medoff (1984); the "rent-seeking behaviour" when unions seek to raise pay and conditions that proves a cost to the employer and the provision of employee 'voice' which offers a number of benefits to the organisation.

Daniels and McIlroy (2009) list what they see as union purpose: political influence, trade union voice and the improvement of the terms, conditions and lives of members. This acknowledges a wider role for trade unions beyond the relationship with the employer such as influencing state policy. Those seeking revolutionary change may see unions as being embedded in the capitalist system. In contrast, employers may welcome the way unions can 'discipline' their members and neutralise or suppress more radical or revolutionary movements (Dahrendorf 1959).

Academics have sought to find ways to measure union effectiveness (Boxall and Haynes 1997, Charlwood 2004, Gall and Fiorito 2016) and how different models of collective organisation influence outcomes. The most obvious measure is membership numbers and density. Other indicators of 'success' are wage premium, membership participation, collective bargaining coverage, organising effectiveness, and political influence. Unions as institutions might be judged by organisational efficiencies and financial strength but this can produce perverse results. A number of unions have witnessed steep membership declines due to industrial restructuring yet remain financially strong and efficiently run. An example was the London Jewish Bakers' Union that remained financially well-endowed until the last twelve members voted to disband and share the resources between them (Wayne 1977). A

more recent example is that of Community, formed through the merging of two declining unions representing steel and textile workers. The resulting union was wealthy but industrial change continued to reduce its membership<sup>4</sup>.

Charlwood (2004) offered a framework to assess effectiveness using consolidatory, organising and recruitment effectiveness (CORE) outcomes. His quantitative research measured a range of unions. This placed significant weight on the union's commitment to recruitment such as the recruitment budget, training in organising, recruitment planning etc. In such a model a union like the NGA would score very badly despite its near 100% membership density across a closed-shop industry.

Boxall and Hayes (1997: 571) made the obvious point that unions are effective when they meet the expectations of their members which raises the question of how such expectations are formed and judged. McAleve (2014: 12) stressed that the core of organising is to raise expectations because workers do not expect much from work. Having raised the bar, the union must clear it in order to succeed. This risks leaving members dissatisfied even when their conditions are objectively better than non-union workplaces (Freeman and Medoff 1984, Bryson and Davies 2019). Members need to be convinced that the sacrifice they make, in the form of contributions, risk of victimisation, participation and industrial action, will secure positive results (Smith P. 2001).

Unions developed around strong collective identity tend to have long-serving members and low membership turnover (eg professional health unions, BALPA representing airline pilots, ASLEF representing train drivers, etc). Even the members' assessment of the union's success may vary from year to year as the fortunes in wage bargaining ebb and flow or on how it handles their personal circumstances. A union that successfully mobilises delivery riders or retail workers might find their tenure in the employment, and with it, union membership, short-lived.

Measuring union effectiveness may be elusive in a dynamic labour market especially given contested views around militancy or cooperation. Membership density will

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<sup>4</sup> TUC Statistics 2020

remain a default metric and as such unions built around a strong sense of occupational identity do well.<sup>5</sup> As the chapter has described, measuring a union's success in delivering its objectives depends upon its purpose and the power it can deploy to achieve it.

### **Collective identity and union formation**

Britain's trade union tradition was founded upon the membership of groups of workers with the same or similar occupations (Webb 1896, 1920, Cole 1924, Aspinall 1949). They had common interests based upon their trade, employment or occupational sector. It was the shared occupational identity that provided workers with the framework to establish *continuous* associations (Webbs 1920). This is more than a temporary combination to seek to resolve an issue but a long-lasting body of workers who come together to protect or advance their interests in relation to their employer and in relation to new entrants and other groups of workers. Braverman (1975: 51) refers to the idea of a human fraternity based around an occupation as a universal attribute of society and the divisions of labour that come with it. Unions give it form and organisational structure. Craft unions tended to base their occupational identity on producers of goods, especially through hand-based skills and knowledge developed through an apprenticeship. 'Professional' unions tended to represent those providing a service with recruitment from colleges and universities. They have different traditions yet much in common through the stress on collective identity.

Hyman (2001) gave three identities to unions: Anglo-Saxon business unionism, or pragmatic unions adopting varying policies of confrontation or cooperation to suit the circumstances; *schools of war* unions that act as agencies of mobilisation against employers and the capitalist state; and corporatist unionism that sought to integrate workers into the system. Craft unionism originated from within the Anglo-Saxon or British model which led to a focus upon industrial strength and raised questions over

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<sup>5</sup> TUC statistics

where decision-making lay within unions. Workplace power was in the hands of workplace groups and not entirely under the control of union leaders.

Successful mobilisation rests on the ability of the union to offer and deploy a range of power resources. This raises questions about the structures within which the union operates and its capacity or agency to influence or regulate these (Lévesque and Murray 2010, Edwards 2003, Hyman 1975, 2001, 2005, 2007), and whether collective organisation follows strategic choice by the union, opportunity or spontaneous reaction to events (Gall 2018). Traditional craft societies formed vertical associations to represent the narrow interests of the occupational group but as technology advanced many rationalised their structures into more conglomerate unions.

Combination is a means to advance or protect workers' interests and once established, a union can develop to serve wider purposes. Hyman (1994) described how unions help shape how workers see themselves and define their interests. This is particularly relevant in craft and professional unions where collective identity helps build pride and status in the job. Employers are the primary organisers of labour with unions as 'secondary organisers' for Offe and Wiesenthal 1980: 176) who describe unions as "associations of members who, before they can become members of unions, are already members of other organisations, namely employees of capitalist enterprises." Müller-Jentsch (1988: 178) describes unions as 'intermediary' organisations, mediating between capital and labour. They may mobilise workers within the contours established by employers but the process of association has a *determination* on the relationship and the outcomes for workers (Smith P. 2001, 2012, 2014). An issue is whether the mode of collective association determines the 'quality' and nature of the power resources accrued. An independent association of workers offering sustainable membership benefits beyond the immediate workplace provides organisational capabilities not dependent upon any one employer. In turn such a model builds membership density for when industrial power may be sought.

The early craft unions in Britain were joined by the development of industrial, professional and general unions. The highest rates of unionisation in a hospital, for example, are amongst the professional groups and specialist workers<sup>6</sup>. This may protect their interests in relation to other groups of workers as much as the overall employer. Scholars such as Braverman (1975) developing theories around labour process have highlighted how employees use skills and knowledge to undermine managerial power (Bradley 1999). This is strengthened when collectivised in an association built around the common bond of the craft, skill or profession.

But does a collection of well-organised, if specialist unions, provide more power in relation to the employer, than one 'industrial' union representing all staff but with a lower density of membership? The answer depends upon the issue at the time and both models have their strengths and weaknesses. Literature focussed on US industrial relations is written through a context of contract bargaining that demands the union pursues a whole workplace approach to win a regulated ballot (McAlevy 2014, 2016). The case studies will examine disputes that reflect these contradictory forces.

### **Union Power**

The case studies examine the changing fortunes of one union as the nature of its power was challenged by technological, legal and political change. If workers combine together to enhance their power, especially in relation to employers, their primary role is therefore to *empower* workers through collective action and by increasing their resources, capabilities and capacity to act (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Hodder and Edwards (2015: 848) define power as the ability to achieve objectives and "the establishment of a framework in which unions' agenda can be pursued and the capacity to influence perceptions so as to create a climate favourable to unions and their roles".

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<sup>6</sup> Statistics from TUC, Government Trade Union Membership and Workplace Employee Relations Surveys

The nature of union power is described by Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2010) and (2018) as structural, associational, organisational and institutional. The structural power - or positional power of the union as it will be termed in this thesis - is the relationship workers have within the production process and their capacity to regulate the supply of labour (Lévesque and Murray 2010). This power is based ultimately on the union's ability to 'stop-the-job' through the denial of work or to restrict skilled labour supply. Restricting skills essential to production, or difficult for the employer to replace, gives craft unions the pivotal leverage over employers to protect or advance their members' interests. Through 'placement control' competition for jobs is limited, forcing employers to comply with wage rates (Knotted 2008: 168). Whether these gains are at the expense of other groups of workers depends upon the nature of cross-union relations as well as wider industrial relations systems. Unions have often been presented as vested interest organisations within an 'insider-outsider' theory where they protect members at the expense of other workers and the unemployed (Lindbeck and Snower 1988). The 'outsiders' could be those within the workplace but outside of the scope of the craft union, especially those denied entry into the craft.

A key factor in the nature of structural (or positional) power is the technology and industrial process that positions the workers in a degree of control through which they can bargain. Structural power can be applied and amplified through 'organisational power' built-up by the union over decades (Dörre, Holst and Nachtwey 2009). This is the range of factors including the common bond amongst members, the ability to call for solidarity actions, the gains from internal democracy and activism, resources and leadership that give shape to the structure and agency of the union. Craft unions with the leverage of these resources tended not to prioritise institutional power that might be derived from legislation and the courts or associational power through alliances with other unions.

### **Positional power, sectionalism and solidarity**

The 'positional power' workers possess derives largely from the technology used and skills required within the production process. To command it, a union must recruit a sufficient membership and organise them into an effective and disciplined combination. There is a symbiotic relationship: the stronger the collective identity the more effective the organisation is likely to be and the stronger the organisation the more benefits the members can derive from it.

The pioneering vision of one union for all workers failed to provide a sustainable model of organisation and associations of workers have all developed around some form of segmentation. The idea of one great union briefly flourished in 1834, championed by Robert Owen (TUC 1934) but the project soon foundered and there was a view (Howell 1890) that sustainable unions were only possible when based upon a craft. Yet the number of unions has fallen dramatically and the last thirty years has seen the development of large conglomerate unions, (Cole 1924) especially Unite that embraces a wide range of occupational sectors.<sup>7</sup>

Unions open to all workers in a company or industry regardless of craft or skills emerged in the late nineteenth century under the banner of 'new unionism' but craft unions continued to play a prominent part in most sectors of the British economy (Cole 1924, TUC 1968). Power through weight of numbers was the leverage deployed against employers rather than the positional power of groups of skilled workers. Visser (2012: 131) describes unions formed around skilled workers and their focus on mutual insurance, control over training and access to the job. He concluded that "the replacement of such workers by semi- or unskilled labour was the major existential threat to these unions". In contrast unions based around an industry seek to unite different groups of workers within the same company, sector or location. Kelly (1988) questioned the way the debate was sometimes framed. He referred to "sectional consciousness" as opposed to collective identity and made the point that any action short of a complete general strike could be considered 'sectional' (1988: 137). If sectionalism was a product of a large number of small

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<sup>7</sup> In 1900 there were 1,302 trade unions (Cole 1924)



unions, he argued that fewer unions would result in less sectionalist disputes and greater political consciousness – but he concluded there was no evidence to confirm this (p: 132). His focus on mobilising workers with a shared grievance seeks to supplant the collective identity of the occupation. This means of organising has become a central theme within many unions but it lacks longevity in the face of hostile employers.

Smale (2017) describes the characteristics of organisational identity and the attributes required to distinguish one group from another. In this he studies the different conceptions of identity including those that are actual and concretely manifested in contrast to those that may be perceived. Unions will help shape their ideal collective identity to reinforce the common bond and determine membership territories. While this process can help bind the membership and boost its status, it can prove divisive within the wider workforce.

Smale (2017) studied the concept of ‘niche’ identity and trade unions. He looked at how such unions define themselves and used differentiation and sectional distinction around which to build group associations. He found organisational identity can be managed to some extent. Unions do not just represent workers’ interests but help shape them. It is in their collective interests to maximise the status and worth of the skills and knowledge they possess.

Unity within a confined group, however, may prove divisive within the wider workforce or sector (Lane 1974). Pay bargaining framed in terms of differentials can be corrosive of solidarity yet the wider community or workers can make gains through the leadership of those groups with the most positional power (Hyman 1975). McBride (2010) concluded that collective identity can divide as well as unite but can co-exist within a wider association of allied groups. In her history of blacksmiths, Tuckett gives examples of the demarcated structure of ship building trade unionism. On occasions the gains made by one section were used to the advantage of another and there was “harmony yet exclusions” (1974: 75).

Despite the exclusive nature of many of their demands, craft unions often led the way for wider employment gains for other workers both within national collective

agreements and at workplace level. Pay scales often had compositors and printers as a top band and increases for them were reflected in lower grades. The metal packaging industry was an example where the printers formed a tiny part of the overall workforce but were the top grades in the national and company agreements (such as Metal Box) and set the pace in any pay negotiations (Gennard 1990: 565).

Additional holidays or reduced hours won by the leading union tended to be enjoyed by all. But this 'knock-on' effect was not universal. In newspapers the largely female sections such as advertising and administrative departments, received far inferior terms and conditions to the printing sectors and only when technology allowed such workers to undertake the craft tasks did the unions pay much attention to their standards (Dawson 2010). Zeitlin (1979) in his comparison of positional power between engineers and printers, concluded that craft unions in print were in a more powerful position because of the nature of their industry, its product markets and because it employed few labourers who could be set against the skilled workers by the employers. This feature was especially true in commercial printing in which most of the entire production process was undertaken by craft workers. The divergent fates of craft unions in print and engineering flowed, according to Zeitlin, from their relative abilities to control the impact on the division of labour in using new technology.

There were times, however, when divisions prevented the unions from maintaining a common front against an employer offensive. Tony Lane argued in *The Union makes us Strong* (1974: 278) that: "Sectionalism literally wrecked the several ambitious attempts at all-embracing union in the 1830s and . . . defeated the Triple Alliance in the 1920s". But the strength of the alliance was more rhetoric than real (Marsh 1992). Tuckett argued that skilled workers could not afford "craft exclusiveness" and the union needed "fresh thinking to get rid of a sectoral outlook" (1974: 249). This led to the formation of the Confederation of Shipbuilding Unions and ultimately amalgamations. The retiring General Secretary, Willie Michael acknowledged: "it is often too painfully obvious that the sectional divisions do on occasions hamper its ability to act with power and speed" (cited in Tuckett, 1974: 365). At the same time, however, the Confederation had to assure members that their interests would be

defended in the merged union. There were many times when the various craft groups united successfully and provided strong mutual support. Darlington found a similar picture in his study of three Merseyside companies. He concluded: "sectional interests and collective attitudes are not necessarily incompatible" (1994: 23). Clegg, Fox and Thompson (1964: 128) described inter-union conflict especially in ship-building and found that in comparison the conflicts of the printing unions were mild.

Sectional bargaining can be viewed as divisive if the notion of a fixed 'wages fund' is accepted. This implies that one group of workers can only gain at the expense of others. This places groups of workers as rivals and even antagonists. Sectoral struggles over pay can be corrosive to wider solidarity particularly if framed in terms of differentials but where a common claim can be pursued the effect may be unifying (Hyman 1975: 179). Increases secured by groups with bargaining power can help secure overall rises, especially if applied across a whole sector, even if this is not the tacit objective of the original campaign. Darlington (1994: 168) wrote about individual chapels within Bemrose printers representing different groups of workers and the relationship between them and the employer. Some felt able to threaten production without asking other chapels within the plant. Such was the demarcated skill structure and discipline that no workers would cover for strikers. Indeed, it hurt the employer more to maintain wages for those not involved. However, he felt this demobilised the "self-activity of workers" and reinforced inter-departmental sectionalism (Darlington 1994: 168)". He argued that such a strategy threw away opportunities to forge shop-floor links and build a united approach to management across the plant. Sectional bargaining reached its extreme in national newspapers and defied many attempts at reform. In the 1970s Mirror Group Newspapers sought to establish a single composing room chapel in place of the twenty-four that they had to bargain with (Martin R. 1981: 206).

Lane (1974) believed sectionalism could only be held in check if the union programme is sufficiently broad and radical and set a context in which other issues become divisive, petty and trivial. But Hyman feared sectionalism and resistance to such a radical programme is incorporated into the organisational structure of unions. His conclusion was that sectionalism and limited class consciousness could be

overcome if workers' control becomes explicitly central to the union demands rather than the process of regulation (Hyman 1975: 183).

McAlevey (2016: 205) believes that "Craft unions wreak havoc on class solidarity". She stressed that workers in the US health and education sectors: "need to maximise their power inside and outside the workplace simultaneously, through one unified, united strategy." In the context of a US-style contract negotiations, the workforce needs a united approach, especially at that moment in time, and having separate unions is unlikely to help even if they are fighting for the same cause.

Writing in 1978, Hobsbawm warned that *the forward march of labour* had halted. He highlighted the growth of sectionalism with groups of workers pursuing their own economic interests irrespective of the rest and that the strength of a group lies in the inconvenience they cause to the public rather than the loss to the employer. His Marxist analysis coincided with that from the Conservative right which exploited the divisions within the working class to undermine the strongest unions. In many sectors of the economy technological and structural change diminished occupational identity as a mobilising source and power resource (Polletta and Jasper 2001, McBride and Martinez 2011). Howell (2015), Martin and Ross (1999) concluded that industrial and technological change alters work boundaries and trades and with it the basis for collective organisation by unions.

Of the 48 unions affiliated to the TUC in 2021, 32 are clearly organised around a particular occupational identity, five organise members in a single business.<sup>8</sup> Yet the literature on trade union renewal barely mentions this mobilisation and organisational approach. Many unions, representing members threatened by technological change, have sought refuge through amalgamations with leaders often promising to retain the collective identity in the merged association (Gennard 1990, Waddington 2005). Hyman (1975) believed amalgamation movements and industrial unionism may be seen as progress towards broader unity but was this at the expense of a dilution of collective identity and membership density (Müller-Jentsch 1988, Dörre 2011)? There has been little debate over mechanisms to maintain strong

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<sup>8</sup> TUC Directory 2021

occupational identity within larger, multi-sector unions and whether this is desirable or not. This result has been an inconsistent approach to sectional representation with limited resources and branding behind it.<sup>9</sup>

Unions grounded in an occupational identity may have greater capacity to manoeuvre regardless of management decisions partly due to the transferable nature of the work or craft. Membership not only sustains beyond the period of work for a particular employer but such unions tend to offer support when changing employment and training. The cradle-to-grave membership reinforces and nurtures the common bonds and develops a character or 'quality' of members that accept the requirement to practice solidarity and discipline (Smith P. 2001). But strong occupational identity, built on embedded customs and norms, may bring resistance to change and barriers to strategic choice in the face of technological or industrial change. The case studies examine this dilemma in greater depth.

Union strength may rely on its positional power but continuity and organisational resilience was developed and harnessed by measures that strengthened the common bond between members and what (Jarley 2005) describes as the 'social capital'. This idea based on the formal and informal networks and benefits of collective association will be explored further in this chapter.

### **Leadership and democracy as power resources**

Organisational power includes leadership competency and capacity but trade unions are collective bodies of workers with complex internal systems of democracy and accountability. The nature of a union's leadership and democracy is shaped, to a significant extent, by the model upon which the membership is mobilised and organised. Unions based on occupational identity will tend to have a more stable membership with higher levels of participation, typified by the example of the NGA. They expect their leaders to understand and share their sectional interests. The skills

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<sup>9</sup> <https://unitetheunion.org/what-we-do/unite-in-your-sector/>  
<https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/>  
<https://www.gmb.org.uk/network>

needed to be an effective administrator are not the same as those of an organiser and agitator. Leaders are bureaucratic functionaries with day-to-day management responsibilities such as deployment of staff resources, financial prudence, and administration of the union but the qualities needed to rise through the democratic structures of the union may not be those needed to run the operation. Effective administrators may not make good leaders (Allen 1954: 197). Leadership is therefore judged not just by its ability to successfully manage the operation but through contested views of ideology.

Unions are democratic in that they exist to pursue the collective interests of their members (Hodder and Edwards 2015) but there is variation in the form and nature of internal democracy and how it holds executive officers to account. Michels (1915: 338) described how workers need to form a “structural aggregate” to achieve their purpose but organisation brings other dangers in its train. "From a means, organisation becomes an end", he argued and leaders retain their hold on power through a number of forces such as their ability to gain advantages within the role such as exposure to members, skills in the art of politics and time to devote to their cause in contrast to what Michels called the “incompetence of the masses (p.111)”. He took a determinist, rather cynical, approach to leadership and democracy inside unions. Leaders, he believed, keep in touch with the rank-and-file so they know how to turn the crowd, that they gain the “gratitude of the masses” (p.90) and draw power from their “indispensability”. Michels’ analysis seems based upon large unions and socialist parties claiming that the bonds connecting the bulk of members to their organisations are extremely slender (p.106). This does not do justice to smaller societies although they too had a record of long-term general secretaries.

Leaders need to be sure their decisions carry the support of the membership and that the systems of democracy provide a foundation upon which to mobilise. Kerr (1957) said that a union expects to be “an army, a business and a town meeting (p.9)”, but he believed, never achieves the later. He questioned the democratic nature of unions believing that a fighting organisation requires strong leaders, commanding discipline and loyalty, features that can contradict democracy. "Unions function best if they are removed from the pressures of democratic life (Kerr 1957:

11)”. Allen, (1954: 15) argued it was the role of unions to “protect and improve the general standards of members, not to provide workers with an exercise in self-government”. The Teamsters in America was notoriously corrupt, led in a dictatorial fashion by Jimmy Hoffa, yet under his charge it became the fastest growing union in the US.

Some unions claim a strong lay member control through elected structures but strategic decision-making remains firmly in the hands of the general secretary and the professional bureaucracy of the union. Michels cites examples of unions that have undergone profound changes in political orientation, not because of the democratic wishes of the membership but due to a change in leadership, for example after the death of secretaries. The case studies introduced more fully later in this thesis are from a time of leadership change within the union when the moderate general secretary was in the process of being replaced by a rising official on a more left-wing platform. Michels is right that leaders seek to appoint their successors (p.111) but the history of unions prove they do not always succeed. Not much has changed since Allen’s 1954 survey into the election or appointment of general secretaries. Most of those elected were previously assistant general secretaries and the contest is often between members of a small elite within the union. The National Society of Operative Printers and Assistants (NATSOPA) had seventeen occasions between 1918 and 1974 in which the General Secretaries were re-elected unopposed (Martin R. 1981). Examples of leaders breaking through the institutionalised systems within unions are rare.

Michels and Kerr both describe unions as one-party states, giving little weight to the unofficial factions that operate and leadership rivals who jostle for power. Lipset’s study into the International Typographical Union in the US (1968) describes the development of its unique two-party system which he described as the exception to Michel’s theory. Powerful internal lobby groups may restrict a leader’s room to manoeuvre and the case studies shall examine this tension. Democratic control over strategic choice can only exist if alternatives are available to be considered by those elected to oversee the union. Without alternative options, decision-making becomes affirmation of executive decisions – the illusion of being masters of their masters

(Michels 1962). Leaders are unlikely to offer choices to their executives. Allen (1954: 202) cites George Isaacs, the General Secretary of the printing union, (NATSOPA) who rejected the notion that it was his function “to simply show members which of two or three roads they may choose”. Alternatives, therefore, rely on strong individuals or lobby groups and factions based upon sectoral or political lines. Union rules or leaders may constrain or even forbid such groupings to limit factional competition for policy formulation (Edelstein and Warner 1977). Such factions primarily exist to promote, or oppose, particular candidates at elections. Edelstein and Warner (1977) questioned whether the membership actively chose a policy or merely assent to it. Their critical test was the degree of legitimate and free opposition. They studied the role of organised factions in producing effective opposition and the space allowed within unions for debates around alternative options.

While some leaders may wish to limit the authority of internal democracy, activist engagement can prove a power resource. Lévesque and Murray (2010) describe two dimensions within unions: collective identities and what they call “deliberative vitality”. The shared experience, real or imagined, is strengthened by the extent of membership participation within structures designed to capture the power of their engagement. Members need to believe that they are the union, with a sense of ownership and democratic control. There are challenges posed by competing identities and leaders and managers may favour – or be perceived to favour – some collective interests at the expense of others.

British craft unions can claim a legacy of high membership participation and contested elections. For example Allen in 1954 found voting turnout averaged 70% amongst London Society of Compositors. A substantial proportion of members played some role in the operation of the union at workplace, branch or national level (Brushmakers 1847, Cannon 2011). My own former NGA Branch was typical; the Three Shires Graphical Society had an active Branch Committee of around fifteen members elected each year chaired by a President elected by secret ballot of the whole membership, quarterly members’ meetings were well-attended and these



were supplemented by meetings of chapel reps in each town<sup>10</sup>. There are records of lively debates over internal structures and finances (examples in Musson 1954: 354, 465). The case studies will explore the extent to which internal democracy determines or limits strategic choice.

If democracy is a power resource then the size and focus of the union must matter. Michels (1962) believed large-scale organisations give officers a near monopoly of power but Allen (1954) felt they have the advantage of being able to employ specialists to manage administration. He acknowledged that small unions enabled all members to “deliberate in assembly (p.18)”. Union leaders of narrow occupational unions require a thorough understanding of the sector covered. Many will have risen through the union’s internal structures and have worked in the trade. Union rules may require candidates for office at various levels to have a certain amount of membership or years of service as an officer (Allen 1954). The process to become an official reinforces the traditional beliefs and customs of the union but this stifles innovation and ‘fresh blood’. Younger officials can more easily break with the past and switch ideas (Allen 1954: 196).

Davis (1941) stressed the importance of leadership in the outcome of a strike, growth or decline of a union and even the success or failure of the whole union movement. A strike for union leaders is what war is for professional soldiers believes Michels (1962: 283). Many a leader has been propelled to the top as a result of their actions during a strike but they can become accommodating to the existing order, and ultimately, weary of the struggle – “hot heads become cool (Michels 1962: 284)”. Kelly referred to “hot and cold” leadership to mark decisions made through the heat of emotions.<sup>11</sup>

Leaders elected on a militant platform have sometimes been propelled into disputes which, especially in hindsight, were unwinnable. A notorious example is that of the air traffic controllers who, in 1981 elected a militant president committed to securing significant advances for members. After isolating itself from other unions,

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<sup>10</sup> Three Shires Graphical Society records are held in Gloucestershire Country Archives

<sup>11</sup> Online seminar by the Elle Baker School of Organising 13.1.21

the controllers pursued strike action that led to the union's destruction, imprisonment of its leaders and the loss of careers for its members (McCartin 2011). How collective action can become carried along under its own momentum is a feature that the case studies will examine further.

Many, including the Webbs, writing in 1894, believed that full-time, professional union officials adopt a more conservative position than that of the membership (Child 1967). There is an assumption that the nature of the job places them in close proximity with employers and therefore liable to sympathise with their point of view (Dorey 2009, Michels 1962). They learn how the 'other half' lives and that they are decent people (Allen 1954). The professional nature of the job removes union leaders from the shop-floor and as such they risk 'losing touch' with the membership. The salary provided and working conditions may offer a standard of living, new social networks and a lifestyle that further removes leaders from the day-to-day experiences of members (Allen 1954).

Some writers such as Gall (2009) argue that many union leaders are effectively 'bought' by the capitalist class to subdue class conflict (see also Lane 1974). The pressure on leaders applied by a radicalised rank-and-file is highlighted by writers such as Darlington (1994) and Hyman (1972, 2007). Hyman (1975) asserts there is an interdependence between shop-floor reps and full-time officers. Officers depend upon reps for recruitment, membership servicing, dealing with routine problems, information and organising votes in elections. He acknowledged a permanent tension between the institutional distinctiveness of the union and its democratic rationale (1975: 150).

This tension between rank-and-file and its leadership is a feature of the literature on trade unions and reflects political divisions between commentators. In his analysis, Darlington (2012) believes that shop-floor agitation and mobilisation against the accommodative stance of bureaucratic union leaders is required to advance worker interests. Other writers (Blissett 2013, Kelly 1998, Streeck and Visler 1998) argue union officers and members have a mutual inter-dependence. The nature of the job exposes union officers to workplace grievances and the politics of industrial relations

management. Good officers nurture and support strong rank-and-file organisation. They must navigate union as well as management structures and systems, tackle internal conflicts and maintain organisational strength. Considerable effort and resources may have to be deployed to win rank-and-file support for a strategic campaign decided from the top (Michels 1962: 90). From my own personal experience, as lay activist and paid official, most time is devoted to seeking to agitate amongst and mobilise the membership to support a particular action. That doesn't preclude situations where the professional officer and outsider perceives the truth of management's position in a way the workforce may not due to poor historical relations or a breakdown in trust. This is different from the argument that officials tend to betray their members' class interests and can only be held to account through rank-and-file pressure.

Far from selling-out their membership, the political right caricatures trade union leaders as militant firebrands, unrepresentative of the more moderate members (Tomison 1972, Milligan 1976). Since the formation of the earliest unions their opponents have made assertions of an agitator basis for union mobilisation (TUC 1934, Tomison 1972). It assumes that a few key radical individuals inspire or agitate groups of workers from their otherwise stable and disorganised state. This ingredient in the mobilisation process is often characterized as an 'external' force from the body of workers and one with wider interests based upon radical politics or the union as an institution. Militant agitators, motivated by left-wing politics, stirring an otherwise satisfied workforce is a common narrative used by employers and the political right to justify counter measures against union leaders (Tomison 1972, Selsdon Group 1998, Darlington 2012). Hyman (1975) thought it wrong to see union reps as trouble-makers but that trouble often comes to them. Much of the contemporary literature studies the role and nature of 'organisers' in leading the collective association of workers (Simms 2019, McAlevey 2014, Heery and Simms 2010, Kelly 1998). Much of the literature discusses the methodology of organising, the tactics and training rather than the ideology of the organisers. Union leaders can help determine the direction of the union based upon their own ideology and can formulate interest amongst members to mobilise their support for a particular

priority (Heery 1998, Kelly 1998). The mobilisation theory lays stress on the need for organisation and external agitation around a grievance (Kelly 1998). This demands strategic decisions by union leaders to allocate resources and set priorities for such work but (Atzeni 2009) argues this plays down spontaneous collective action. Kelly rebuts this with his belief that all collective action requires a degree of organisation and leadership.

Accountable to the democratic processes, leaders must maintain support amongst existing members, especially activists, rather than potential recruits. Such members may not share the priority objective of membership recruitment as their measure of success. Leaders are forced to nurture and placate internal power bases even when this becomes counter to the strategic priorities of the union. This research explores what this means for a craft union at the point the workforce faced replacement by non-union recruits due to technological change. It highlights the contested views around leadership and its relationship to democracy and rank-and-file pressure.

Blissett (2013) highlighted micro-political factors in union decision-making and argued this aspect had often been overlooked by scholars. He cited personal loyalties, friendships and enmities within union leaderships in influencing strategic choices. This feature will be further explored within the case studies.

This section has explore the nature of leadership within the framework of systems of internal democracy and the arguments over the tensions between union leaders and rank-and-file members. These features are at the centre of the NGA case studies for this research.

### **Leadership ideology and union values**

Ideology represents a view of the world or a frame of reference (Hyman 1972). It shapes the relationship between unions, employers and the state and may derive from external sources such as political parties or faith. As such the ideology of a union can change with different leaders (Hodder and Edwards 2015: 846) and may derive from external sources such as political or faith groups. As such they concluded

it plays a secondary role to that of collective identity that offers relatively stable characteristics.

Leadership ideology matters when making strategic choices but presents a paradox for those who believe in 'rank-and-fileism'. Darlington (2012) highlights the role of agency and leadership in the mobilisation of collective discontent, presenting the left-wing leadership of the RMT and its workplace focus as an example. He challenges the 'agitator theory' of strikes believing that holding left-wing militants responsible for industrial action ignores the importance of rank-and-file organisation (and see also Smith, D. 2020). It is the interplay with union agency that determines strike propensity according to Darlington and he highlights the importance of the role of leadership in the mobilisation of collective discontent. He argues that union leadership is as important as any structural or institutional complexity in shaping the nature of collective action (Darlington 2012: 520). But leadership – its strength or weakness – alone cannot explain levels of industrial action or other indicators of trade union success. This study will examine case studies where action was determined from the leadership and from activist pressure.

Lévesque and Murray (2010) stress the importance of 'framing' as part of any strategy to form and shape actions. This includes narratives to mobilise support and justify new practices. But they warn that change can be problematic given the strength of past behaviours especially choices that have solved problems previously and the recollection of previous victories. The NGA had developed a repertoire of industrial practices and this research examines how adherence to them was central to the disputes featured in the case studies. Successful framing assumes an ability to change the script and "replenish the stock of narrative resources" (Lévesque and Murray 2010). These are the range of values, shared understandings, stories and ideologies that inform the way the union thinks and acts.

Union strength and militancy does not necessarily correlate to a place on a left-right political spectrum. Powerful craft unions have been seen as more 'right-wing' than the general industrial unions (Milligan 1976). Yet ideological shifts inside unions reflect when and how unions use the positional power they possess. It will also

influence how the union positions itself within the wider trade union movement and society at large.

### **Leadership and Strategic choice**

The common bonds, required by unions around which to mobilise, are dependent upon the nature of the labour market to provide employment. They are bound, as Hyman (1975: 102) describes, by the contours imposed on them by the capitalist system.

Yet union leaders have a range of options open to them but the model of mobilisation and organisation of the union influences the capacity for such determinations. Hyman (2007) uses a military reference arguing that strategy denotes the planning of a whole campaign rather than tactics deployed in a single battle. Strategy involves actions towards the achievement of set objectives to take advantage of new circumstances or to avoid negative impact.

A central theme in the union renewal literature is the strategic choice between cooperation or conflict with employers. Having positional and organisational power does not, in itself, lead to militant action, especially if determined from the top of the union. Lack of action may be due to recognition on both sides of the balance of power or it may be a leadership comfortable in its close relationship with employers (Hyman 1972). Few leaders would acknowledge this, however. The 'moderate' general secretary of the NGA in the 1970s recognised the power of the union at chapel level in Fleet Street: "We are obviously in a strong bargaining position. What does one do about it? One bargains strongly (Ferris 1972: 19)".

Contemporary literature on union strategic choice has often concentrated upon the large conglomerate unions that have faced the steepest decline in the last thirty years (Undy 2018, Murray 2017, Ibsen and Tapia 2010, Lévesque 2010, Heery 2003, Dörre, Holst 2009 et al). As such there is a gap in the literature around strategy for occupational or professional unions that have remained largely stable (see graphs in Chapter one). Frege and Kelly (2003, 2004) conceptualised six strategic options for

unions to achieve renewal from decline since the 1980s: organising, restructuring, social partnership/collective bargaining, political action, coalition building and international solidarity. Their analysis of the variety of union responses listed the menu of choices union leaders may consider. Yet in comparing union fortunes across a number of countries, Frege and Kelly confirmed the significance of national environments and institutions, as varieties of capitalism, indicating path determination for unions as among the conditions limiting strategic options. My 'palette' of organising options is in Appendix Seven.

The tension between 'adversarialism' and co-operation between unions and employers waxes and wanes over time and with the balance of power and changing external conditions (Silver 2003). It is possible to adopt a variety of orientations on a spectrum of conflict in some contexts and cooperation in others (Daniel 1987). Strategic choice on this dimension is therefore contingent on context. Leadership has to judge the union's capacity for self-determination given the circumstances at the time. Smale (2018: 34) found moderation and militancy might be considered as components of union identities but labelling unions as either moderate or militant is too simplistic.

Any option to determine a union's stance towards conflict or cooperation has to take into account the attitude of the employer. A union may choose cooperation but it is only achievable if the employer concurs. Unions may see a cooperative relationship with an employer as the objective, achieved only through a period of conflict. But can such a forced partnership ever be sustainable? Pohler and Luchak (2015) found it was crucial for management to gain the confidence of the union by signalling its willingness to cooperate. Unless members see clear gains from cooperation the union risks the charge of co-optation to management's position.

Union capacity to act strategically depends principally upon the economic and industrial relations environment in which they operate (Adăscăliței and Guga 2017, Hyman 1987a, 2007, Frege 2004). Strategic choices open to union leaders may be limited in contrast to those available to employers but this does not rule out discretion and independent action. In his study into the growth of white-collar

unionism, Bain (1970) concluded that growth was largely outside the hands of the unions themselves. He suggested that the explanation for union growth (or decline), therefore, must lie with the employer. There are factors, however, within the remit of union leaders, that determine growth outcomes and a range of literature highlights options for renewal that require strategic direction from union leaders (Lévesque 2010, Dörre, Holst and Nachtwey 2009, Fairbrother 2015, Saundry, Stuart and Antcliff 2012, Frege 2003 and 2004, Hyman 2007, Boxall and Haynes 1997, Kelly 1998 and others). Yet much of this debate around union renewal has emphasised organising and the role of conscious action to unionise enterprises rather than compositional and structural factors (Gall 2018).

Union agency assumes a degree of self-determination, a leadership with the resources to call upon and a membership demanding, or that can be mobilised for, action. Union organisers must explain the ways in which workers can define their interests and identities in collective terms even if this is based upon 'us and them' with other groups of workers (McBride 2010, Holgate, Simms and Tapia 2018).

Martin and Ross (1999) described unions as organised actors who must constantly make strategic choices about their identities, goals, allies and opponents. They believe these choices are, to a considerable degree, constrained by their pasts. Hyman (1975) argued unions only move in directions that will not threaten shared ideas, values and habits. His conclusion is that unions are conservative institutions containing many veto points that block radical change. He feels they must overcome their conservative bias but that strategic innovation may require a process of 'creative destruction'. Hyman implies the need to overthrow past practices and systems in the search for new membership. This study, through analysis of the NGA's 1983 dispute, explores how far occupational identity becomes a boundary to limit scope for initiative and fresh ideas. This raises questions about the nature and authority of union democracy and leadership accountability.

The framework by Hodder and Edwards (2015: 843) recognises the role of external factors and builds in a feedback mechanism for unions to set outcomes and build on successes or failures. They describe the relationship between purpose and strategies



as a two-way process, changing as a result of internal relations as well as external agency with employers and the state. Their framework concentrates upon ideology and purpose that helps shape the character of the union rather than the collectivisation of groups of workers needed to establish and maintain it. They accept that a union's organising efforts are shaped by deeper identity, whether class-based or a focus on market relations, and their framework should contribute toward further research in this regard.

People in unions develop a 'taste' for certain tactics and these can become entrenched in the choice of actions to pursue (Polletta and Jasper 2001). The NGA case study provides a good example of its traditional use of 'blacking' instructions to prevent work bypassing a dispute. Members may define their collective identity around their occupation or craft but activists may add to this through their shared experience of the customs and practices of the organisation. These may be reinforced when confronted by an existential threat or shared sense of injustice.

### **Institutional and associational power**

Unions that can lever power through the position members hold within the production process will rely on this before resorting to other means such as legal remedies or wider publicity campaigns. This hierarchy of union power resources leads unions to shift their focus according to the changing nature of the environment in which they operate. Unions without positional power must seek other forms of leverage including institutional and associational power (Holgate 2014). In the face of hostile employers and diminishing collective bargaining, some unions have sought to mobilise outside the workplace including building alliances with external campaign groups. This approach, espoused by (Heery and Simms 2008, Holgate, Simms and Tapia 2018), features neighbourhood advice centres, welfare aid, immigration and language support, learning provision and campaigns on issues such as the living wage, safety and the local environment. The common cause is the locality rather than the occupation and the approach develops associational power and political influence. This is not the bond between individual members but the power of coalitions. It relies on 'weak ties' resting on shared values and empathy

rather than a collective identity at the workplace (Heery 2018). It does, however, share the organising approach where collective action is often mobilised around grievances caused by the behaviour of local employers.

This approach offers assistance to those workers facing difficulties to which union membership has long struggled to address. These have grown in the so-called gig economy and include migrant workers and those on insecure and transient contracts. The model relies on financial support from charitable institutions, volunteers and low or no subscriptions (Fine 2006). This 'social movement' approach raises questions around the degree to which it adds weight to the power of unions or supplants them. Heery (2018) considered arguments that new movements might be more effective in mobilising citizens than unions are, especially if supporters believe unions lack legitimacy with under-represented groups or serve only a narrow interest of workers. Social movement theory places the emphasis on linkages with campaign groups and pressure groups through political processes, public protest and alliance-building (Simms, Holgate and Heery 2013, Holgate 2014). Developing stronger connections to wider allies may lever greater power in order to compensate for the loss of more traditional union power but it can raise tensions with those who view unions through the insider/outsider concept. This is based on the belief that unions only serve the narrow self-interests of their members at the expense of other workers and wider society. Heery questions whether working with allies offers fusion or replacement (2018). He points to the ability of community organisations to mobilise around shared values often with 'weak ties' as opposed to unions who require an instrumental commitment making sustained member mobilisation difficult (Heery 2013: 655). He found such coalitions often difficult to forge, fraught with tension and liable to collapse (2018: 67). Unions cannot opt in and out of alliance-building when they believe it is in their immediate interests and it may require a greater shift in their organisational culture. Ibsen and Tapia (2017) wrote of unions building external coalitions to compensate for the loss of structural power tied to collective bargaining. Associational power can therefore be seen as a sign of weakness, either by relying on allies for support or seeking to organise workers from

outside the workplace. This point will be explored further in the case studies for this research.

Unions based and developed around strong occupational identity relied less on legal regulation to protect minimum standards and upon alliances with bodies beyond their immediate reach to influence employers. The notion of institutional power is the role unions as organisations have in the wider mechanics and laws governing industrial relations and in economic planning. A greater focus upon this leads unions to invest in a higher profile in influencing politics. The legal framework for industrial relations for much of the twentieth century was based upon immunities from civil actions for trade unions that acted as part of a trade dispute. Chapter Four will explore this context in more depth.

(Adăscăliței and Guga 2017) include the relations the union has within the broader trade union movement as well as with external organisations such as campaign groups with similar aims or community groups that have overlapping objectives. Lévesque and Murray (2010: 337) describe the degree to which a union is linked to these wider groups as “network embeddedness”. They see some unions as being caught in a “spiral of isolation” while others have strong horizontal links with unions in the same sector or employer. Other unions create vertical links with regional, industrial, national and international structures.

A union with considerable positional power and control over its relevant labour supply can opt to eschew wider collaborations. Associational power appears to be the strategic choice of last resort for unions yet some writers stress its importance for union renewal. McAlevey (2016) stresses the need to organise the ‘whole worker’ in the workplace and community, especially as they need to reach into the service economy. She criticises ‘business unionism’ and those leaders who believe they can recruit from the outside or cut deals with employers. She champions ‘bottom-up’ organising, where workers are at the centre of all activities and that must mean addressing their wider interests outside of the workplace. Alliance-building may not be possible if the priority is sustaining an insider base and when organisational insularity has a legacy of success. Polletta and Jasper (2001) found

that movements that defined their identities (and with it their membership) narrowly tended to reject alliances as 'selling out' and that such exclusiveness helped sustain the commitment of remaining stalwarts. Social movement leaders must strategize within a complex multi-organisational environment, whereas union leaders must satisfy internal systems of democracy (Heery 2018, Gaham and Pekarek 2013).

Alliance-building may have to overcome nervousness or opposition from potential partners. Rivalry and conflict can ignite between unions and campaign groups as they compete for influence and credit (Heery 2018). The need for union reps and officers to collaborate with external bodies depends upon the issues at hand. The development in union learning activities has required significant engagement with learning providers, career advisors and skills bodies. Supporting health and well-being amongst workers may need the support of external specialists and mental health groups. These links can be undertaken with the active support or partnership with the employer or developed unilaterally by the union (Moore 2008).

The stress on union organising and industrial power in the UK through most of the twentieth century, in comparison with statutory frameworks for industrial relations as developed across much of Europe, stems from the legacy of the voluntarist approach to industrial relations (Marsh 1992, Martin and Ross 1999). The need for unions to exert industrial power (Lévesque and Murray 2010) heightened the tactics of competitive sectional unionism (Cole 1924, Taylor 1980).

Where the legal framework provided for or facilitated collective bargaining it reflected the industrial power of the unions. Lévesque and Murray (2010) argued the degree to which institutional power may become misaligned with 'real' union power depends upon the politics of the nation or posture of employers. Conflict tests the limits of each party and rests the balance of power. Differences between the models have been attributed to 'varieties of capitalism' (Hall and Soskice 2001, Crouch, 2017). This implies a determinist theory in which difference in approach is explained through variations in the country's business structure, economic management and systems and not through union leadership strategy. It leaves little scope for agency

at local level and this is challenged by Wagner and Refslund (2016) who describe the differences as the consequence of union strength. (Hodder and Edwards 2015: 848) see the legal framework as reflecting and inscribing the uses of union power rather than being a form of power directly.

The approach to associational power through collaborations are strategic matters to be determined by union leaders including prioritising potential allies and developing shared objectives. This study examines these in the context of an employer and government offensive against them.

### **Chapter Summary and conclusions**

This chapter has set out the theoretical context for the research on the role of strong occupational identity in relation to positional power, organisational strength and leadership. It has defined briefly the differences between 'craft' and 'occupational' identity and between craft and professional unions, stressing the similarities for the purposes of organising. The strengths and weaknesses organising around such identities will be examined in the case studies.

The ability for any union to deliver its purpose depends upon the power resources it can wield. Concepts of positional, organisational, institutional and associational power are found to be a helpful theoretical framework to contextualise the case studies (Schmalz and Dörre, 2020, Hyman, Richard and Gumbrell-McCormick 2013). Positional power, based either on pivotal skills within the industrial process or numerical strength through 'super majorities', (McAlevey 2016) offers maximum leverage over an employer but is vulnerable to technological change and sectional divisions. Whether a union leadership opts to deploy such power raises questions over strategic choice, democracy and ideology.

Unions develop organisational strength through the exploitation of positional strength and collective identity. These in turn build the social capital of the membership through formal and informal networks of mutual support and welfare assistance. In such a setting, union leaders command greater strategic choice,

especially in regard to the union's orientation towards employers but they may balance these options with internal pressures from the democratic processes. Such options invoke the tension between union leadership and the rank-and-file. High levels of participation may be a precondition for membership mobilisation but the relationship between internal democracy and strategic leadership has been described by Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2018: 11) as "an enduring dilemma for trade union democracy". There can also be conflict between the interests of existing members and potential recruits. Democratic strength can restrict a leadership seeking radical or conservative alternatives in the face of an overwhelming external threat.

In the absence of positional power, union leaders turn to other forms of leverage against employers including institutional and associational power, seeking legal remedies rather than industrial bargaining and alliance-building. The case studies in this research explore these factors especially at a time when a union, known for its independence, even detachment, from the wider movement sought to win allies as circumstances changed.

The next chapter examines the nature of craft unionism and collective identity in more detail, especially in the printing industry. It explores social solidarity and the way additional strength is gained by the development of close personal networks. It charts the advances in technology that so fundamentally undermined the basis of the NGA and printing trade unionism. It will also look at why customs and industrial tactics were so embedded in the lifeblood of the union and question the extent to which this restricted the leaderships' ability to consider alternative actions in the face of an employer assault.

## **Craft trade unionism and the printing industry**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter examined the nature of trade union purpose, power and the capacity of leadership to determine actions from a range of strategic options. It sought to provide a theoretical framework for the case study research centred in this thesis, based upon the role of collective identity in the formation and maintenance of trade union organisation and its relationship with positional and associational power. This chapter examines in greater depth how strong occupational collective identity is built and the nature of craft trade unionism, especially in printing. It describes how this helped shape the industrial relations within an industry dominated by small workshops (Child 1967). It examines the symbiotic relationship between positional power and the organisational strength built upon the collective identity.

The printing unions trace their formation back to the mid-nineteenth century, with roots even earlier. They adopted many of the practices, language and structures of the earlier guilds but in contrast members saw their interests as different from those of their employer. The bedrock of the union was the chapel, but the interests of craft workers extended beyond the individual workplace (Musson 1954). They borrowed methods from the earlier friendly societies (Sabel 1982: 167, Thompson 1963) and offered a range of welfare benefits, social activities and mutual support. The chapter will examine the scope and nature of such an approach and the 'social capital' developed by this model of trade unionism (Jarley 2005). The unions mobilised and built a tight-knit organisation with strong loyalty and solidarity based on their shared identity. A central feature of their organisation was the closed shop and the chapter will address the arguments for this approach and whether it was a symptom or source of union power.

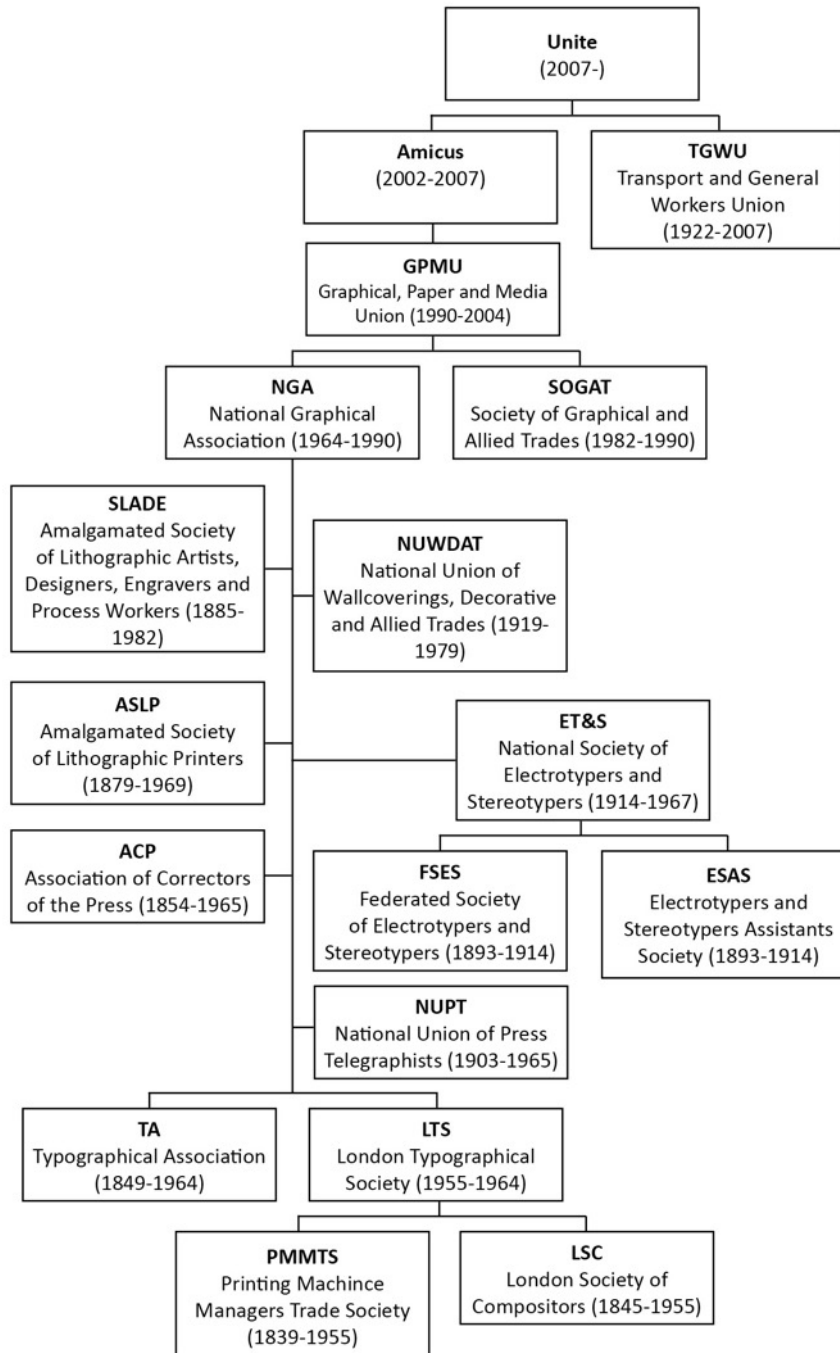
Such a model of trade unionism depended upon mobilisation around the craft or occupation as a common bond and the need to protect it from unskilled entrants, including defending the gender division of labour (Cockburn 1983). The chapter considers the nature of gender divisions within printing and how they were reinforced by trade unions.

The chapter describes the technological transformation that the printing process went through, robbing unions of their positional power. It concludes by considering what options could be considered by union leaders in such changing circumstances, including stronger associational relationships between other unions and amalgamations (Gennard and Hayward 2008). Merger was a strategic choice for the NGA in the 1980s as it faced a combination of challenges from technological change and the newly elected Conservative government. This was the chosen path for many unions at that time. The chapter will consider amalgamation as a strategy and its consequences especially in regard to collective identity.

The complex range of unions within the printing industry were rationalised so that, by the end of the twentieth century only the GPMU remained representing production workers. The 'family' tree' below shows the process of mergers that took place.



### 3.1 The family tree of the National Graphical Association



## **Industrial relations in printing**

Strong trade union organisation, as defined through membership levels, does not equate to poor relations with employers regardless of the size of the organisation. Adăscăliței and Guga (2017) stressed two crucial dimensions: the relationship between unions and employers and between unions and their members. The overlap between these two dynamics is where the NGA built its strength between its positional power and its organisational effectiveness. The collective bond the NGA built between and for its members was the foundation upon which it developed its bargaining strength with employers.

Employers were obliged to accept a loss of control over labour or its performance in return for a stable supply of skilled workers (Blissett 2013). The early collective agreements unions reached with employers developed from the individual firm, to the town, the district and the whole country (Child 1967: 205). Employers saw advantage of combining to secure multi-enterprise agreements and unions tended towards a principled position of national minimum standards for all. The first national agreement in 1898 covered the working of Linotype machines (Musson 1954: 137) and in 1900 the Federation of Master Printers was established and in 1911 a national agreement was reached with it and federations of newspaper employers.

In the small enterprises that dominated the commercial printing industry, the workforce and management worked in close proximity. The employer-union relationship was different from a large enterprise where the proprietor is a distant figure (Rainnie, 2016). Provincial newspapers, often owned by national conglomerates, were produced in relatively small workplaces. A reasonably large city such as Gloucester had a daily newspaper office employing around 100 people and small towns would tend to have a weekly paper produced by a handful of workers. In this context, National Agreements suited most employers and chapels. Yet Rainnie concluded that industrial harmony was a myth (Rainnie, 2016: 153) and stressed the diversity of small companies. In my own experience, relations in small firms could be excellent or could become highly strained. Family loyalties sometimes caused tensions within the workforce. As a full-time officer I could raise issues and expose

grievances in a way the employees felt unable to, given the close relationship they had with the employer. In his study of small printing firms Rainnie encountered two contrasting attitudes towards the NGA by employers: firstly acceptance of unionisation mainly due to the passivity of the membership but secondly “vitriolic hatred of the NGA organisation regionally and nationally” (Rainnie 2016).

The story of industrial relations in printing is striking for its consistency over such a span of time. The fundamentals of the production process remained barely changed over several centuries. Longevity and tradition were not just important features of printing trade unionism but the products its members produced. Many provincial newspapers traced their roots back a century or more. The Berrows Worcester Journal, produced by a chapel I used to represent, lays claim to being the oldest newspaper in the world having been established in 1690.<sup>12</sup>

National Agreements were a central feature in printing for much of the century but the Conservatives in the 1980s saw them as restricting labour market flexibility and sustaining trade unionism (Purcell 1993: 25). Freeman and Medoff (1984: 51) found that union wage differentials fall noticeably with plant-level bargaining as workers and managers worry about competitive consequences or as Hyman (2001: 474) described, the dynamics of global influences. After its election in 1979, the Government promoted ‘enterprise-confined’ or company-level agreements, but it took until 1991 for the commercial printing industry national agreement to break down. In some rare circumstances national agreements have survived such as in the engineering construction industry, largely due to the agency of labour and union strategies (Clarke and Fitzgerald 2020: 70). Preference for local or national bargaining depends much on the power balance between employers and unions. For example, there was a short period in the 1960-70s when the Society of Lithographic Artists, Designers and Engravers (SLADE) held supreme positional power. Lithography was the rapidly growing printing process and it relied upon large, expensive cameras and scanners, operated by a small number of highly skilled specialists to convert artwork into lithographic plates. An average commercial

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<sup>12</sup> Berrows Worcester Journal – see: <https://www.worcesternews.co.uk/news/13885539.worlds-oldest-newspaper-celebrates-its-325th-birthday/>

printing factory would need to employ one or two such workers. SLADE decided to break away from the National Agreement – initially over a failure to agree on the role of assistants – but the union pursued a policy of house bargaining (Gennard 1990: 565-567). This secured significant wage levels and led to the development of specialist reproduction houses. Maintenance of the house agreement policy was a condition of the merger between SLADE and NGA in 1982 (Gennard 1990: 154). Its success in sectionalist bargaining offered terms for the NGA and other unions to aspire to.

A significant element within the earliest agreements between employers and unions was around the proportion of apprentices within any establishment and the nature of recruitment and training. This was a fundamental matter for unions seeking to control the supply of skilled labour.

### **Apprenticeship entry**

Many of the earliest trade unions in Britain were based upon a narrow occupational group such as those within the printing industry. Sydney and Beatrice Webb (1920: 44) wrote:

It is not among the farm servants, miners or general labourers, ill-paid and ill-treated as they were, that the early trade unions arose. The formation of independent associations to resist the will of employers requires the possession of a certain degree of independence and strength of character. Thus we find the earliest trade unions arising among journeymen whose skill and standard of life had been for centuries encouraged and protected by legal and customary regulations as to apprenticeship and by the limitations of the numbers which the high premiums and other conditions must have involved.

As such the basis for trade union organisation was the craft group above that of the individual workplace. Clegg, Fox and Thompson (1964: 4) define a craft society as a “union of skilled workers who have attained their status through a prescribed apprenticeship”. The apprenticeship system was an integral part of the craft union: a

long period of training and induction into the craft at little pay. The reward was access to relatively secure and well-paid employment. The traditional apprenticeship was the “cardinal feature” of control of entry into the skilled occupations of the printing industry (Gennard 1990: 452). It required school leavers to undertake training over a fixed length of time starting with low, if any pay and rising to the rate of the ‘journeyman’. The unions had secured quotas limiting the number of apprentices to a ratio with journeymen. The system was designed to ensure apprentices acquired transferable skills through college attendance and qualifications such as those certified by City and Guilds<sup>13</sup>.

By the 1970s the ‘time-served’ apprenticeship became increasingly questioned given the changing nature of skills needed and rising expectation from young people. In 1975 apprenticeships were reduced to four years with a reduction to three-and-a-half years if the apprentice demonstrated the competencies required. It also permitted an extension to five years if needed to achieve the standards expected. This began a shift away from time to a system of accreditation as a measure of achievement. With the transformation of the technology, the apprenticeship system struggled to keep up and new entrants were arriving from art colleges and universities. “Training was required which was comparable with VDUs and laser plate-making rather than Guttenberg and Caxton (Gennard 1990: 459)”. Art colleges could offer graphic design courses without the need for the equipment and machinery of the composing room.

Other factors were at play through the 1980s with recessions leading employers to cease the custom of apprentice recruitment. In 1986-7 just 614 companies registered trainees under the revised Joint Training Council that oversaw a more modular form of training (Gennard 1990: 463). To tackle the rising levels of unemployment, the unions’ priorities became re-training of members, often those made redundant as a consequence of their employer’s lack of investment in new technology or inability to keep up with the pace of change.

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<sup>13</sup> As demonstrated in indentures held in Gloucestershire Records Office

Lee (1979) considers whether union strategy, driven by vested interest, was directed to regulating entry into the trade rather than upholding standards of training. Unions had to face the challenge of new routes of entry into the industry and with them the lack of control.

Unions built around occupational identity sought to maximise access to training, including transferable skills. In this there was often tension with employers who sought to limit skill acquisition to only those competencies they needed. Lee found that this was often presented as a conflict between 'restrictive practices' by unions set against the drive to secure greater management prerogative (Lee 1979: 44).

The approach to trade-based skills in Britain was reviewed by Clarke, Winch and Brockmann (2013) in their comparison with Germany. The British system tends towards a 'production' system, relying on on-the-job know-how rather than 'occupational capacity' including accredited transferable skills. Lee (1979) highlights the limitations of the dependence upon the enlightened self-interest of individual employers under a voluntary system of training.

For craft unions the apprenticeship system was more than training and accumulation of knowledge towards accreditation for the occupation, it provided unions with the opportunity to inculcate trainees in their customs and practices.

### **Bound by tradition**

Collective identity includes organisational commitment (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley 2008) that comes with a shared protection of the characteristics that bind the society together. 'Tradition' for trade unionism has been viewed as anachronistic, and as some kind of "pernicious survival from the past (Lee 1979: 34)". Traditions are developed from the special conditions of the type of employment and while the occupation is the source, the union can build upon them to enhance the status of their members and to magnify their positional power. Craft union leaders are bound by their heritage and repertoires of action (Smith P. 2001: 10). Musson (1954: 1) argued that: "The roots of trade unionism in the printing industry lie deep in the

customs and regulations of the craft guilds (*sic*).” Knotted (2008: 273) wrote of what he called “artisanal associationalism” that emerged before industrial factories.

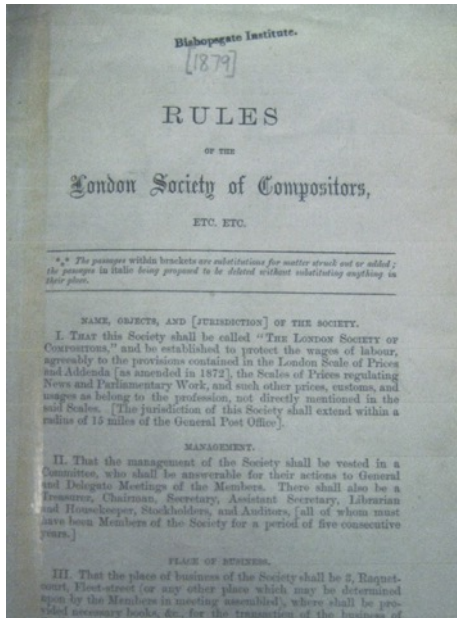
The cross-over between friendly societies and early trade unions was not straightforward and sometimes the language was deliberately used to confuse. Workers recognised the value in mutual welfare insurance but such schemes could be, and sometimes were, organised by the employer as an attempt to undermine the establishment of a trade union. Early unions also used the language of the friendly society to disguise more adversarial intentions towards the employer. In an industry dominated by small enterprises, meaningful mutual aid societies required a larger group involving multiple workplaces. At the same time, class divisions between employer and worker made the case for trade unionism that developed beyond friendly society benefits.

In an environment where the career of a craft worker may outlive the business, such workers will be attracted to a society that will provide support in and between jobs. Members looked to their union for life-long protection, not just during what might be a transient period of employment with one employer (Child 1967: 123). Hyman (1975: 44) described the early craft unions as ‘defenders’ of their position and status apart from the occasional ‘wages movement’. Unions promoted trust and care for one another, of self-control, independence and self-reliance (Phelps-Brown 1986).

### **The chapel and a community of workers**

The chapel, described by Joseph Moxon in *Mechanik Exercises* in the 1600s (Moxon 1958), comprised all the printers in the office, the whole occupational group, including the master. It was a club bounded together by the same craft within the same workplace. Darnton (2001: 101) in his account of the ‘Great Cat Massacre’, when apprentice compositors in Paris in the 1730s killed the employer’s pet cats because they received better treatment than the workers did, described the printers as identifying with their craft rather than their class.

The chapel, as a term used by the union, is the voluntary association of workers to represent their interests as they may be different from the employer (Sykes 1960: 52, Webb 1920, Aspinall 1949, Barou 1947, Cole 1924, Child 1967). The various



**3.2 Rules of the London Society of Compositors, 1897**, held at the Bishopsgate Institute, London

printing craft unions had rules stating that where there were three or more members in a workplace, they shall form a chapel<sup>14</sup>. Known as ‘the companionship’ or ‘ship’ the chapel was a mutual benefit society, a disciplinary and benevolent institution, almost masonic with its initiation ceremonies and secrets. Membership tended to be a constant through the whole of a career and not dependent upon any workplace, dispute or grievance (Musson 1954, Gennard 1990). It built extraordinary solidarity (Melvern 1986: 37-38), strengthening the workers positional and organisational power.

The chapel was the bedrock of printing trade unionism, at first as a self-regulating workshop club (Phelps-Brown, 1986). The chapel was a strong community of workers that resolved all kinds of disputes that could arise amongst its members, both personal and work-centred. It emphasized the equality of its members and tended to create conformity of behaviours such as when and where to drink beer, social activities and common political ideology. “It would fine members for being drunk at work, then use its collection of fines so that all members could get drunk together.” (Jacobs 1980: 16-19). Sykes (1960) saw the chapel as a genuine association of equals with decisions made by the assembly rather than officials acting alone. In some, the Father of the Chapel (FoC) was a position rotated amongst all members (Martin R. 1981). Cannon (2011) found that a third of the members he interviewed had held some form of chapel office.

<sup>14</sup> NGA Rules and the London Society of Compositors for example



The chapel had customs such as initiation ceremonies and ‘bang-outs’ (making a cacophony of sound to mark the completion of an apprenticeship or retirement). Activities and institutions like these buttressed feelings of identification with the occupation and the society (Cannon 2011). Chapels were sometimes the focus of sporting activities such as bowls, skittles and cricket<sup>15</sup>. Social events were organised including group outings, known in printing as the ‘wayzgoose’. Worker interests can be described as being ‘socially constructed’ by unions but their collective interests arise from their shared sense of working in the same company, craft or profession. Their sense of common bond is the foundation of the union – the “root structure” as described by Hodder and Edwards (2015: 845) but it is also strengthened by the actions of it (see also Johnstone, Stewart and Ackers 2015; Hyman 1997). The union ran the industry’s system of recruitment, its welfare system and looked after members in dispute. Jacobs argued that “the employer is almost a bystander with what his union is doing.” (Jacobs 1980: 16-19).

The development or use of social activities to help bind the society of workers together was not exclusive to printing. The records of the National Union of Agricultural Workers<sup>16</sup> lists a busy programme of social activities including a convoy of coaches taking members on their annual holiday. The National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) was founded to "provide means for social intercourse amongst its members, and for their improvement, advancement and recreation, also promote a knowledge of the principles of local government (Spoor 1967: 13)". NALGO leaders believed that for an organisation to succeed, it must equip itself with magnets, first to attract, then to hold. Its early magnets were drama, choirs, orchestra, sports, rambling and rifle clubs, holidays and medical insurance to attract members. NALGO acquired convalescent homes and holiday camps for members to use, providing an additional benefit to membership but also a means of creating a social network between members (Spoor 1967; Costley, Cole and Walker 2014). McAlevey (2016: 33) refers to how US unions in the 1930s drew in new members with music, boxing matches, card parties, dances, picnics and various

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<sup>15</sup> Gloucestershire had trophies for such sporting activities

<sup>16</sup> Dorset NUAW minutes held at the Tolpuddle Martyrs’ Museum

sports. These activities also engaged the wives of members in the exclusively male domain of the trade union. Delegate conferences of the Typographical Association would have a parallel programme of outings for members' wives with dinner-dances in the evenings. Women may have been excluded from the workplace organisation but were involved in the social life of their husbands' union.

Those who worked in composing rooms considered themselves more than factory workers. Setting lead type, photo-engraving the etched images of photographs, making up pages and reading the proofs, the samples of the pages – these they considered craft skills. The speed with which they set type or the ability to read the reversed words on the metal blocks, was for them an industrial art (Musson 1954, Howe and Waite 1948). The composing room had a special atmosphere imbued with the language, customs and culture of the chapel held deeply by members. As Johnson (1972: 56) described when writing about professional workers, the highly developed language or jargon served to maintain internal homogeneity and increase autonomy from outsiders. Chapel membership was 'hard-wired' into apprentices when they were first permitted to join the union. They were inducted into an exclusive society and they were expected to observe its rules. Some required members to keep chapel business secret from non-members (Sykes 1960). Breaches could result in fines or even expulsion and the consequences of losing your union membership could be the end of a meaningful career. *The Rules of the London Society of Compositors* of 1879 included:

Any member working in an office where there is any encroachment made, or about to be made, on the authorised customs or regulations of the trade, shall give information respecting the cause of such encroachment to the Secretary or be fined 2s 6d.

That no member shall accept a situation in any office, the character of which is either unknown or doubtful, without first enquiring of the Secretary and if found acting contrary to his instructions shall be fined 2s 6d.

Despite the welfare benefits of membership, the unity and cohesion of the craft union was founded on the basis of conflict with the employer (Sabel 1982: 9). He makes the case that such craft workers can be both "docile and militant – out for

himself but capable of solidarity, disposed to lead broad movements against management but also to defend narrow privileges". The union could adopt different orientations at different times but the panoply of benefits developed by craft unionism ensured membership loyalty and stability regardless. This confirms the degree of strategic choice available to leaders of craft unions.

### **Welfare and control over labour supply**

The craft societies, especially in printing, developed sophisticated ways of maintaining support and regulating the supply of labour even during fluctuations in trade (Fowler and Wyke 1987). They recognised that over-supply of labour threatened to swell the 'reserve' workforce of the unemployed.

In the early days of trade unions some believed that this model was the only one that could offer a lasting organisational basis. Dobson (1980: 45) describes welfare aid as being essential to maintain a continuous association and the strict rules of the friendly society formed the basis of trade union discipline. Writing at the formation of so-called 'new unionism' attracting semi-skilled workers, George Howell, believed that unions that simply concentrated on their 'trade purposes' would prove weak and inefficient (Howell 1890: vii). He acknowledged that members didn't primarily join for the friendly society benefits but to be sustainable unions needed to offer members such reasons to remain (Howell 1890: 477).

Unions sought to limit the supply of labour through restrictions on the number of apprentice entrants. This required union control beyond any single workplace (Phelps-Brown 1986). Members' allegiance to the society was reinforced through protection when out of work.



**3.3 Typographical Association**  
**Tramping Map** – author’s collection

When trade was depressed and workers laid-off, an option was to walk or ‘tramp’ to another town in search of work. The early societies developed a system of ‘tramping relief’ where members could report to the secretary of the local society to learn about possible vacancies or be warned of employers who refused to recognise the union or its pay rates (Knotted 2008: 172). Payments were made to the ‘journeyman’ based on the mileage shown in a ‘tramping map’ Child (1967: 99). Accommodation was

provided until the job was obtained or the journeyman was obliged to set off for the next town (Rounsfell 1982). Tramping (along with assisted emigration) was one way to help members source alternative work in times of downturn and relieve the pressure from unemployment on terms and conditions for those still in work. Keeping labour short in good times was part of the long-term strategy of the union (Lee 1979: 45). Knotted (2008: 182) describes this as an “intricate system of supra-local intermediation”. The system also built social networks and a collective sense of support to fellow members faced with unemployment.

Child (1967: 101) cites the *Compositors’ Chronicle* of 1841 in which a member describes the twin motives of the system:

I have often shared my evening meal with a forlorn tramp, and this I considered not merely charitable, but politic, for had I not done so, what security had I that the traveller would not, on the following morning, by underworking me, have turned me out of house and home?

The Webbs (1920) contended that unemployment benefits were primarily designed to deter unemployed from undermining wage levels and only secondarily to relieve distress. Knotted (2008: 185) also found that unions were more effective, than public agencies, in verifying that the person was really unemployed. The London Society of Compositors provided benefits to members when out of work, compensation for ‘loss from fire’, funeral allowance, emigration allowance, superannuation payments, removal grant, travelling cards, tramping relief, a reading room and a library (London

Society of Compositors 1879, Howe and Waite 1948). The system required a level of national coordination and supervision and so the local societies agreed to come together in a national union called the Provincial Typographical Society in 1849. Craft unions built an astonishing level of support as shown in the examples of mutual aid during difficult times. In 1866 the iron-founders union faced a crisis caused by depression in trade and the failure of some key employers. Unable to pay unemployment benefits the working members agreed to pay a levy of a sixth of their weekly pay and some members deposited savings of up to £2,500 to rescue the union (Howell 1890: 161). Brushmakers made similar sacrifices when their union faced a financial crisis due to rising unemployment. Debts were taken out on furniture and houses to assist the union meet its obligations to out-of-work members (Brushmakers 1847).

After the Second World War, as the State increasingly provided welfare support and workers were less inclined to an itinerate lifestyle, tramping relief was replaced with a system of unemployment benefits. Up to 1983 unemployment benefit was paid to out of work NGA members for up to six months at a rate of a third of the basic wage, a valuable incentive to stay loyal to the union and a way to prevent unemployed members undermining them (Musson 1959, Gennard 1990). But with a tide of redundancies in the early 1980s, this generous benefit was unsustainable. An emergency levy of all members supported the fund until agreement was reached to freeze the benefit level (Gennard 1990).

Assistance to members while out of work was a significant benefit to belonging to the association and encouraged feelings of solidarity (Faniel 2012). It was a powerful way to retain members and develop a strong sense of mutual support. Other benefits such as sickness, educational grants, funeral grants and retirement payments, provided the 'cradle-to-grave' approach to membership ensuring organisational stability and a deep commitment to the business of the union.

## Social Capital and unionism

The close-knit nature of the association provided social and personal networks. Union officers often acted as social workers and social secretaries. This is described as 'social capital unionism' by Jarley (2005) and includes trust, norms, and networks representing any group which gathers consistently for a common purpose (Gilchrist, 2009). Social capital is often associated with privileged elites and the echelons in society who can use networks and closed societies to gain or maintain advantages in education, employment and social standing. In the context of trade union social capital may be defined as those resources inherent in social relations which facilitate collective action. Craft unions maximized the social capital of members to control the labour supply and provide mutual support. The privilege of membership meant higher earnings and job security but it led to barriers for others who sought entry, especially women (Drake 1984).

Craft or professional unions follow the worker not the workplace (Fairbrother 2015). Social capital includes benefits flowing from belonging to a collective institution and the added value that comes from the shared interests of members and the interactions between them. Job movements within the printing industry built strong member networks (Child 1967). The social capital approach developed benefits not dependent upon the employer and helped boost or bolster occupational status, spread ideas and prepared members for future change. This dynamic process adapted to the needs of members from welfare support to retraining.

A lifelong career in a single trade brings a high level of commitment with long-standing networks and friendships. Union journals contained articles about the trade, changing technologies, news from around the industry but also correspondence from members expressing their views and arguing over union policies<sup>17</sup>. As technological change became more rapid from the 1970s onward, the union offered retraining courses for members especially those unemployed. As a consequence, membership knowledge of the technology and process of printing was high and the 'organisational intelligence' of the union, important when making

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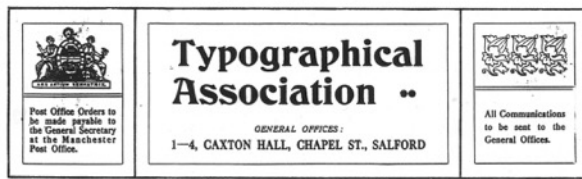
<sup>17</sup> Examples include *The Process Journal* of Society of Lithographic Artists Designers, Engravers and Process Workers – copies held by the author

strategic choices, was strong. Union officers at every level developed expertise about the industry that could be utilised for the benefit of members and employers (Daniel 1987). Klindt (2017) studied the potential for union renewal through skill formation and local partnerships. He found the knowledge base of the craft union can be used to complement a firm's production system and refine vocational training programmes. Such unions are also in a favourable position to facilitate local networks and coordinate skills development activities. A key ingredient in the success of such an approach was the level of 'social trust' unions brought to any partnership and their ability to motivate workers to train.

In summary, the craft unions, especially in printing, developed, by accident or design, a panoply of benefits above and beyond the immediate relationship with the employer. These responded to changing circumstances such as turning tramping relief into unemployment benefit. The need to maintain members' employment within the sector led the unions to offer retraining schemes. Rooted in the labour process, the union built organisational strength and in turn this strengthened its positional power. The system relied on a very high level of membership penetration across the labour force. The benefits offered were obvious and so the incentive to join was overwhelming. But there was a risk from non-union 'free-riders' and as a consequence the membership supported and defended the principle of the closed shop.

### **The closed shop**

The nature of the production process gave craft workers in printing positional power but they needed organisational strength to use it. To regulate the labour supply the union needed to ensure maximum membership density. From the late nineteenth century, the printing craft unions achieved a comprehensive pre-entry closed shop model. Membership of the union was a requirement to obtain and retain employment. This required a potential recruit to be an existing member with clearance from the local branch.



General Secretary: H. SKINNER.  
 Assistant Secretary: O. WADDINGTON.

*Manchester,*

April 16, 1918

Dear Mr. Bliss,

Your copy of the 8th inst., giving copy of resolution passed by your Branch, has been placed before the F.C., who granted their permission for your Branch to declare the abolition of "open houses" in Gloucester.

Yours faithfully,

*H. Skinner,*  
 G.S.

**3.4 Typographical Association memo confirming the abolition of open houses in Gloucester** – author's collection

For example, in 1918 the Gloucester Typographical Society had authority from the union's National Council to declare that there were no 'open houses' left in the city<sup>18</sup>. This meant that every worker in the craft occupations covered by the union were in membership of the Society, a status common

with most trading centres across the country. The route to entry was through an apprenticeship or exceptional circumstances agreed by the local branch committee, possibly with the payment of an entrance fee. This 'pre-entry closed shop' was the cornerstone of the craft union model in printing but Purcell (1993: 28) argues it was more of a symptom than a source of union strength. As the case studies will show, 100% membership and the closed-shop were traditional elements of craft unionism. It was clearly in the interests of craft workers to be on the inside and union members and leaders considered it a source of strength rather than a by-product of effective organisation.

When a vacancy occurred, the employer was expected to contact the local union branch that would send suitable applicants for the position. Unemployed members were given priority and if none were available the job could be advertised, often with the words: 'NGA advised'. Pay and conditions were based on the national agreement, supplemented by local bargaining. Lloyd described it as representing the "most complete and successful form of workers' – or more accurately, union control in the country" (Lloyd 1984: 33).

Employers accepted the fact of the closed shop as they had little choice, but it proved useful in maintaining stability, ensuring high levels of skill and reducing wage

<sup>18</sup> Memo from Typographical Association headquarters, 1918



undercutting (McKelvey 1953). In the history of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives an employer is quoted:

We would not have a trade unionist on our payroll if we could help it. But if we had to employ union labour we should be quite willing to employ nothing else . . . to make their bargains through their responsible officials and to stick to them after they were made (Fox 1958: 342).

Milligan (1976) shared a similar view, believing employers would prefer their workforce to be non-union but the closed shop system could simplify life. The union control over labour supply reduced wage competition between firms and avoided wasteful recruitment costs. It guaranteed a stable supply of skills and reduced 'poaching' between employers. The holding of a union card assured the employer of the competence of the worker, a measure of qualification that was part of the prestige of the association (Baron 1991). Hart (1978) suggested that employers supported closed shops to avoid multi-unionism and because they allowed union officials to reach unpopular agreements. Smale (2018) cites the example of the Association of Education Psychologists who, while not applying a closed shop as such, secured a high membership density by offering services that made it significantly more difficult for anyone to remain outside and still practice in the profession.

Mandatory membership through the closed shop helps bind the collective identity and enforces discipline but it means the union contains those who would otherwise be indifferent or even hostile to the values of the organisation. This, it has been argued, moderates the leadership's ideological posture and dampens demand for radical action. Hyman (1973) argued the compulsion of the closed shop led to 'paper members' with a weak attachment to the trade union and a contradictory approach to state intervention and free collective bargaining. His perspective may have changed given the demise of trade union power when such paper members are now unlikely to be members at all. A militant posture is unlikely to succeed if it fails to win a sufficient proportion of the workforce to its cause. Action involving a minority of workers without sufficient positional power is likely to be limited to symbolic

protest and large majorities are required for it to be effective (McAlevy 2014, 2016).

The closed shop did not extend fully across the printing industry. Some journalists saw it a restriction on civil liberties. In other areas unions sought a closed shop but often failed to achieve it (Finch 1984). Recruitment in these areas was not exclusive to apprentices and workers were less bound to the industry for employment and thus the relation with the union could be transitory.

There is little evidence of resistance to the craft union closed shop – it was a club most workers wanted to be inside. There was opposition to ‘outsiders’ and those who sought a ‘free ride’. Controversy arose in the late nineteenth century with the rise of ‘new unionism’ amongst semi-skilled workers where weight of numbers was critical for industrial power. It was fine for skilled workers to combine in closed shops but Howell, an early TUC leader, wrote of his concerns over the coercion of other workers into unions. “Freedom to combine carries with it the corresponding freedom to abstain from combining” (Howell 1890: vii). The question of individual liberty has accompanied the concept of the closed shop. It became a more central part of the debate over trade union reform through the 1970s. Right-wing groups such as the Freedom Association supported individuals who refused to join the union and wider public opinion became more antagonistic to the closed shop (Opinion Research Centre 1979). But the Conservative Party was warned in 1979 that while opposition to the closed shop had increased, it was not particularly pronounced and found mainly amongst non-union and white-collar workers. Union members objected to legislation banning closed shops and the polling confirmed attitudes around the ‘free ride’ of non-unionist who refuse to contribute to the union but expect the benefits (Opinion Research Centre 1979).

Craft unionism builds a ‘group pride’ and in turn an enhanced status for being part of the collective. But societies built on the collective bond around a job function risk division or sectionalism with those not in the group. Reinforcing, even exaggerating, the special qualities of the craft serves the purpose of the development of collective identity and in doing so raises its status within and beyond the workplace. This

approach can, however, ferment tensions even within the association as groups undertaking specialist job roles press their own group interests. Musson (1954: 358) reports on moves to form break-away sections within the Typographical Association and specialist chapels and how these were resisted by the leadership.

With employees being mandated to join, unions rarely had to persuade a non-member to enrol. This lack of recruitment experience hampered unions when changing technology introduced to the industry new workers with little if any knowledge of the trade and the union (Blissett 2013). And many of these new workers were women. Until the 1980s the NGA possessed little if any institutional experience of open membership recruitment. It did not need the materials or the expertise to persuade workers to join (Blissett 2013). Strategic options for such unions were principally around the package of membership benefits and its relations with employers – individually or by sector. There is a dilemma faced by a union focused upon serving internal forces when this may be in contrast to the interests of a new workforce that could form its potential membership in the future.

Turner (1969) saw ‘closed’ or ‘open’ approaches to trade unionism as alternative strategies for recruitment and organisation. The first defined membership in exclusive terms with the union attempting to close its borders to those not ‘qualified’. The second sought to build the broadest possible collective of shared interests and was typified by the development of ‘general unions’ (Johnstone, Stewart and Ackers 2015). ‘Closed’ unions establish a strong and lasting sense of solidarity at the expense of those excluded whilst ‘open’ unions rely on a wider appeal of common interest and may use the language of socialism to appeal for workers’ unity. But the closed model relies on positional power due to the production process. The case studies examine the impact of technological change and the challenge of transforming a union from a closed to a more open model.

### **The consequences of exclusive membership**

The printers’ chapels and societies can be idealised for their solidarity and mutual responsibility but their structure was based around limiting access to employment in

the industry and in providing an exclusive membership. Michels (1962: 272) believed that printers took the lead in 'aristocratic stratification' and that differences in cultural, social and economic status between the compositor and the casual labourer were more pronounced than between the compositor in one country and the small manufacturer in another.

In some craft unions, new members had to be nominated by existing members and their qualification verified. Their acceptance into the society had to be approved by the local committee and entrance fees could be imposed in certain circumstances. NGA Rules referred to adult entrants into the union being charged if they had "stood aloof" from the Association (NGA Rules 1983). Apprentice entrants had to 'serve their time' as well as prove their abilities through the passing of exams and approval by the employer. Sons of men in the trade had the knowledge of how and when to apply and were often given precedence – Allen (1954) called this restriction 'patrimony'. This further fostered the common bond but also divisions with outsiders and the process became self-perpetuating. The benefits this proffered to those inside relied on exclusion and division.

For print unions, the sense of identity based upon the craft was strong and provided stable characteristics and orientations over time regardless of changes in the leadership. The union helped sustain craft pride and reinforced the belief in being 'special'. It differentiated them from other sections of staff and in the wider community. The level of craft gave them an advantage over management who did not possess the same level of knowledge but could sometimes lead to frustrations over decisions being made by people who didn't understand the production process (Mortimer 1960: 416).

Exclusivity brought a powerful sense of belonging and provided a defensive structure based upon the nature of the work. The system was self-reinforcing, building a greater status for workers on the inside. The question, much discussed in the literature is the extent to which benefits gained by this model were at the expense of others or whether the positional and organisational strength of such unions helped others rise in proportion? The evidence from the literature appears mixed. The compositors, for a considerable period of time, held the high ground in

positional power and developed organisational strength around it. Other unions, especially in printing, aped much of the same structure and industrial tactics – either as a direct consequence of the compositors lead or because of their own positional power. But administrative and sales workers in newspapers – predominantly women – did not enjoy terms and conditions comparably better than similar workers outside the industry and were not considered worthy of much attention by the union until technology enabled them to undertake the work of the compositor (Gennard 1990: 110, Dawson 2010, 2014).

### **Craft unionism and gender**

There was a long tradition to marginalise and exclude women from the better paid jobs in printing. They were seen as a threat to the conditions of the journeymen (Bundock 1959: 67). Ramsay Macdonald (1904) collated a substantial study in the book *Women in the Printing Trades* in which he described the nature of employment which viewed women as a cheap supply of labour and in which married women were not expected to work. Where women were employed their wages were unregulated and they were largely unorganised. Craft societies made every effort to exclude women. Macdonald described the constant struggle of the Typographical Association to protect the journeymen's positions against three forms of cheap labour: apprentices, unskilled men and women.

Macdonald's work is grounded in a gendered view of the world, acknowledging the position that society put women workers in. He listed the advantages to employers of engaging women including the acceptance of low wages, not being a member of the union and therefore: "more amenable to the will of the employer as the absolute rule of the workshop" (1904: 50).

Macdonald argued that young women assumed their careers would be cut short by marriage so were prepared to do jobs with limited prospects. They were less inclined to put their minds to advancing their careers and as such: "preferred to remain incompetent" (1904: 65). He acknowledged that employers saw little point investing

in their training and they found evening classes difficult to attend. “Girls go home to commence a new round of domestic tasks from which the boy is exempted (p.66)”.

The craft unions claimed to support the employment of women on equal terms but in reality this was a meaningless gesture that provided a cover for their determination to restrict the entry of women into the trade. In 1886 a conference of the typographical societies resolved:

“That while strongly of the opinion that women are not physically capable of performing the duties of a compositor, the conference recommends their admission into membership of the various typographical unions, upon the same conditions as journeymen, provided always the females are paid strictly in accordance with scale (Macdonald 1904: 28).”

This guaranteed that it was practically impossible for any women to be employed or join the societies. In 1904 the National Union of Printing and Paper Workers admitted women but did so to maintain the sexual divisions. A delegate at the 1911 conference of the bookbinders union described: “the growing menace to our trade in the competition of unorganised female labour (Bundock 1959: 86). Women were often seen as a ‘problem’ for unions (Bradley 1999: 164). In 1918 women were allowed to join the National Union of Bookbinding after much debate (Boston 2015).

Composing type was a lightweight function, requiring nimble finger work and technical skill. It was a job women were more than capable of performing yet resistance to their employment by the craft unions ensured that only a handful were employed in the industry (Cockburn 1983). There were exceptions, such as the women’s printing society in Edinburgh in the 1860s which employers engaged to break a strike of compositors in 1872 (Drake 1984: 33). They were paid half the men’s wage rate. In 1910 the Typographical Society served notice on employers to eliminate cheap female labour. An agreement was reached stopping further female apprentice compositors until 1916, a success that was achieved due to: “the hearty support of the ladies themselves (Drake 1984: 35). Women were employed as compositors in Warrington news offices in 1880 and were found to be quicker than the men (Macdonald 1904: 46). Despite being paid a third of the men’s rate, the women didn’t stay long.

It was not only that the male-exclusive societies perceived female labour as a threat to their pay and conditions but there were deep-rooted cultural and societal prejudices against it. The Typographical Association (TA) in particular adopted an uncompromising policy against women and declared any office as ‘unfair’<sup>19</sup> in which women were employed (Musson 1954).

During the First World War when women entered the labour market in large numbers, the printing unions did all they could to exclude them. To fill labour shortages, the TA accepted that printing machine minders could manage more than one press, compositors were permitted to also run presses, rules against ‘smooting’<sup>20</sup> were lifted allowing members to work in different offices and overtime restrictions were suspended. Some employers tried to introduce women but the TA’s stand was largely successful (Musson 1954: 321-322).

At the outbreak of the Second World War an Emergency Agreement was reached between the employers and unions to meet the needs of a war economy but the TA made it clear that “all attempts to introduce dilution of labour – women, labourers – must be resisted. (Musson 1954: 412). As the war progressed, some women ‘dilutees’ were recruited and while the unions insisted they were paid the full rate, they restricted access to training. Through this the TA hoped to safeguard the standards of pay and prepare for the exclusion of the women when the war was over (Musson 1954: 416).

In sectors where women were organised in unions, it was unlikely to be on a ‘craft’ basis but ‘industrial’ across a range of job functions. This was in large part due to the degree to which they identified themselves by gender rather than skill (Drake 1984).

### **Patriarchy at work**

Printing apprentices took up their role in work structured not only by capital but by older men. The apprenticeship not only taught the arts and mysteries<sup>21</sup> of the trade

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<sup>19</sup> The union maintained a ‘Fair List’ of employers in which members could work

<sup>20</sup> Working as a casual operative for different employers

<sup>21</sup> A typical phrase used in apprenticeship indentures

but also appeared to be a rite of passage into manhood. The threat to lose such work, therefore, meant more than the mere loss of a livelihood (Cockburn 1983, Baron 1991).

Baron (1991: 50) describes how apprentice boys acquired their masculinity during the long apprenticeship system and how printers sought to define their work as 'manly', combining intellectual and manual labour. She describes how a man losing his job also lost his role and status within the family as 'breadwinner'. Baron describes how workers who were discharged for incompetence lost their manliness as well as their job (1991: 59).

Cockburn described how men relied upon the advantages accruing from:

the hierarchical relations of patriarchy, the unions were male power bases and they gained much of their standing and comfort from their authority over women at work and at home. Their radicalism never came near relinquishing – or even questioning – that power (Cockburn 1983: 33).

In 1972 the NGA had only 203 women members. In 1977, the Royal Commission on the Press highlighted that no national newspaper employed women in production. There was not a single woman amongst more than 5,000 compositors and in the regional press just 300 women worked alongside more than 11,000 men (Cockburn 1983: 161). The NGA, sometimes referred to as 'No Girls Allowed' had just four per cent female membership in 1981. My own experience in the 1980s included securing employment for the first ever women in some significant workplaces. They received equal terms and conditions but their introduction was not without resistance.

The structure and culture of craft unions such as the NGA enhanced the status of men by excluding and subordinating women (Dawson 2010, 2014). For some feminists it confirmed the failure of trade unionism to represent women on an equal footing. This phenomenon was not exclusive to craft unionism but they are held up for this stance because they had the power to enforce their will on the employers. Musson (1954) describes how when non-craft unions sought to organise women workers, they faced strong opposition from the craft unions and they "came to accept this viewpoint (p.387)". Other unions have a poor record of welcoming



women into their ranks and supporting the cause of equal pay (Drake 1984, Boston 2015).

It wasn't the craft union model of strong collective identity in itself that excluded women. In Cobble's (1990) study of waitresses in the US union HERE, however, she found that the successful organising campaign by women had utilised many of the characteristics of the craft union model. The craft emphasis on pride in the trade and loyalty to others in the same occupation encouraged the women's identity with the union and fellow workers.

Dawson (2010, 2014) concentrates on the failure of the union's internal systems of representation including within the negotiating machinery of collective bargaining to advocate and achieve progress to secure gender equality. She touches on the mixed impact of technological change upon women workers, charting the fall in their numbers as a consequence of mechanisation, especially in bindery occupations but their increase as a result of new systems of composition. The gendered nature and culture of the NGA is a critical issue when it sought to recruit 'non-traditional' (ie: women) workers employed on new typesetting systems such as those utilised by Messenger Newspapers in the research case study. Bradley (1999) believed that employers tended to employ women to fill jobs more prone to the business cycle and technological restructuring. She considered 'gender homogenization', the blurring of gender divisions and the scale of convergence in patterns of employment and work histories. Her conclusion was that the structures of gender segregation had been dented but not displaced (1999: 213).

The male-dominated craft unions were not entirely indifferent to the lot of women, especially those who worked in jobs of close proximity. There were examples of solidarity shown to women in bindery occupations in a number of disputes (Child 1967). In a Gloucester printing company, the men refused to return to work after the 1926 General Strike until all the women were reinstated<sup>22</sup>. In the rare cases where women were indentured as apprentices the union ensured equal pay and conditions (Gennard 1990).

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<sup>22</sup> Gloucester Typographical Association Minutes 1926, held in Gloucestershire Records Office

Union policy may have taken a patronising attitude towards women but the overarching objective was to keep them at bay using any tactic and argument possible. Women were segregated into jobs identified as unskilled, emphasising elements of the job deemed to be masculine. Dawson (2010: 96) described this as sectional interests taking “the guise of gender interests masquerading as class interests.”

In regard to technological change, there is a balance between the economics of capital investment and the price of labour. Employed in Warrington in the 1880s, women were on such low pay it was unnecessary for the business to introduce the new Linotype machines in order to remain competitive. Similar accounts came from women bindery workers and new technology. Macdonald (1904: 94-98) discusses machinery displacing women especially in mechanising hand-work. His research found examples of machinery replacing workers of both sexes but the women were seen as the more dispensable and were more likely to be discharged. As new typesetting machines were introduced in the 1970s and 80s they were seen as easier to operate and as such women could be employed to use them.

The NGA, seeing the changing nature of the labour market through the 1970s, sought to break out of its segregated past with conscious efforts to recruit women, represent them within its structures and abandon its misogynist traditions (Gennard 1990). It dropped its overtly sexist language and practices such as the sole term of ‘father of the chapel’ and the monthly photos of semi-naked women in its journal. The leadership actively sought to recruit women but members were often reluctant. It established a Women’s Committee – initially with a man in the chair (NGA Minutes 1980)! In negotiations with employers the NGA pressed for provisions for maternity and paternity leave, took up issues around sexual harassment and women’s health but such issues were often dropped in the process of collective bargaining (Dawson 2014).

Inequality was deeply embedded in all aspects of employment and the collective bargaining process struggled to address it. Dawson (2014) describes the gender pay gap in printing, how negotiating teams were dominated by men and the “muscular”

approach to the process. Equality issues often failed to get on the agenda and were the first to drop off.

By 1980, male compositors were not only challenged by employers winning over the constraints of craft control through new technology, anti-labour legislation but by women in pursuit of equal access to employment. Whether by feminist incursion or employers taking advantage of lower-paid women workers, technology was breaking down the male bastions of the NGA and its control over the labour supply. Men saw their power diminishing and women had new opportunities for work but for both men and women, their collective power over capital was being reduced. Cockburn (1983) makes the case for fusing socialism with feminism and highlights the contradictions and confusions caused by a highly segmented labour market and its impact upon class solidarity. White-collar workers, women and men, look down on male manual production workers as being socially inferior despite earning considerably more money. "Men are torn between a working-class identity and a masculine one – all too often subordinating the former to the latter" (Cockburn 1983: 213).

In her feminist analysis of the technological change in printing, Cockburn does not predict or propose the mechanisms for transforming the industry and in whose interest such change would be. Technological advance is presented as an inevitable development yet highly gendered. She questioned whether the new-style workforce, with more knowledge of machinery and labour, will stay loyal to capitalism. She wondered if "advanced technology carries the seeds of revolution within it" (1983: 218). But when the book was republished in 1991 she afterward acknowledged that employers had used technological change combined with legal reforms to "scupper" the newspaper compositors (1991: 234) and while the number of women in the industry had increased their status relative to men had not.

### **Strategic choice in craft unions**

The 'culture' of the craft workplace, its ground rules and atmosphere, rooted in the labour process, could be determined by the workers themselves, acting together. If

everyone decides to take a tea break at a certain time, it is hard for management to prevent it. If there is a shared position that a particular task takes twenty minutes, it becomes part of the operation even if it can be done in fifteen. These practices then offer points to bargain over. If the boss wants it done in fifteen there is a price! Workers found a variety of forms of collective action to gain power and influence in the workshop such as calling meetings, refusal to train others, slow-downs and strikes. They could determine the inner life of the workplace often through unilateral action but also through compromise and accommodation (Hyman 1975: 152).

At what level within the union decisions could be made depended upon the power of the chapel and branch. NGA branches, called local 'graphical societies', retained considerable autonomy, but the industrial power existed at the point of production within chapels, especially for time-critical newspapers and magazines.

Blissett (2013: 71) confirms the success of the craft union model in generating an "almost doctrinaire belief in the defence and perpetuation of chapel and branch autonomy". He concluded from his analysis of policy-making in British and Australian unions, that this made adjusting union strategies to cope with a transformed institutional and industrial environment extremely problematic.

The diagram in Appendix Seven sets out the range of options for union leaders and how they relate to unions built around strong occupational identity. Much of the literature considers strategic choice as being primarily the orientation with employers, to seek confrontation or cooperation. Yet strong occupational unions can adopt a variety of positions and have been typified by seeking good relations with employers. Darlington (1994) considered that the strength of militant chapels was constrained by the officialdom of the union.

For unions such as the NGA, its leaders took a largely pragmatic approach to each employer except when they sought significant advances in the terms of national agreements as the case studies will examine. 'Strategic choice' for its leaders often concerned such matters as the level of contributions, the range and extent of membership benefits, the alteration of demarcation boundaries, relations with other unions and the allocation of resources to recruitment.

## **Strategy and associational power in printing**

Chapter Two described the nature of associational power. Craft unions saw little if anything to gain from association with other crafts (Cole, 1915: 213-214) and the relationship with other unions was based on the need to guard against membership incursion.

After the Second World War there were a dozen or so printing unions, some representing a very narrow craft group or occupational sector. By the 1980s they had merged into either the NGA or Society of Graphical and Allied Trades (SOGAT). In commercial printing the respective territories were clear, in newspapers the demarcation lines were more open to argument. The unions had mostly been part of the National Agreements covering commercial printing and the newspaper industry. Relations between unions became strained when technological change combined different union functions and led to competition over work (Gennard 1990).

The friendly society benefits of craft unionism, the social networks and internal organisational issues meant they focused most of their attention on matters confined to their own business and relations with employers within their own particular industry (Fox 1958). Some craft unions, such as in engineering operated within a wide range of industrial sectors where relations with other unions was a constant matter of importance (Mortimer 1960). The degree to which a union needed to influence allied unions depended upon its status within the sectoral agreements in terms of membership numbers and industrial power.

The NGA worked within cross-union committees within its own printing back-yard but it did not concentrate on building strong alliances across the labour movement or within the wider community (Gennard 1990). That did not mean that individual members and activists did not take a very full part in such affairs and many represented the union on trades councils and college committees. Some became councillors and JPs. Some individual activists played leading roles within trade union history. For example R Hartman was the Secretary of the campaign to free the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834. Compositors SC Nicholson and WH Wood called the first

Trades Union Congress in 1868 and CW Bowerman of the London compositors was the TUC Secretary 1911-1921 (TUC 1934, 1968b).

Institutionally, craft unions tended to be strong enough to focus upon their own affairs with little need for allies or partners. In the 1970s the NGA was required to resign from the TUC after it registered under the Heath government reforms in defiance of a policy of opposition. At the time its leadership adopted a politically 'moderate' position, supported by delegate meetings and membership votes (Gennard 2000). If there was what could be described as a shared ideology within the union it was not a left-wing one. In 1973 NGA members voted by two-to-one not to take part in the TUC May Day protest strike as recommended by the leadership (Milligan 1976). It was not a 'labourist' union in the way Cole (1915) describe as having a narrow focus on improving wages and conditions in that it had a wider role in membership support as a society of workers with shared interests.

Through the 1970s, as some aspects of print production became less dependent upon skilled craft workers the NGA sought to follow the job into in-plant units. This clashed with the dominant unions who had bargaining rights such as in local government. The case study of the 1980 printing dispute for this research is an example of the NGA disregarding the views of the other unions in the industry. Cole (1915) stressed the risk in such independent actions and felt that as long as a craft union remained on good terms with the employers and semi-skilled workers did not threaten to encroach on its territory, it could remain detached from other associations.

As technological change eroded its positional power, the NGA was forced to engage with other unions that represented members competing for the same work. It also need to build alliances beyond its industry to gain wider political and industrial influence. The case studies in the study expose the challenges this involved in a relatively short period of time.

## **Technological change**

When I was first elected as a full-time officer for the NGA in 1981 there were still a number of small-town newspaper offices and commercial printers that would have been entirely familiar to William Caxton from 1476. Pieces of lead were assembled into words, lines and pages with a relief image so that, when ink was applied and paper pressed on them, a printed image was produced.

Mechanisation had sped-up the setting of type. but skilled and experienced operators were still required. Like a manual typewriter a bell would ring as the operator approached the end of a line. Judgement was needed over whether the next word could be squeezed in, carried over to the next line or hyphenated. The preceding spaces would be adjusted to 'justify' the line to fit the column width, known as the 'measure'. The columns of mirror-image type were arranged into pages using a complex puzzle of lead pieces, blocks for pictures, headlines and rules then squeezed into a frame with such accuracy that none of the pieces would come loose during the printing process.

The letterpress printing presses got faster as ways were developed to turn the flat block of type into a rotary drum. But this was overtaken by developments in lithography, another age-old process using a chemical process to separate the printed image. Lightweight aluminium plates and rubber drums to 'offset' the printed image allowed much faster printing, including both sides of the paper at the same time.

Using photography to etch the image to the plate meant that words and pictures could be reproduced in ways, other than through the arrangement of pieces of metal. Phototypesetting was quickly overtaken by computerisation and 'desk-top publishing'. In a couple of decades, the printing office changed from a craft workshop to a design studio, from frames of typesets to banks of computers in open-plan offices. The craft of the compositor was largely eliminated.

The first technological challenge to the power of the compositor was at the turn of the twentieth century when mechanical means were invented to set type. Employers and manufacturers argued that the new machines were not that much more

complicated to operate than a typewriter. Monotype, the manufacturer of the leading typesetting machine in commercial printing, offered training courses aimed at women (Musson 1954) but the unions were able to restrict entry to them.

Unlike the Linotype machine, the Monotype system required a keyboard operator and a casting attendant. This led to demarcation and payment disputes between unions and the employers (Musson 1954: 210). As an apprentice compositor I learned Monotype keyboard, casting and hand composition. The casting room was more akin to a foundry operation, turning a molten lead alloy into hot metal type. By the time of my experience the union had embraced the role of the casting process as a skilled function and part of its occupational identity. This was not a given and had to be socially constructed by the union. In trade typesetters and small print shops, the Typographical Association was able to claim this work but in some establishments there was inter-union rivalry over the operation and employers sought to employ caster attendants on lower pay than the compositor.

In 1911 national strike action was threatened by the compositors that succeeded in maintaining control of the machines, secured higher pay rates for their use and a reduced working week but the numbers of workers employed fell (Musson 1954: 144, Zeitlin 1979). The International Typographical Union, in the US, acquired Linotype machines in order to train its members to use them (Lipset 1968) and retain control.

Zeitlin (1979: 272) in his comparative analysis between compositors and engineers 1890-1930 concluded that it was the market structure which:

create the pressures for change and set the limits for confrontation, and the divisions within the ranks of workers and employers themselves which so influence each party's relative strength.

Employers sought to utilise technological change and so-called scientific management to break-up and disrupt the power of skilled workers in order to pay the lowest price (Braverman 1975). The result has not been the elimination of labour but its displacement to other occupations and industries. The compositors had won command over the technology whereas the engineers faced competition from other



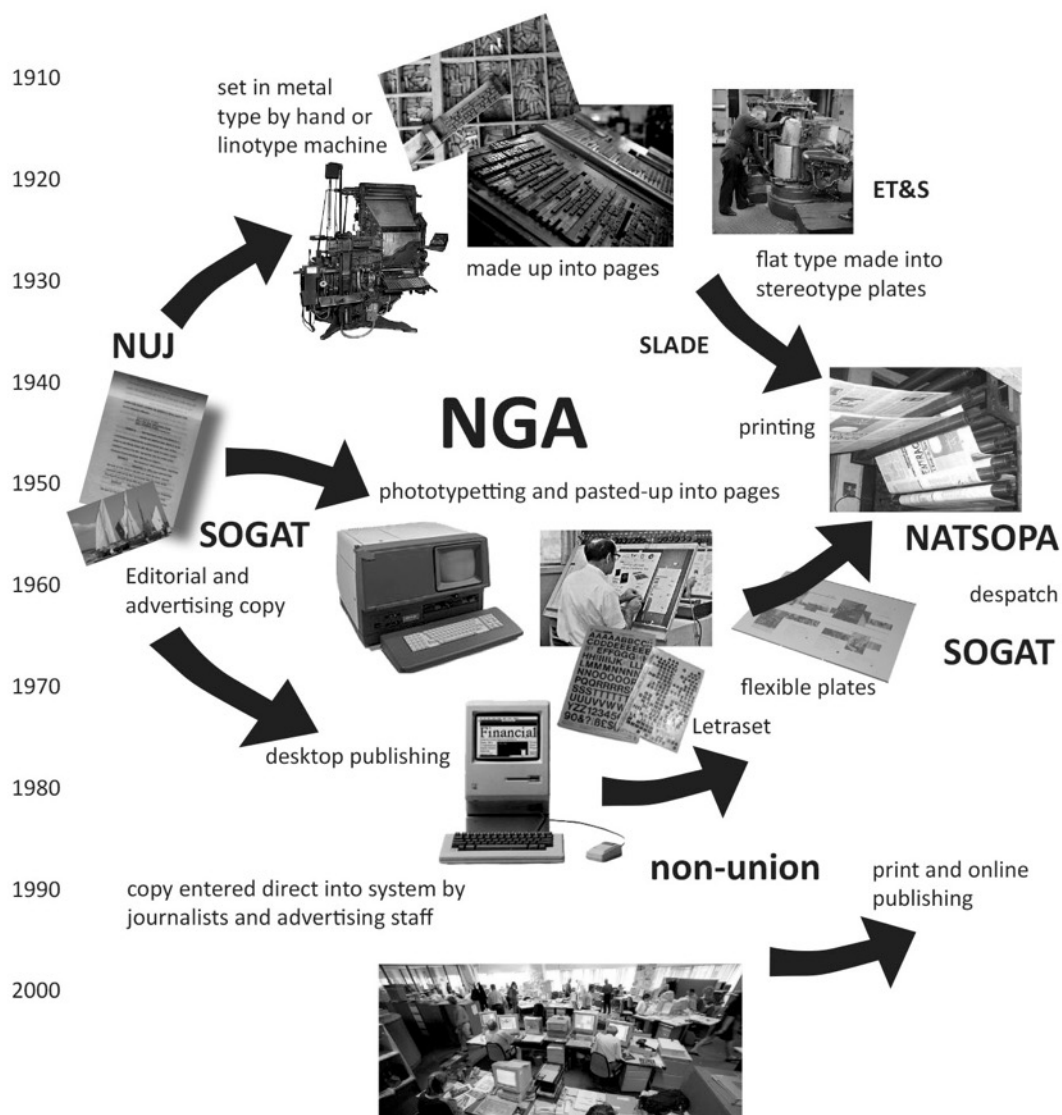
groups of workers. The engineering employers maintained far greater unity than their counterparts in printing, partly due to the nature of the product market (Zeitlin 1979).

An important feature of the printing industry was its fragmented nature involving a complex network of specialist skills and production methods (Rainnie 2016). A printed product passed through numerous different firms from conception, design, composition, plate-making, printing and binding. Trade typesetters would be used for particular jobs, specialists may be required or expensive equipment such as large cameras and scanners with highly skilled operators. Metal type or 'camera-ready artwork' could arrive from multiple sources to make-up a single job. Different presses were used depending upon the size, volume and colours required. The nature of the industry provided unions with particular leverage provided they could organise solidarity action across the industry. If the union faced a dispute with an employer, members in other firms were expected not to send or receive work from the company until the conflict was resolved (Gennard 1990). This significantly extended the union's positional power beyond the individual workplace.

For a union whose strength relies on the nature of the production process and the skills required, technological change poses a particular threat. Phelps-Brown (1986: 24) wrote "Technical change was liable to bypass any toll-gate held by a union". Davies (1986: 34) writes of the 'social bias' of technology in that it is "not an autonomous force but used to increase managerial control over workers".

As described in Chapter Two, the positional power of craft unionism depends upon the technology and requirements of the production process. The Linotype and Monotype machines may have been owned by the capitalist but it was the compositors who, through their organisational strength, retained the power of knowledge to utilise them. Unions that relied upon control of a craft labour support made sure they were aware of any new ideas and technologies that might challenge their position. Through the 1970s and 80s, NGA members and the union's leaders were well aware of the changing technology (Gennard 1990) and the threat it posed for traditional organising and the structures of the industry.

## The transformation of newspaper production



### 3.5 The way technology changed newspaper production and union influence

By the 1970s, instead of setting type with pieces of lead, new photo-typesetters were coming onto the market. Products such as *Letraset* and golf-ball typewriters provided an alternative to 'hot metal' typesetting. Authors, journalists and advertising copy-takers traditionally typed out the words so that the compositors could 'set' them into type. As technology advanced it became feasible to type the copy directly into the composition system and eliminate the compositor almost completely. This 'direct input' or 'single keystroke' significantly reduced the workforce and led to a struggle for control of the jobs that were left. Journalists, advertising staff and compositors were pitted against each other for the work.

The technology caused tensions between unions as they competed for influence over the process. The National Society of Operative Printers, Graphical and Media Personnel (NATSOPA) saw new technology as ending the barriers of craft exclusiveness and largely welcomed it (Martin R. 1981). The Society of Graphical and Allied Trades (SOGAT) Delegate Conference in May of 1983 carried a motion highly critical of the NGA and its “continued encroachment” into areas of its members work. It called on the union to meet the NGA’s “incursions head on” (SOGAT minutes 1983). This was a contest between unions in which the employer was not a ‘neutral’ party. Given the choice, the employer opted for none of them and sought to eliminate trade union influence all together (Gennard 1990). Union leaders saw joint action as the most effective to control the new technology but as Martin (1981: 158) pointed out: “Like virtue, unity is desirable in principle but inconvenient in practice”. The NGA sought to use its control of the final make-up and printing to retain control over the process. Artwork arriving at an office would need to carry an impression or stamp signed by the union chapel from where it came. Members were instructed not to touch artwork without such a stamp or label (Gennard 1983 and Dunn 1985). If the union could not ensure the work came through their organised workplaces, it would seek to organise those places that did it. The union had to learn the skills of recruiting new members just at a time when their popularity was poor (Blissett 2013).

Members looked to their Association for support in the face of rapid advance of new technology and expected its past success to be maintained. The union developed ways to help members retrain and learn new skills. This grew to encompass wider learning opportunities and the development of a suite of services to support members (Gennard 1987). But these appear to have been mainly branch-level initiatives rather than a strategic approach by the union leadership.

The NGA National Council established a special committee to consider its response to what was described as ‘work by-passing the composing room’. It studied emerging processes and analysed technological developments in the US.<sup>23</sup> Griffin (1984)

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<sup>23</sup> NGA National Council Minutes 17.3.83 – see Appendix 2

compared the process of technological change and craft control across the UK, Australia and America. At the time he was writing he found that the UK unions had been able to maintain a broadly united front against employers seeking to challenge craft controls. In New York the privileged position of the Typographical Union left them struggling to gain support from other print unions and Griffin (1984: 57) found that in both Sydney and New York the lack of inter-union solidarity and therefore the inability to stop publication was crucial in favour of employers. Griffin reflected on events at *The Times* newspaper in London in 1979 when the employer sought to break the unions through an eleven-month lock-out. The tactic failed as it united the unions in the dispute. The rival Fleet Street publishers raised production to fill the gap – and with it employed many of the workers locked out (Martin R. 1981).

Earlier, in 1972 T Bailey Forman began to take an aggressive stance against union control at the *Nottingham Evening Post*. The newspaper appeared throughout a number of disputes by using strike breakers and agency copy instead of local journalists.

### **Amalgamation as a strategic option**

Narrow, craft-based unions faced with the loss of their craft sought mergers with other unions to gain access to new jobs or retraining. An example was when new platemaking technologies replaced the work done by members of the National Society of Electrotypers and Stereotypers. Workers making stereo plates for letterpress printing were threatened by new technology and the shift to lithographic plates. They could not compete with the more powerful NGA for control over new job functions. In 1967 the small craft union transferred into the NGA protecting its members employment and accommodating retraining into the wider work of the composing room (Gennard 1990: 98-100).

A merger option would relax demarcation boundaries and would secure the security of officials (Streeck and Visler 1998). Union mergers sought to unite workers in the same workplace or sector, preventing the employer from exploiting union divisions and maximising resources (Gennard 2008). The process of amalgamation, however,

dilutes occupational identity and disrupts established formal and informal networks and customs (Waddington 2000, 2005). Common bonds established through a narrow, shared experience can be lost in the need to develop a new unity of purpose in the new union. Even informal networks and unofficial factions can be disrupted in the process of merger (Waddington 2005). In contrast, Smale (2018) observed that smaller, niche unions have survived even in a relatively poor financial state, opting not to pursue defensive mergers.

One niche union was the Association of Correctors of the Press (ACP) that represented proof readers, initially within a fifteen mile radius of the London Post Office, who passed a tough entrance examination and could show six years' experience as a copy holder (Shane 1954). Of the 120-130 candidates who took the annual exam only a quarter passed (Gennard 1990: 96-97). The ACP sought to uphold high standards of proof reading and much of the discussions in its journal were as much about correct grammar as pay negotiations<sup>24</sup>. Nicknamed the 'Comma Club', it had a lively level of membership participation devoted largely to upholding the professional status of the job and acting as a voluntary employment agency (Shane 1954). The Typographical Society and then the NGA considered all its composing room members as being capable of proof reading and encroached on the ACP membership. Many ACP readers wanted employment in the growing industry outside London where the NGA held sway. The amalgamation promised designated representation for proof-readers at every level of the NGA to assuage fears that their identity would be lost. In the end the vote for merger was carried by just 51 votes (Gennard 1990: 98). Whatever gains or losses followed for proof-readers, the features of their exclusive society and its focus on the professional aspects of the occupation were diminished.

Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2018) share the view that rank-and-file involvement is greatest in unions with a skilled and homogeneous membership and the tendency towards larger conglomerate unions weakens internal democracy creating strong and authoritarian leaders who retain control through the largely passive consent of members. Thomas (2017) found that in the larger general unions

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<sup>24</sup> Journals kept in the Three Shires Graphical Society library

corporate management and efficiency took precedence over internal democracy. Faniel (2012:141) argued that the bureaucratisation of trade unions is ill-suited to a real internally democratic operation and that passivity of members undermines the effectiveness of the union. Conglomerate unions must preserve their internal cohesion at the expense of the sense of proximity and camaraderie held within occupational groups. Lyddon (2015) came to a similar conclusion and that general unions, where no closed group of workers had a dominant interest, tended to have low membership participation and display the greatest difference between members and professional officers.

Conglomerate union strategists and policy makers can become bogged-down in bureaucratic routines (Hyman 2007) or feel obliged to champion a 'one model fits all' approach to the large and diverse membership needs. Craft or 'closed' unions are able to lever control over labour supply and have a more assertive democratic control over decision-making (Allen 1954, Turner 1962).

Undy (2018: 141) describes unions as collectives formed from disparate individuals and groups, "divided and united by occupation" and as such embodying permanent tensions and fault lines that have implications for governance and structure. In 'general' unions there is conflict between the priorities that may be given to members in certain sectors and the need to achieve and maintain unity across the whole union. When the Transport and General Workers Union was established its structure sought to balance trade groups with territorial representation (Coates and Topham 1991: 841, Adonis 2020). Unite the Union has 22 industrial sectors<sup>25</sup>. The National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) wrestled with its structure to ensure it retained the collective identity members had in their association as it grew into new sectors (Spoor 1967), an issue UNISON faced. In large conglomerate unions generic services become more important and centralised. Membership identity is inevitably less regarded and decentralised in the name of greater class unity. As an ally of the syndicalist movement, Cole argued that it was a fallacy that in the 'greater' unionism, small unions must necessarily lose their

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<sup>25</sup> [www.unitelegalservices.org/unite-sectors](http://www.unitelegalservices.org/unite-sectors)

identity. He lists other benefits of larger combinations, the prime point being that it is “superior in its better adaptation to the needs of industrial warfare” (1915: 215).

When covering a wide range of occupations and industrial sectors it is difficult to speak with one voice for all members. The need to protect the union from legal challenge, potential impact from the action of one group on another, such as demarcation and pay differentials, means that decisions on collective bargaining and industrial action are controlled from the top (Streeck and Visler 1998). Welfare aid and services, which provided ‘cradle-to-grave’ craft membership, have been sacrificed in many of the larger unions and with them has gone the less tangible benefits that come from the strong community of workers within a special interest group. The union becomes a more distant institution rather than a combination of workers and ceases to be embedded in the everyday work process. The union is seen as only needed when a problem arises and as Streeck and Visler (1998: 41) describe, most members do not need the union most of the time.

In conclusion both Waddington (2000) and Undy (2008) found that mergers, at best, have prevented members from leaving but the overall membership decline that led to the amalgamation continued unabated. This has proved the case with the trajectory for NGA, merging into Unite, then Amicus and currently Unite<sup>26</sup>. Dawson (2010: 97) concluded that the mergers in printing had helped to mitigate the loss of members rather than helping to establish unionism in more promising job territories.

In Paul Smith’s (2001) study of unionisation in the road haulage industry, he concluded that British drivers failed to create a powerful union like the US Teamsters devoted exclusively to their interests. Such a sectional occupational union might have helped them raise their status and achieve a clear identity rather than becoming a rather isolated group inside the Transport and General Workers union.

Despite the advantages of combined resources and expertise, the merger process has negative effects on membership identity and mobilisation. These processes have left an increasingly centralised a top-down union leadership and diminished

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<sup>26</sup> TUC statistics

membership participation (Murray 2017, Waddington 2000).

Streeck and Visler (1998) concluded that centralised service provision of the more general unions led to decentralised representation and participation. Combined strike funds in conglomerate unions reduce the vulnerability when exposed to a dominant sector and its fortunes or employer offensives. But they also found it led to greater central control over strike action. Leaders need to take into account the impact of action on other groups of members. They cannot deploy identity as a strategic tool in the way narrow occupational groups can.

The fragmented and fluid labour market has taken away much of the ground upon which craft unions flourished. Visser (2012) concluded there was no future in craft or occupational unionism. It was, in his view, a form of exclusive unionism suited to stable occupations that lasted a lifetime and not suited to the current labour market. But he does argue for unions to develop the offer around training and mid-career progression assistance. Careers may have become more fluid and the nature of work more insecure but as some defined job roles disappear new ones emerge around which a collective identity can be built. Smale concluded that many unions retaining a niche identity have successfully exploited a position in the labour market and advocates a systematic reconsideration of contemporary union identity (2018: 22).

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter contextualized the nature of craft trade unionism and how this was typified within printing. It examines how these unions were founded upon significant positional power in relation to employers due to the technology, production process and industrial structure (Child 1967). It charts a very long time-frame during which the fundamentals of the production process changed little and embedded traditions that helped shape industrial relations. It helps explain why these were engrained in the lifeblood of the union to be cherished and protected against the challenges from employers and the state.

The relationship between workers and their employer was the bedrock of union purpose. The union's organisational strength, however, was based upon factors



wider than the individual workplace. It formed a community of workers with shared interests bound together with systems for welfare provision, social networks and occupational status (Musson 1954). This model of trade unionism developed 'social capital' through the informal networks and systems of mutual support (Jarley 2005). This reinforced the organisational resilience and the sense of group pride. Such strong sectionalism, however, generated divisions between unions (Lane 1974).

The closed shop was a central feature of the organisation of the NGA but while this exclusive approach built solidarity it created disunity within the wider workforce and was based upon gender division (Cockburn 1983). Such features of printing craft unionism helped develop organisational strength but left it vulnerable to technological, societal and industrial change. The tradition of self-reliance and exclusivity left such unions potentially isolated and lacking in associational power.

To explore these issues in more depth, this research examines two significant disputes in the printing industry in the 1980s. It is necessary to set the context for the case studies, which made this period pivotal for the future of the union and the wider labour movement. British unions, by and large, favoured free collective bargaining over 'institutional' power through regulation, but this was challenged by a Conservative government determined to reduce union power. The next chapter, therefore, will examine the battle over industrial relations reforms and how governments targeted the mechanisms relied upon by craft unions in printing such as 'secondary action' and the closed shop. The chapter looks at the clash of ideology that pitted a powerful union founded upon strong collective identity against a government set on radical trade union reform.

## **Politics and the law, the industrial relations background**

### **Introduction**

The case studies in this research reflect a period of turbulent labour market change. In the 1980s the printing unions faced challenges from the Thatcher governments' reforms of labour law and from the introduction of new technology. This chapter sets the scene and summarises the background. It explains the sense of foreboding apparent after two decades of controversy over trade union reform. For Conservative Party policy-makers and ministers the reforms introduced in 1980 and 1983 had not been tested and were not secure.

Reform to the UK's 'voluntarist' system of labour relations regulation was considered by Labour as well as Conservative governments over the 1960s and 1970s. It was from 1979, however, that Conservative governments led by Margaret Thatcher sought to use the law to radically reform the UK's economic and social landscape (Wedderburn 1987, Dorey 1995, 2009, 2014).

Explained in this chapter is the voluntarist legacy in UK labour relations, dating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Parliament enacted statutory trade union immunities from common law liabilities. 'Free collective bargaining' set the terms of employment for most British workers rather than a state regulated system. Unions, especially those with the industrial power to benefit from free collective bargaining, fought to defend it. This was especially true for the industrially powerful printing unions.

This chapter considers how the industrial relations system of the UK shaped the way trade unions developed and how it tended to focus attention on positional and organisational power at the workplace rather than institutional power provided by legislation to facilitate collective bargaining or provide a framework of workplace rights and minimum standards (Schamlz and Dörre 2020). The chapter examines the context of successive government attempts over the 1960s and 1970s at industrial relations reform and how the trade union movement was able to resist such changes

until the advent of the Conservative government of 1979. Margaret Thatcher led the new government after a period of internal policy debate over a step-by-step approach to trade union reform (Dorey 1995). The Chapter uses relevant literature and confidential Conservative Party papers, held in the Bodleian Library, recently released for research purposes. The chapter goes on to examine the role of the TUC in coordinating the trade union response to these reforms. These set the context for the case studies in which the NGA became the first union to be confronted by an employer utilizing the new laws.

### **Whose freedom?**

Much debate on industrial relations over the twentieth century centred on the extent to which law and the courts influenced and regulated collective bargaining and the operation of trade unions. The Webbs said, although legal, trade unions' status was precarious (1920). GDH Cole wrote how unions came into conflict with the law as soon as they took any action (1924: 140). Throughout the history of trade unions there has been conflict over the degree to which the law regulates their activities. This research looks at a time when this issue was at the centre of political debate but the nature of employment law remains a contentious topic<sup>27</sup>.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries unions were given a set of immunities from civil action that heralded what became known as a system of 'voluntarism'. British law developed a system of collective laissez-faire to limit the intervention of the courts within industrial relations. The law stood aside except to accommodate collective bargaining (Marsh, 1992: 3, Kahn-Freund 1959: 224). In 1911 Winston Churchill told the House of Commons: "It is not good for trade unions that they be brought in contact with the courts, and it is not good for the courts" (Pelling 1982: 901). British law made a virtue of trying to keep out of relations between employers and trade unions (Brown 2011, Palmer 1986). Without a positive framework of rights underpinned by law, however, unions relied on industrial

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<sup>27</sup> Motion to 2020 TUC Congress as an example

strength through restricting the labour supply or by weight of numbers and solidarity (Frege 2004, 2003; Frege and Kelly 2011). The 'voluntarist' framework of British industrial relations suited those unions with significant industrial or positional power. Strong unions wanted no legal intervention and sought little assistance from the state as they possessed the capacity to starve the employer of critical skills (Lévesque and Murray 2010). This was buttressed by highly effective organisational systems and structures to regulate the terms for their members (Clegg 1954: 291). In the early nineteenth century craft workers believed it was their discretion to determine their terms. Clegg, Fox and Thompson (1964: 4) cite the London Union of Compositors who in 1834 declared: "what we alone have a right to regulate, the value of our labour".

Academics argued over the extent to which capitalism was prepared to accommodate free collective bargaining (Hyman 1987, Ewing 1998: 2, Dickens and Hall 2003). The debate raged about comparative industrial relations systems (Kahn-Freund 1959, Donovan 1968, Hyman 1972, Milligan 1976, Wedderburn 1986, Metcalf 1989). The unequal development of relations and a reliance on industrial power placed emphasis on shop-floor leadership and adversarial bargaining tactics to secure advances for members rather than political influence and legal protections. Unions resisted legal reforms that might impinge upon their industrial actions and freedom to organise themselves (McIlroy 1990). This was especially true for powerful industrial unions including those in the printing industry.

The voluntary system, with few legal safeguards, left behind those workers not able to organise themselves. Alternative systems, more reliant upon a legal framework of rights (institutional power), were developed across continental Europe after the Second World War, along with the concept of 'social partnership' in which unions, employers and government were tied into a system of mutual engagement (see e.g. Hyman 2005).

## Post-war industrial relations

The post-war period saw trade union membership grow and collective bargaining become a more central feature of the labour market (Undy 2015). Printing in common with other craft and manufacturing trades developed sophisticated joint arrangements for conditions of employment and apprentice numbers, training and accreditation. Most terms of employment, determined by national agreements between the unions and federations of employers, included various forms of dispute resolution. Whilst the Conservative Party was reluctant to legislate to regulate trade unions, some on the right of the Party, pressed for regulations to limit the closed shop, the frequency of strikes, particularly unofficial ones, and the financial support unions gave to the Labour Party (McKelvey 1953; Dorey 2006).

Conservatives increasingly blamed trade unions for economic problems and Freidrich Hayek in *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) argued that unions had become uniquely privileged institutions to which the general rules of law do not apply. These rights, he claimed rendered the market system ineffective. Through the 1960s and 70s the debate raged about the nature of industrial relations with a growing clamour within the Conservative Party for restrictions on trade unions.

The Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations in 1968 chaired by Lord Donovan supported reform of collective bargaining but unions sought to retain the status quo of the voluntarist approach. The TUC argued that the State should stand aside with an attitude of abstention and formal indifference (Woodcock 1968, McCarthy 1972). The Labour Government in 1969 responded to the *Donovan Report* with proposals for a new framework of industrial relations in a White Paper, *'In Place of Strife'*. After a bitter dispute with the unions, the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson agreed to abandon most of the White Paper. Barbara Castle felt the trade union movement "had done itself great harm by its 'hands off us' attitude and would pay the price under a Tory government" (Castle 1993: 424-425). Undy (2015: 14) concluded that the episode could, retrospectively, be seen as: "a missed opportunity, rather than a betrayal of union rights". The divisions over *In Place of Strife* were perceived as a factor in the defeat of the Labour

Government in 1970 but it emboldened trade unions to oppose future attempts to restrict their activities whilst convincing Conservatives that a robust and more regulatory, interventionist approach was required (Dorey 1995).

Rising inflation in the 1970s saw increased industrial action over pay. The 1971 Industrial Relations Act sought to stabilise industrial relations by placing responsibility on union leadership to regulate industrial action, if necessary, through the courts. The Act, influenced by the American model of regulation (Fosh, Morris, Martin, Smith and Undy 1993) was a complex range of measures including a requirement on unions to register in order to retain immunities, legally binding collective agreements, a new Industrial Relations Court, rights for workers not to belong to a union and ways to hold a union responsible for the action of any of its members (IBID). Dorey (1995: 97) believed that most union members supported the reforms but were: “none the less readily mobilised against the Act by their union leaders”. The Trades Union Congress, according to Darlington (2018), reluctantly called a 'Day of Action' in protest, with a 'Kill the Bill' march through London. The TUC required its member unions not to comply with the Bill's provisions and organised further demonstrations in protest. The most effective tactic was to ensure that most affiliated unions refused to register under the law (Dorey 1995: 98).

The NGA broke ranks, however, and complied with the legislation claiming that it had to protect its special financial arrangements to pay unemployment and other provident benefits to members. The TUC did not accept the NGA's special pleading and it was suspended from membership at the 1972 Congress. The union's isolation from the rest of the TUC reflected its ability to operate effectively regardless of the new restrictions. Its industrial power left it immune from the measures and it was prepared to be ostracised by the rest of the movement.

Early in 1972 the mineworkers took national strike action for the first time since 1926. They had significant public support and coal was the principal fuel for electricity generation and gas production. The large gas works at Saltley in Birmingham was used to store coking coal and Arthur Scargill from the Mineworkers' Union organised a picket of the depot. The picket grew each day and on 10 February

1972 workers from Birmingham factories, especially engineers, joined the picket in large numbers. Faced with the massive crowd, the police ordered the gates to be shut (Tomison 1972). The new tactic of 'flying pickets' to blockade a strategically important site and win a symbolic victory helped determine the outcome of the dispute. Shortly afterwards the National Coal Board made an improved pay offer and the dispute was settled. Mass picketing and secondary action to back-up strike action had proved successful. This physical trial of strength between union pickets and the police became an emblematic struggle for the labour movement, dramatized in theatre and song. Echoes of this incident return in the case study of the Messenger dispute in 1983. Stung by their failure at Saltley, the police took measures to prevent a repetition (Wiles 1985).

Later in 1972, dockers at the Chobham Farm container depot in Newham took unofficial action and began picketing the site. The action continued despite a legal injunction to stop. Five shop stewards refused to appear before the court and were arrested for contempt of court. Imprisoned in Pentonville Prison on 21 July 1972, they became known as the 'Pentonville Five'. Following their arrest, a rolling series of strikes became virtually an unofficial national strike (Pelling 1979: 279-80). The TUC called for an official national strike on 31 July, demanding the release of the five shop stewards. Thousands of striking workers marched to Pentonville Prison. The Government backed down and the five were released when the Official Solicitor overturned the arrests.

Yet trade union resistance was not clear-cut. Later in 1972 railway workers took industrial action in pursuit of a pay rise, led by the powerful, yet not traditionally militant, train-drivers' union, ASLEF (Ferris 1972). The Government turned to its Industrial Relations Act to impose a 'cooling-off' period. Ignoring the TUC's outright opposition, the unions complied and when action was due to recommence the Government used the Act to require a members' ballot. The unions complied again and when the votes produced huge majorities in favour of the action, a settlement was agreed. Unions claimed victory, side-stepping the fact they had breached the position adopted by the TUC.

The failure of the Act had a significant effect on future Conservative policy makers and a determination to avoid making such martyrs (Marsh 1992). Lord Scarman concluded that the Industrial Relations Act 1971 was an attempt to subject the power of the trade unions to the rule of law of the land; “The challenge which faces lawyers is to win and retain public confidence in the law as the instrument of control” (cited in Weir 1986: 132-133).

The TUC later reflected on the defeat of the 1971 Act and concluded that the aggressive posture adopted by unions made the law unworkable. Unions had successfully seen off hostile legislation through tactics of outright opposition.

The Conservatives became increasingly split. Pragmatists argued that, like it or not, unions needed to be accommodated and brought into the management of economic policy. Others wanted a more robust assault on trade union power. Auerbach (1993) described the profound shift that was taking place away from the post-war consensus and ‘abstentionist’ approach in relation to the law and industrial relations.

The British economy was rocked by the 1973 Middle East oil crisis and high rates of inflation. In response, the Government capped public sector pay rises. Faced with rapidly diminishing earnings, workers looked to their unions for action. In 1974 the Government faced a second miners’ strike in two years that quickly hit electricity supply. The government took drastic action and commercial users of electricity were limited to three specified consecutive days’ consumption each week. To break the crisis, Heath called a general election over the issue of ‘Who Governs Britain?’. He lost narrowly and after the defeat the Conservative Party argued over the lessons to be learnt over how to constrain trade union power.

### **Labour’s approach to industrial relations**

Labour in 1974 had to govern with a small parliamentary majority and faced serious economic problems. Harold Wilson, the new Prime Minister, within minutes of re-entering No. 10, asked that the TUC and the CBI meet him and his new ministers.



The miners' pay claim was swiftly settled and the three-day week brought to an end (Haines 1977: 198). The incoming government repealed the Conservative Industrial Relations Act through the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974 with rules on trade union functioning and legal status, the presumption that a collective agreement is not binding and the immunity of unions who take strike action in contemplation or furtherance of a trade dispute.

Inflation remained high and Labour secured agreements with the TUC over pay policy, limiting wages rises to £6 a week in 1975 and further caps in 1976 and 1977. Inflation fell from 26.9 per cent at its height to around ten per cent<sup>28</sup>. Unions wanted to sustain Labour in power but, with pressure from their rank-and-file, wanted a return to free collective bargaining (Pelling 1979, Taylor 1980). The Government pressed ahead with a five per cent pay cap despite opposition from the TUC and warnings over the consequences, especially amongst the lowest paid public sector workforce. Trade union membership reached a peak at around thirteen million members<sup>29</sup>. By late 1978, anger was growing in the public workforce including refuse collectors, grave-diggers, hospital porters and nurses. In January 1979 a series of strikes took place in what became known as the 'Winter of Discontent'. Rubbish piled up in city streets, picket lines appeared outside hospitals and local councils. In February an agreement was reached with the TUC but the images of strike-prone Britain etched an indelible mark on public opinion. Much of the 1979 General Election was fought around the issue of trade union power and scenes of strikes and rising unemployment helped the Tories to win under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher (Pelling 1979, Taylor 1980, Jackson 1982, Marsh 1992)

In 1979 the NGA was fined £80,000 for blacking firms that advertised in the Nottingham Evening Post. The courts ruled that the NGA had no 'trade dispute' with these companies (Gennard 1990: 475). This ruling was under the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act introduced by Labour to replace the Industrial Relations Act of

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/2647/economics/history-of-inflation-in-uk/>

<sup>29</sup> TUC membership records

the previous Conservative Government but prompted debate over “Are the union above the law?”<sup>30</sup>.

### **The New Right prepares a step-by-step approach**

In the run-up to the 1979 General Election the Conservatives prepared their approach to trade union reform. Policy makers studied the mistakes of previous legislations, especially under Edward Heath – what Auerbach describes as the “political horror of this experience” (Auerbach 1993: 39). The Conservative leadership recognised that all-out war on trade unions and an open strategy to seek revenge would not win support from the electorate or the consent of ordinary trade unionists. Such an approach would lose the party’s claims to be a ‘national party’. The Right, however, believed that their case for major trade union reform had been vindicated. They were gathering strength in the party and opinion hardened against voluntarism and neo-corporatism. The influential economist Friedrich Hayek proposed the restriction of picketing, the abolition of the closed shop, extension of collective agreements and tort immunity of unions – ideas that gained ground in the Conservative Party under its new leadership (Dorey 2013).

The question became not whether a future Conservative Government should seek to reform trade unions but how far and how fast it should go. In an article entitled ‘Preparing to tackle the trade unions by stealth’, David Mahony (1976) a former Bow Group official advocated a more subtle approach in which the strengths and weaknesses of unions would be analysed and ‘guerilla warfare’ tactics adopted. Unions should be softened up before confrontation. Nicholas Scott advised a future Conservative Government to take small evolutionary steps to alter the laws governing trade unions (*The Times* 3 Feb 1976).

The report: *Stepping Stones*, a private ‘communications programme’ produced in 1977 by John Hoskyns and Norman Strauss, aimed to shift the terms of the debate on trade unions and challenge those Conservatives who sought an accommodation

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<sup>30</sup> *Militant*, 13 April 1979

with them. It became a blueprint for the first Thatcher Government, 1979-83. In his diary, Hoskyns reported that Thatcher 'had read the draft report and was thrilled with it'. Yet *Stepping Stones* was far from generally accepted. Lord Thorneycroft, the Conservative Party chairman, interpreted it as a 'smash the unions' strategy and was, according to Hoskyns, anxious to have all copies recalled and destroyed (cited in Taylor 2001).

In confidential Conservative papers, held in the Bodleian Library, the summary of 'Stepping Stones' policy stresses how central trade union reform was to the Party's policy agenda (Conservative Party 1979). Despite a few individual voices to the contrary, anti-unionism was deeply embedded in the Conservative Party with "visceral ideological hostility" (Auerbach 1993: 223; Hyman 1972).

Nicholas Ridley argued that unions must be blamed for rising unemployment: "People must be made to suffer the consequences of their actions, or inaction, once more" (*The Times* Dec 1974). His 1977 *Report of the Nationalised Industries Policy Group*, known as the 'Ridley Plan', was leaked to *The Economist* on 27th May 1978. It proposed how the next Conservative government could fight and defeat trade union action especially in the coal industry. This strategy included being prepared to deal with violent picketing with a "large, mobile squad of police who are equipped and prepared to uphold the law against the likes of the Saltley coke-works mob." Dorey (2013: 176) described it as: "the most ambitious plan for 'taking on the unions'".

There was tension within the Conservative Party, however, between those who did not wish to repeat the experiment of the previous government and wanted a pragmatic approach to unions and those who believed that the Heath Government had failed due to its confused and half-hearted attitude to labour and economic policy (Auerbach 1993). Jim Prior, the Shadow Secretary of State for Employment was reluctant to wage a full-throated war on the unions and stressed the need to address what he saw as the excesses of union practices. He commissioned an *Inquiry in certain trade union recruitment practices* led by Andrew Leggatt QC (1979) which was highly critical of both SLADE and NGA. Both unions refused to cooperate with the Inquiry. Prior singled out the Society of Lithographic Artists Designers and

Engravers (SLADE) that used a system of labels to show that artwork had originated from a union source. Citing the Inquiry, he claimed SLADE was an extreme example of a protection racket amongst printing unions, and this was the sort of practice the Conservatives intended to outlaw.

The *1979 Conservative Party Manifesto* included five key tasks, number one being to strike: “a fair balance between the rights and duties of the trade union movement” (Conservative Party 1979: 7). The Conservatives argued that unions were dominated by a handful of extremists who did not reflect the “common-sense views of most union members” (Conservative Party 1979: 11). The sustained attack by the mainstream media and careful tactics by the Conservatives shifted public opinion (Johnstone, Stewart and Ackers, 2015). The Conservatives emphasized individual rights over the closed shop and claimed that the unions had become dominated by extremists. A survey carried out by Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) in 1978, quoted by Taylor (1980) found that 82 per cent of people believed that unions had too much power in Britain. Nearly three quarters (73%) of trade unionists believed this, although other polls found a marked reduction when the question was whether their own union had too much power. “The Right had shown, cynically and manipulatively, a frightening ability to communicate with the working class’, concluded (Johnstone, Stewart and Ackers, 2015).

The Employment Act 1980 removed unions’ tort immunity for picketing away from an employee’s place of work and for industrial action outside the first customer or supplier of a company in dispute – so-called ‘secondary action’. It also took tentative steps to regulate the closed shop through confirmatory ballots.

Hoskyns argued that exposure of trade union funds was the key to making them behave more responsibly. The Conservative Party papers show the level of preparations for potential conflict and the way the Conservative Party gathered intelligence on the posture of trade unions. A research memo by Peter Shipley called *The State of the Unions* in July 1980 warned “the NUM and the print unions are especially militant. They want total opposition”.<sup>31</sup> The memo speculated the TUC

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<sup>31</sup> Confidential memo 25.2.80 from Conservative Party archive – see Appendix 3

General Council would resist a wholesale campaign of disobedience that encouraged workers to disobey injunctions but: “It could however, be a different matter in the heat of a dispute: a collective response from assorted militants to flout a court order over secondary picketing, for example, is not inconceivable”.

A confidential note on *The Daily Telegraph* notepaper from Peter Utley, a close ally of Thatcher, to Alan Howarth, then a right-wing policy assistant to the Conservative Party considered the need to prepare for serious industrial strife.

It would be desirable for us to set up a very small and secret group to consider now a hypothetical state of affairs in which, during a general strike or something like it, the Government would have to take over a very large measure of the responsibility for the dissemination of information, instructions and exhortations.<sup>32</sup>

Utley postulates over the need to control broadcasting and suggests looking back at the 1926 General Strike when the Government commandeered resources to produce the *British Gazette* but stopped short of controlling the BBC. Utley refers to the failure of the Loyalist strike in Northern Ireland that “was in no small measure due to the degree of *sub rosa* cooperation between the press and the official information service designed to conceal the good start to which the strike got off in many places”. Utley suggests a very small group headed by the Paymaster General are prepared to take charge with one or two “wholly reliable people with media experience”. He nominates Bill Deedes, the former cabinet minister, the *Daily Telegraph* editor and known opponent of the print unions.<sup>33</sup>

Peter Shipley from the Conservative Research Department and a member of the Prime Minister's policy unit in Downing Street 1982-1984, followed up Utley's memo.<sup>34</sup> He suggested the need to consider the recruitment of volunteers and special constables, as in 1926. Shipley was a member of *Shield*, a secret committee

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<sup>32</sup> Confidential memo 22.2.80 from Conservative Party archive – see Appendix 3

<sup>33</sup> Confidential memo 22.2.80 from Conservative Party archive – see Appendix 3

<sup>34</sup> Confidential memo 25.2.80 from Conservative Party archive – see Appendix 3

set up by radical right-wing activists and former intelligence officers in 1976 to brief Thatcher and her aides on 'subversion' (Powerbase 2018).

At the start of Thatcher's first term it appeared that the pragmatists or 'wets' might still hold sway. Jim Prior became the new Secretary of State for Employment, but as the momentum of the New Right gathered pace he became isolated within the cabinet. Prior resisted proposals to restrict union immunity as advocated by Hoskyns, Thatcher's advisor, and deflected the more radical ideas into a Green Paper. Thatcher backed Prior's line in public but supported Hoskyns's in private (Marsh 1992:58). After she consolidated her position, she replaced Prior as Secretary of State for Employment with Norman Tebbit in September 1981 – long sought by Hoskyns – this shifted the agenda quickly and radically to the right. The ensuing Employment Act 1982 significantly narrowed the statutory definition of a trade dispute to conflicts between employers and workers within the UK, opened trade-union funds to tort actions and further regulated the closed shop – see Chapter Eight for more details. Auerbach (1993) highlighted Tebbit's direct intervention in the affairs of unions as his most personal and significant measure. It gave employers, rather than members, the right to seek injunctions and court orders, regulations to shift bargaining power toward employers through limits on industrial action, picketing, etc. and direct regulation over how unions run themselves such as the election of officials, complaints, disciplining members, political funding.

The editorial in *The Sun* warned union leaders: "Don't be foolish". It wrote of "dark rumblings" that unions will resist the government's plans for curbing excessive trade union power. It declared that the public backed the "sensible, moderate" measures to ban secondary picketing and the worst abuses of the closed shop<sup>35</sup>. NGA leaders knew that the proposed laws would make unlawful its most effective industrial tactics. It hoped that employers would not opt to use them for fear of conflict and clung to the policy of opposition declared by the TUC (Gennard 1990).

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<sup>35</sup> Sun editorial 9 July 1979

## **The TUC and the law**

The Trades Union Congress, the longest surviving union federation in the world, has rarely sought to instruct its members to act and was established with limited authority over affiliated unions. Its decisions are made by delegates elected by unions to its annual congress and acted upon by its General Council. It reflects the majority view of its affiliates but has little direction over them. As Darlington points out (2018) the TUC is not the 'General Staff of Labour' able to mobilise working class forces in conflicts with government and employers. It offers to coordinate actions agreed by individual unions but has resisted supporting industrial action in breach of the law. This will be a key feature in one of the case studies for this research. The TUC has never sought to challenge the dominant capitalist system. Its posture has swung depending upon the context in which it operates. Its search for consensus across a wide range of unions results in compromise that may not please everyone.

The TUC called a 'Day of Action' in May 1980 against the Thatcher employment laws and another in support of NHS workers in 1982. Even at the time they were seen to have failed, in that they confirmed the government's narrative that union leaders were out of touch with 'ordinary' members (Marsh 1992). Any union hopes that rescue would come from the return of a Labour Government were dashed when Thatcher won a landslide victory in June 1983. With a fresh mandate, the Right of the Conservative Party were firmly in control and could press ahead with their assault on trade union power. For the NGA this left their time-honoured industrial tactics outlawed at a time when technological change was also threatening their positional power. It clung to a position of non-compliance with the law and refused to contemplate any accommodation with it.

## **Trade Union power resources**

The first chapters of this thesis have studied the nature of craft unionism at a critical time for the Labour Movement facing a period of traumatic change. It has presented the background of a skilled union with a long history of positional power within the workplace and through the regulation of the labour market. The helped develop and

was in turn strengthened by strong organizational power. As such the union largely stood aloof from the wider trade union movement and had little recourse to institutional power provided by the state. It felt little threat from the proposed trade union reforms of the 1970s. But technological change and the arrival of the 1979 Thatcher Conservative government transformed the environment in which the union operated and with it the power resources it could call upon.

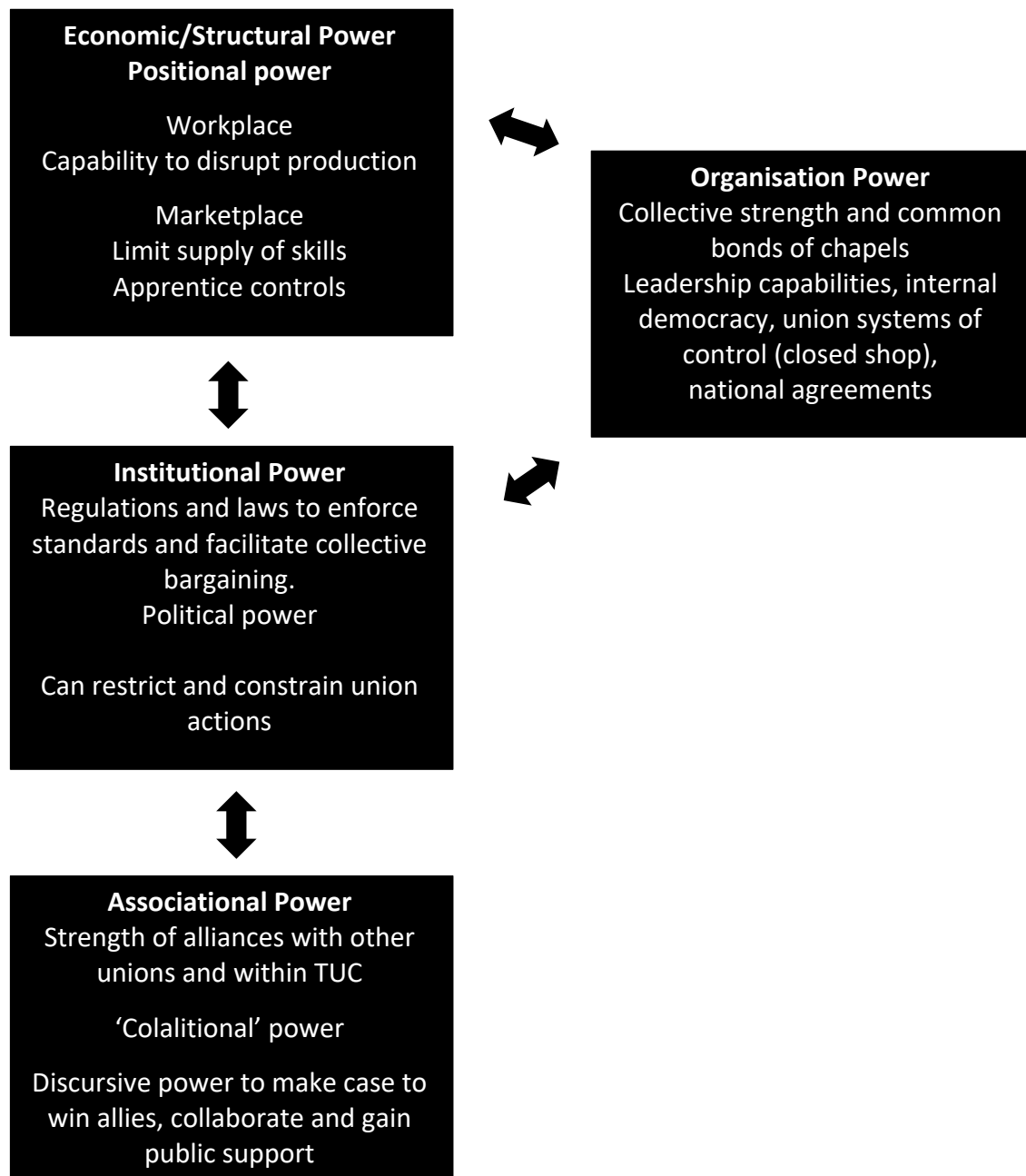
Underpinning this work is a theoretical framework of trade union power resources which helps analyse where unions can derive power. This will provide a valuable approach to the case study research that follows.

The diagram below summarises the nature of trade union power resources for a craft union such as the NGA. It places the power developed through strong collective occupational identity in the 'Organisational Power' box along with the structural resources of the union such as its leadership, internal democracy and closed shop. The diagram shows the symbiotic relationship between organisational and structural power.

Such a diagram cannot be seen as fixed in time and as technological change and political reforms undermined the resources of the craft union so the dynamic process led unions to rely more on institutional and associational power.



## Trade Union Power Resources



Sources: Schamlz and Dörre (2020) Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2013)

## **Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has set the context for the looming battle with trade unions following the election of the Conservative Government in 1979. It charts the policy debates and attempts at industrial relations reforms over the preceding decades up to what became a turning-point for British industrial relations. It looks back to the nature of early trade unions as seen by the Webbs (1896 and 1920) and GDH Cole (1924) and how the law gave no positive rights, rather it allowed unions to function free from civil court actions.

The chapter argues that historically the so-called voluntary approach led to a focus upon bargaining power rather than a wider legal framework where rights were enshrined – positional rather than institutional power. This suited craft unions such as the NGA that built high levels of discipline and solidarity amongst a closed shop membership. Such a focus on sectionalist organising reinforced the unequal pattern of power resources with groups of workers largely unprotected by collective bargaining. The Conservative Party in power from 1979 with Margaret Thatcher as leader viewed trade union reform as an economic imperative and unfinished business from previous failed attempts (Dorey 1995). As the case studies will show, some on the Left were eager to confront the laws in the belief that they could again be defeated by the might of collective action.

This chapter has set the scene for analysis over chapters 6 to 10 of the NGA case study disputes of 1980 and 1983. It has captured the sense of anticipation of major conflict whether in excitement or foreboding for both Government, employers and trade unions.

Chapter five sets out the research methodology and explains how the case studies will be used within the framework provided by the first chapters of the thesis.

## Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter explains the basis of the research for this dissertation. It sets out the principal aims of the research and the methodology to be used.

The research, set within the theoretical framework provided by the preceding chapters, examines the roles of occupational identity in craft solidarity and their impact on union structure and leadership. The reliance upon positional power within the production process was threatened by technological change. Key features of the union's organisational model such as the closed shop and solidarity actions were also directly challenged by the new laws enacted from 1980 and used for the first time in the 1983 Messenger dispute. The dispute is seen as pivotal (Dickinson 1984, Goodhart and Wintour 1986, Gennard 1990, Neil 1997, Lang and Dodkins 2011) but has been largely overshadowed by the 1984-85 miners' strike and the conflict at News International in 1986. This study revisits the 1983 dispute, contrasting it with the early national printing dispute in 1980.

The thesis is partly a fresh historical account of a significant industrial dispute including evidence not available to earlier authors and an industrial relations study. This is especially relevant to the debate over union renewal. The study questions the degree to which trade unionism based upon a narrow occupation, craft or profession has a determination over membership mobilisation and leadership.

It draws evidence from two contrasting case studies involving the National Graphical Association in the early 1980s using a review of existing accounts and media coverage with new materials from previously hidden archives. These are supplemented by interviews with the leading actors in the disputes.

## Research aims

This research sets out to answer the following questions:

- What factors underpin positional and organisational power and how did the changing environment of the early 1980s impact upon them?
- What was the NGA's capacity for strategic choice and how far did legal, political and technological change constrain it?
- What new knowledge can be gleaned from the NGA case as to the role of the state and police in industrial relations?
- Where did decision-making lie within the NGA between national, branch and chapel levels and were there tensions between them?
- Does a constant tension exist between rank-and-file members and their union leaders?
- To what extent was the NGA's strong collective occupational identity and solidarity based on sectionalism and how far was this a constraint in its survival?
- What contribution do the features outlined above add to the wider debate over the future of trade unions?

Telling the story of the disputes within a narrative framework, the research adopts a case study approach to examine the NGA disputes in 1980 and 1983, contrasting examples of offensive and defensive union strategy and action (Perry and Bellamy 2013). Between the two conflicts much changed, economically, politically, legally and technologically but the later dispute with Eddy Shah was a ground-breaking use of new trade union laws.

This first section in this chapter summarises the research approach and philosophical context. It explains the basis for the qualitative approach and choice of research methods, highlighting the role of the researcher as a key instrument in the case studies.

The next section explains the nature of the case studies, and their credibility for the purposes of this research. It delves into the sequences of events and describes the episodes through a detailed narrative.

With the passage of time, some of the politically sensitive issues have faded and as such the research can obtain information about the dispute in a way not possible at the time. Memories can also fade and individuals may adjust their views with the benefit of hindsight. It is possible to cross-check with accounts taken at the time, media reports and documents to 'triangulate' the findings and question the viability of the memories. Some material is collected from anonymous participants. Their role and relationship to the events is described without revealing the source.

This study reviews the contemporary literature that examined the 1983 Messenger dispute. Earlier accounts of the Messenger dispute, most notably Mark Dickinson's *To Break a Union* (1984), did not have access to the archive materials obtained by this research.

The study of industrial disputes and their consequences requires the facts to be judged through the values and beliefs of those involved and in the context of conflicting ideologies and political objectives. The research listens to what people say and triangulates the findings through the analysis of the documentary evidence. The evidence taken from the testimonies of key participants is considered alongside recently opened archival material. Confidential government documentation from government acquired through the Freedom of Information Act is used as well as confidential internal documentation of the Conservative Party held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Minutes of the NGA National Council meetings with associated reports and correspondence have been accessed and utilised for the first time as a result of this research. Media transcripts and recordings have been obtained and are used to inform and enrich the narrative approach.

### **Research approach - philosophical context**

The complex nature of industrial relations can only be fully studied through analysing and contrasting the various perspectives of the parties involved and viewed within the context of political and economic power at the time. The research's ontological position suggests that people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions are meaningful properties of social reality.

The research's epistemological position embraces a legitimate way to generate data on the ontological properties through talking interactively with people, asking them questions, listening to their accounts, analysing their language and through construction of discourse.

This investigation, into the controversial and highly significant Messenger dispute, considers its causes and consequences. The research produces a comprehensive record of the actions and events and provide descriptions of the way the dispute was viewed from the perspectives of different actors. I believe a different researcher studying the same materials would come to the same conclusions.

The question often raised in qualitative research is its authenticity. Interviews, often open-ended, gather an understanding of people's experiences and an account from their memories. Like many qualitative studies this research relies on a small sample for interviews and the relationship with the interviewer can be defined in political rather than scientific terms (Searle and Silverman 1997).

Gabrial (1990) questions how to turn transcripts and memories into reliable, valid and useful statements. The methodological answer is to be found in 'hermeneutics', a term related to what Wells and Lunn (1986) called 'rolling hypotheses' and Blyth and Robson (1981) described as the inductive approach. The principles of interpretation, discourse analysis and language in use are critical in qualitative research. Ritchie (2033: 32) is right to warn that: "People remember what they think is important, not necessarily what the interviewer thinks is most consequential".

There is a difference between history and memory and it is important that the process and use of oral history acknowledges this. The rearch seeks to report the 'truth' of the events but this can be a matter of interpretation by the interviewees.

## Case studies

The research examines in detail the events of contrasting industrial disputes using a range of methods: archives, media accounts, interviews with key participants, etc as described in more detail below. Case study research is sometimes viewed by methodologists with circumspection (Gerring 2007). The use of a single observation to shed light on a larger class of cases raises problems of representativeness (Vennesson 2017). No two industrial disputes are the same but the intensive study of the decision-making can aid our understanding of the factors involved.

Given the contested nature of industrial conflict and the arguments that prevail to this day over the events of these cases, the research does not necessarily aim to prove one side right and the other wrong. Proof may be hard to come by in social science but lessons can be learned (Flyvbjerg 2006: 224).

Case studies are sometimes chosen to be stereotypical and thereby providing analysis of a typical situation or set of circumstances. Atypical or extreme cases can, however, reveal more information because they expose more mechanisms and activate more actors. They can also highlight a point in a dramatic way (Flyvbjerg 2006: 229). An example of a single extreme case study is that of Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision* in which he examined the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allison 1971) and Galileo's theory of gravity based on a single case study from the Tower of Pisa is often cited to make the argument for research based on one case. Michels (1962) chose to study an 'extreme' case study of a grass roots organisation with strong democratic ideals. He chose this outlining case study to prove that even this example conformed to his theory of the tendency towards oligarchy.

The research analyses the events involved in the 1980 national printing dispute and the 1983 Messenger dispute and draw lessons and conclusions from them. Chapter Eight, contains a substantial element of narrative. As such it is difficult to summarise into neat scientific formulae. Instead it provides a rich description of events as observed by those involved with all the complexities and contradictions (Flyvbjerg

2006: 237). It reports what people say alongside an analysis of the documentary evidence. The research helps understand the beliefs, experiences and perceptions of the participants involved in the dispute. A thorough understanding of these events and an exploration into their significance cannot be obtained by running numbers through a computer. But the research has taken into account Ritchie's (2003) warning that people remember what they think is important, not necessarily what the interviewer thinks is most consequential (Gabrial 1990: 32).

### **A qualitative approach**

Sykes (1960) believes that qualitative research is often *inductive* in its approach, with findings and conclusions being drawn directly from the data in contrast to the *deductive* approach where formulated ideas and hypotheses are tested out in data collected especially for the purpose. The research will allow an examination of participants' experience in detail using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A qualitative researcher needs to be open-minded, curious and empathetic, flexible and able to listen to people telling their own story. This involves studying the subjective meanings that people attach to their experiences (Hennink *et al.*, 2010: 14).

Anthropologists, ethnographers, and other social scientists often incorporate interviews and narrative into their research. The idea is to observe and talk with the people whose beliefs and behaviours the researcher wishes to understand and to record carefully the interactions with them (Blyth and Robson 1990). Shopes believes that oral history research has moved from understanding an interview as an archival document to a: "historical record that must, in turn, be evaluated for accuracy, to understanding it as a narrative construction, with attendant concerns about memory, subjectivity, and identity that must be interpreted (Shopes 2014: 257-268)." Ritchie warns, however, that oral history is "too dynamic and creative a field to be entirely captured by any single definition (Ritchie 2003: 19)."



The perspective provided includes the effect of the passing of time, the influence of change and continuity. It is the difference between a diary and a memoir, with the reflection gaining the benefit of hindsight. Ross and Moore (2014) present the benefits of biographical, narrative, interpretive methods to interrogate and rework a participant's memory.

The question often raised in qualitative research is its authenticity. Interviews, often open-ended, gather an understanding of people's experiences and an account from their memories. The methodological issue is the reliability of the interview schedule and the representativeness of the sample. Like many qualitative studies this research relies on a small sample for interviews and the relationship with the interviewer can be defined in political rather than scientific terms (Searle and Silverman 1997).

The research sample is based upon a purposive selection of participants and witnesses to the events in 1983 and a selected number of practitioners and commentators to reflect contrasting perspectives on the consequences of the dispute for trade unionism today. The sample is largely self-selecting as the surviving actors in the drama but the research widened the sample through 'snowball selection'. Participants were asked to suggest other potential interviewees and asked to assist with contacts where appropriate.

The perspectives of the TUC and the wider trade union movement are obtained through interviews with people involved at the time alongside an examination of the documentation of key meetings, conferences and reports. Although focused upon the trade union position, the research interviews Eddy Shah, the employer and principal actor in the dispute. He was given assurances of objectivity and honest reporting in the presentation of his statements. There are interviews made at the time of the dispute but the research will try to obtain his reflection not just on the events of the dispute itself but of its consequences.

### **Researcher as research instrument – role of 'insider'**

In developing the research methodology, I recognise that I am the primary research instrument and must take into account my relationship with those being interviewed and my own role in the dispute.

In 1983 I was the youngest full-time officer in the NGA. Elected at the age of twenty-four, I filled a post typically reserved for older men. As such I wasn't as embedded in the institutional culture as my peers. I was apprenticed as a 'hot metal' compositor and introduced to the customs of the chapel and the rules of the union. To undertake such research, I have reflected on my capacity to objectively investigate the different dimensions of this dispute. The research is dispassionate and has proactively pursued alternative positions in the literature, documentation and witness statements. I have relied on my own personal memories of these events very sparingly and the research seeks to verify my own personal evidence.

I identify with Braverman, a former apprentice coppersmith, who explained in his seminal work, *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (1975: 4) that he sought to rebut any suggestion that his background had led him to adopt a sentimental attachment to the "outworn conditions of now archaic modes of labour", He had seen first-hand how the transformation of industrial processes had robbed the workers of a craft heritage with little if anything given in its place. His thesis sought to learn from his experience and point to a future model of employment not seek to restore a romantic version of his past.

My contemporaries are now retiring or retired and the time is critical to capture their stories and memories of the dispute but also to tell their accounts of activities that have not been told before due to the sensitivities of their accounts, fears for damaging themselves or their union and possible disloyalty to others involved.

Gabrial advises qualitative researchers to recognise the potential bias and try and deal with it (Gabrial 1990). The advantages of personal contacts and access to key figures within the union and the TUC carries the risk of leaving the reader to question the credibility of my research. The risk of bias and undue personal leanings is constantly questioned. Readers will be given sufficient extracts from transcripts to allow them to assess the credibility and validity of the findings.

As an active participant in the events of the case studies and a TUC official my role in the research could be described as participant observation (Crotty 2014). The case studies, however, are not current events in which I am taking part or ones where the research is immersed within the community such as Beynon's (Beynon, 1973: 9) *Working for Ford* in which he described himself as "an outside who was accepted inside". He was a researcher who got inside to gather his evidence, I was an activist who became a researcher. I do not attempt to expunge my subjectivity from the research, as per the positivist approach. I am conscious of emotional attachment I may have from my 'insider' perspective.

C. Wright-Mills (1959) wrote of the concept of being able to 'think ourselves away' from the familiar routines of our daily lives in order to look at them anew. To have a sociological imagination, a person must be able to pull away from the situation and think from an alternative point of view. This demands a high degree of self-awareness throughout the collection of the data. Patton (2014) stresses the importance of the background, experience, training, skills, inter-personal competence, capacity for empathy, cross-cultural sensitivity and how the researcher engages in fieldwork and analysis. Interpretation is "affected by who you are, what's going on in your life, what you care about, how you view the world and how you have chosen to study what interests you (Patton 2014: 832)." The researcher is the 'research tool' and therefore the methodology must provide sufficient reflective information in order to make a judgement regarding the influence on the study design and the findings presented.

### **Interview methodology**

The interview methodology was flexible and designed to elicit general personal reflections as well as detailed accounts of events. The accounts provided through semi-structured interviews are quoted in detail to provide the reader with an understanding of the different perspectives.

Anecdotes can inform, enliven, enrich and colour a narrative. Some critics dismiss anecdotal evidence as random and not statistically significant to be able to generalise, yet others believe they can corroborate a position and provide a convincing portrait. (Ritchie 2003) The research seeks to provide multiple, matching stories that reinforce the evidence and back up other materials.

Ethnographic enquiry seeks to uncover meanings and perceptions from the perspective of the participants (Crotty 2014). In this it makes sense to use unstructured interviews. The flexible research design allows change as different perspectives emerge and when analysis of documents exposes potential fresh avenues for exploration or validation. Patton (2014) advises to expect the unexpected, look for it and see where it leads. Ritchie also advises the interviewer to follow the interviewee down unexpected paths and to be prepared to abandon carefully prepared questions if necessary (Ritchie 2003). It is important to recognise the value of serendipity in the research process. One document search will often lead to another and one interview will open up new leads or paths of enquiry. Archives often contain surprising material and information can be gleaned from unexpected places.

The research is based on interviews with a small carefully selected group of individuals who were directly engaged in the events of the disputes.

**Attwill, Steve** Unite Regional Organiser was GPMU and NGA official, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed 12.2.2019

**Burke, Tony** Unite Assistant General Secretary, was President Stockport NGA Branch at the time of the dispute and led the initial negotiations with the employer. 18.2.2014

**Coop, Owen** was West Pennine Graphical Society Branch Secretary, NGA National Councilor, Unite National Officer. Interviewed 14.2.2020

**Dobney, Megan** Southern and Eastern Region TUC, formerly NGA and GPMU activist, Mother of the Chapel and National Council member, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed 13.8.2016

**Dubbins, Tony** was NGA Assistant General Secretary, General Secretary, GPMU General Secretary and Unite Assistant General Secretary Interviewed 17.8.2017

**Harris, Peter** was NGA South West and South Wales Assistant Regional Secretary Interviewed 9.2019

**Field, Anne** was SOGAT, GPMU and Unite Officer, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed 28.8.2016

**Grindley, Mike** Chair of the GCHQ unions and one of the dismissed trade unionists. Interviewed 2014

**Manning, Alan** was TUC North West Regional Secretary Interviewed 8.2018

**Monks, Lord John** was TUC official in charge of the Committee responsible for industrial action support in 1983, was TUC General Secretary. Interviewed 12.3.2015

**Newis, Chris** was NGA National Council member. Interviewed 3.12.2017

**Parkinson, Brendan** Unison officer, was NGA activist, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed 9.7.2015

**Royston, Alan** was Father of the Chapel at Messenger Group Newspapers and one of the 'Stockport Six' sacked NGA members. Interviewed 2014

**Scott, Vince** was NGA activist, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed 24.6.2015

**Shah, Eddy** was Managing Director of Messenger Group Newspapers. Interviewed 7.4.2015

**Slater, John** was South Wales NGA Branch Secretary. Interviewed 9.2019

**Williams, Ray** was Liverpool NGA Branch Secretary, organised pickets, Messenger Group was GPMU President. Interviewed 4.2014

Plus a number of anonymous participants

Interviews began with those involved in the negotiations with Messenger Newspaper management and those on the union's National Council. Personalities played a big part in the way antagonisms developed within the business and the research took into account the way interviewees still sought to defend the actions they took. Tony Burke was then a lay member and President of the Stockport Branch. He led the early negotiations despite his conflict of interest in working for the principle rival to the *Stockport Messenger*.

The research gathers data from the employer perspective in terms of a significant interview with Eddy Shah. He refused to speak to Mark Dickinson for his book (1984) and work was needed to track him down to his home in Wiltshire and persuade him to participate.

As the employer and principal actor in the Messenger dispute, Shah was given assurances of objectivity and honest reporting in the presentation of his statements. He provides an invaluable insight into the causes of the dispute and his reflections on its consequences. His perception is set against that of government, police, media and union. The differences are examined and challenged through the research.

Tony Dubbins, the former NGA General Secretary, was always likely to be a difficult interview to arrange. He had a reputation to maintain and actions to defend but it was hoped that he would be more prepared to share his reflections since his retirement. Now living in Spain, the interview took time and effort to arrange.

The FoC (shop steward) of the striking workers, or the 'Stockport Six' gives his account. Other full-time officers of the union involved in supporting the union's campaign and in sustaining it through the dispute and the sequestration of its assets

are questioned. The research interviewed those engaged in the picketing, including those who helped organise it, lay members who participated and others who were witness to the events. The views of activists and delegates help inform the pressure on the leadership of the union to settle or not, to confront the law or not.

The research participants were asked to recount their memories of the events before, during and after the Messenger dispute. Given the time lapse it was critical to allow them to recall events and try to remember their thoughts at the time rather than in retrospect. Memory is important to oral history but may be unreliable and flawed, being part of someone's subjectivity (Ross and Moore 2014: 5). The more reflective views, with the advantage of hindsight, were discussed later in the interview process. Some prompts, such as sharing the minutes of the meetings they attended, were used to encourage memories but this was done with care to offer accounts of events to stimulate their own memories. The interview style was kept free-flowing and without formal structure but the key research questions were probed as the interviews developed. Where appropriate and possible some interviewees were able to read minutes of meetings to remind themselves of the events and how they were recorded at the time.

The interviews were not treated as 'confessionals' or 'therapy sessions' nor were they interrogations. They covered some awkward issues and sought to explore the motivations of the interviewees for their actions including those that remain controversial and contested. In some instances the evidence appears to contradict statements they made at the time and assessments are required to judge whether this is due to their changed memory or a wish to alter the way the research will record their actions given the hindsight of time.

After the passing of more than thirty years, some of those involved are prepared to describe the actions taken in more detail and openness. Previous research may have encountered difficulties in obtaining a full and comprehensive account due to reluctance by participants to show disloyalty to the union or make remarks that might lay them or the union open to criticism. The NGA has since merged with SOGAT to form the Graphical, Paper and Media Union. This in turn formed part of an

amalgamation to become Amicus and Unite. Officers have changed and the proximity and attachment to the people of the 1983 dispute has stretched making a full and frank account of events more likely. Some of the information included will be in the form of anecdotes that circulated within the union and are remembered by interviewees. Some stories have become 'legends' within the union and cannot always be verified. They are given with caveats for their authenticity but they add flavour in describing the mood of the union and its determination to win the dispute and survive the onslaught from the courts. During the period the NGA had its assets seized or sequestered officers and staff conducted the day-to-day business without access to bank accounts and in fear of deeper restrictions over its resources. The level of secrecy that was adopted to survive this episode means that some data is hard to obtain or authenticate. The research will only use anecdotal evidence to help paint a picture of the atmosphere within the union, the sense of siege and show the degree to which an institution will defend itself against what it believed to be unjustified and unfair attacks by the law.

Oral history provides valuable narrative descriptions of past events and builds an archive of recorded material. Shopes (2004) describes it as a dialogue, and a self-conscious, disciplined conversation between two people about some aspect of the past considered by them to be of historical significance and recorded with the intent of preserving it. An interview is a historical record and must be evaluated for accuracy, to understand it as a narrative construction, with attendant concerns about memory, subjectivity, and identity that must be interpreted (Shopes 2004, Blyth and Robson 1981)

Triangulation is achieved by linking the evidence from interviewees to investigation of primary and secondary source documentary evidence, including trade union minutes, internal government correspondence, Conservative Party papers, media reports and press cuttings, photographs and other relevant ephemera – listed in the Appendix.

## **Documentation and archives**



### ***Trade union records***

Alongside interviews, the research has a strong documentary basis through its analysis of union histories, union journals and minutes of meetings – see Appendix Two. Trade union histories have to be interpreted with care, taking into account the authors and the motives behind the records. Many historical accounts are commissioned by the unions themselves and as such risk being a partial or biased view of their record. Some are produced as ‘souvenirs’ for members on the occasion of a key anniversary or at the time of merger. The authors are sometimes current or retired union officers, they can be commissioned researchers who have to account to the union’s leadership before publication (Lyddon 2017).

The histories of unions based upon craft or occupational lines often refer to the sense of community of workers or ‘family’, especially brotherhood, (for example: (Cummings, in the history of shipbuilding unions, 1905, and the accounts in the history of the Brushmakers, 1847). There are many references to the sense of fellowship based upon the job but also relationship forged in common struggle. Lyddon (2017: 252) challenges the way union histories are written and questions the use of the term ‘family’ in the history of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). Written to convey what Lyddon called the “cuddly” image of the union from the leadership’s point of view, such expressions may not be shared with the rank-and-file Lyddon argues. His critique was based on the history of a more ‘general’ union which was hierarchical and covered a period where women members were not treated equally.

Trade union documents are highlighted by Scott (1990) in categorising such materials as ‘ideological’ in the sense they were mainly written for unions themselves and were intended to reinforce a sense of collective identity.

The research examines archive materials not available to contemporary writers such as Dickinson (1984) and Gennard (1984). It interviews participants and witnesses to the dispute and recounts the public debate on the tactics deployed by both sides.

Primary source documents are used including draft correspondence and speeches prepared for government ministers obtained through a Freedom of Information

request. They expose ministerial reactions to the initial enactment of the legislations and the police handling of the dispute. It is significant to see the process through which amendments were made. Parliamentary papers and Hansard records confirm the comments and speeches finally made.

The research examines to what extent the dispute was politically pre-determined by studying Conservative Party documents and accounts as well as public declarations of the intent of the legislation and the response from trade unions.

### ***Minutes***

The minutes used are from meetings of the NGA National Council, Executive and NGA delegate conferences. TUC Congress, General Council and sub-committee minutes have also been accessed. The research also draws on minutes from SOGAT West of England Branch and its national delegate conference in May 1983 and 1984. The various minutes take different forms. NGA Delegate Conferences were held every two years or called on an emergency basis to deal with a particularly pressing matter. Delegates were elected from every branch. The minutes are a verbatim account.

The NGA National Council minutes were given to Warwick University in large bound folders for archiving with instructions that they were not be opened for 70 years. Unite took over responsibility for the archives and initially sought to maintain the covenant placed on the records by its constituent union. After several attempts, access was eventually given for the purposes of this research.

The correspondence regarding access to the NGA archive is given as an Appendix.

National Council meetings tended to last two days with a membership of 40 National Councillors elected by the membership on a regional and sectoral basis. Also present were the 13 National Officers including General Secretary, Assistant General Secretary and Financial Secretary, and seven Regional Secretaries. The meetings received reports from the union's Executive, a smaller group of leading councillors and officers, a variety of sub-committees and working groups and reports from national officers.

The minutes are summaries of meetings and do not necessarily reflect the scale and scope of the discussion. They are often a succinct account of a verbal report and therefore do not provide a comprehensive account and may simply record any decision made or action agreed. These sources are compared or triangulated with other accounts of the events covered and from the recollections of the interviewees. The brevity of the account may be due to the style of minute-taking, a desire to maintain confidentiality or because the officer may be reluctant to place in writing an assessment of a dynamic dispute. Sometimes the officer's report is accompanied by documents such as draft agreements, letters between the parties etc. On occasions the National Council received copies of letters or motions from branches expressing views on issues under consideration. NGA Delegate Conference minutes provide verbatim accounts allowing the reader to obtain a sense of the mood and atmosphere in the meetings as well as view the differing arguments and contested views over tactics.

The research explores actions taken that would not have been contained in minutes or official records. For example, the dispute involved the seizure or sequestration of the union's bank accounts. To sustain its activities, the union resorted to a range of necessarily secretive tactics. The research is able to reflect perceptions of this episode and the extent to which this was successful and how other unions learnt from this episode.

The records of the national meetings and evidence from the interviews with the union's officers can result in a slanted perspective. The story of the leadership is not the full picture of the union as a whole and the research interviews lay members and activists. It studies the official histories of the NGA and GPMU (Gennard and Hayward 2008), news accounts and other sources to question the interpretation of contested decisions.

The TUC archives include the Annual Report summarising the key decisions of the General Council, minutes of the various committees and General Council and the verbatim minutes of Congress<sup>36</sup>. The 1983 TUC Congress was held in Blackpool 5-9

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<sup>36</sup> See list in Appendix 2

September, at a time the dispute between the NGA and Messenger Newspaper was rumbling along but before its escalation into a major conflict. The record of the Congress provides a good account of the way the TUC was shifting its stance over how to deal with the employment laws and relations with the freshly re-elected Conservative Government.

### ***Internal Government documents***

The research uses documents headed Private and Confidential that were internal memos and letters between government departments – see Appendix 4 for details. The names of recipients and authors are mostly redacted but refer to various divisions of the Home Office (such as F4) the Department for Employment and the Cabinet Office. The dispute would have been the principal responsibility for the Secretary of State for Employment but as the picketing developed it also involved the Home Secretary and Downing Street.

Administrative records are not neutral reports of events, they are shaped by the political context in which they are produced and by cultural and ideological assumptions of the departments and organisations responsible for them (Scott 1990). Some of the correspondence requires a degree of interpretation with key information left unstated. Civil servants writing to one another and to politicians summarise or confirm the outcomes of conversations and sometimes leave the researcher to ‘read between the lines’.

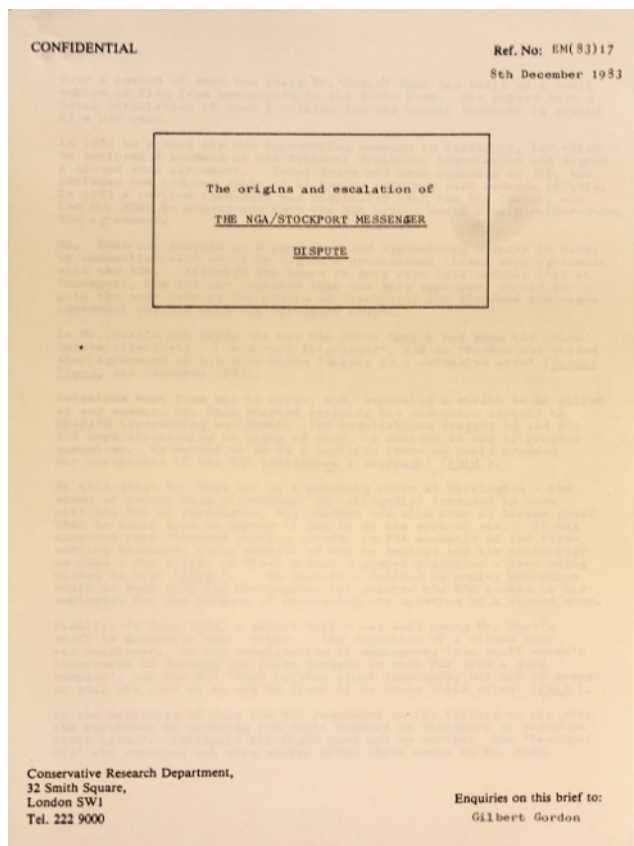
Some of the letters were not intended for public view and require a degree of interpretation to ascertain where they are from or who is the intended recipient. Examples are those written to the “Secretary of State” by “Robin Harris, Private Office”. With further investigation it is discovered that Harris was a Special Adviser at the Home Office at the time having worked for the Conservative Party from 1978. He became Director of the Conservative Research Department from 1985–88 and a member of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit from 1989-90. He was Margaret Thatcher's speechwriter and was chosen by her to write her biography.

Many of the exchanges are internal memos, often confirming a telephone call or other conversation between themselves or with others such as MPs or the police. Some include draft replies to Parliamentary Questions or other correspondence. The documents highlight when the Prime Minister was involved or when her office wanted more information or action. The research compares draft speeches with what was actually delivered in Parliament, provided by Hansard. This shows interesting variations and changed emphasis. The Messenger dispute took centre stage of political debate and the research looks at parliamentary records to judge how the dispute was viewed by the parties.

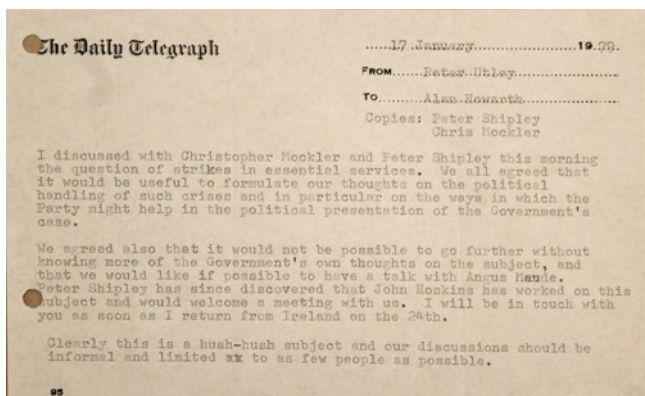
It is not always possible to trace the sequence of events leading up to a statement in Parliament. For example, accusations in a draft speech about a man possessing a pistol on the picket line were excluded when Leon Britton, the Secretary of State spoke, presumably because it could not be substantiated. Also removed were references to police protective equipment and the closure of the M6 Motorway. This apparent toning down or factual correction of drafts may be at odds with later reporting, when ministers appeared to talk up the level of threat and violence.

The correspondence includes letters and memos between the Home Office and the Cheshire Constabulary. These often take the form of reports on events on the picket line but also include exchanges over how the dispute should be policed. In principle, local police forces are autonomous of central government but at the time central government was seeking to play a more significant role in directing the policing of industrial disputes (Wiles 1985: 161). This tension becomes apparent when reading the private correspondence.

See list of government documents used in this research in the Appendix.



5.1 – Cover of confidential briefing by Conservative Research Department



5.2 – example of a memo to Conservative Party figures from the Daily Telegraph

### Media accounts

The government papers include press reports and even transcripts of media interviews about the dispute. Civil servants were clearly closely watching all reports and interviews about the dispute and reporting to ministers. These add to the research retrieval of press reports over the period of the dispute from a variety of

### Conservative Party archives

The research accessed the confidential papers of the Conservative Party held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. These are in the form of briefings to ministers and MPs as well as letters arguing for particular policy positions. Some are on *Daily Telegraph* headed paper.

They expose the debate within the Party at the time but also expose the pressure being applied by key figures and policy groups on the edges of Conservative politics.

See list of Conservative Party documents used in this research in Appendix Three.

newspapers held in the British Library or other repositories. The left-wing and trade union press, including the NGA's own journal *PRINT*, covered the dispute extensively and these are used to reflect a significant strand of thinking within the union's leadership. Also accessed are a number of leaflets, circulars and other campaign materials used by the union during the dispute.

Newspaper articles, recording and transcripts of TV and radio programmes help highlight how the dispute was seen by the public. But in this research the newspapers themselves are part of the narrative. Newspapers were overwhelming hegemonic in the way they viewed the politics of the day, especially in regard to industrial relations reform. Media proprietors had a vested interest in the outcome of the dispute. Parts of the employment legislation had a critical impact on the printing industry and may have been written at the behest of employers (Dickinson 1984: 31). The research will examine the contested views over the initial attitudes of the national press, whether they supported Shah or whether they feared becoming embroiled in a wider conflict over which they had little control. The research examines the level of influence certain newspaper owners had over the Government and what evidence there is to show it was used to ensure the defeat of the print unions. Left-wing newspapers, journals and trade union newspapers provide a counter-point to the mainstream media.

Regardless of motives, the positions adopted by the national press, informed public opinion and framed the political debate over the dispute. The dispute was headline news for some weeks and the high profile of the dispute influenced the behaviour of the parties involved. This research will reflect to what extent this made a difference to the outcome.

See a list of media reports used in the research in the Appendix.

### ***Photographs and ephemera***

Photographs are used in the research to illuminate the sense of occasion as the events unfold but also to provide visual evidence around the contested moments of

the dispute. Pictures during disputes can give false impressions and account is taken of this risk. Research integrity requires a description of the conditions under which photographs are gathered, altered and analysed (Glucksmann, 2000). For research that uses still photographs as data, it is unacceptable to present photographs elsewhere described as 'photo-fiction' or 'editorial photography' (Glucksmann, 2000). Photographs can be manipulated and altered to enhance the image or to misrepresent the situation to the viewer. Jordan warns that changing photographs to alter the representation would amount to research misconduct.

Operating amidst violent confrontations between pickets, demonstrators and police, photographers make judgements that influence the way the situation is seen. A photograph taken from behind police lines can give a very different impression from one taken facing them. The research hears a number of accounts of police attacking people taking photographs and filming or their equipment. There appears to be a period of time, during which police cleared the largest crowd, where there is no film footage or photographic account. Before mobile phones and social media, this was a time when photographers and camera operators were more conspicuous and perhaps vulnerable as a consequence. But there could be other explanations such as the speed of movement of police and demonstrators during what might appear to be a chaotic situation. The camera can prove a useful witness – not one that can be taken without question but the photographs help confirm the accounts of those interviewed.

### **Ethical issues**

In undertaking the research, potential ethical issues have been explored. The interviews are based on informed consent and have been recorded and transcribed. Interviewees have signed a Consent Form that states the research objectives and asks them to confirm their consent to be recorded and for quotes from the transcription to be used in the research. They were advised of their right to withdraw at any point.



University ethics committees or institutional review boards need to be satisfied that research involving humans stays within ethical bounds, regardless of the topic. Informed consent is firmly established as a guiding principle for those engaged in oral history.

The research commenced before the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) were introduced, nonetheless it met these standards in any event. The principle of consent has been embedded in the study. The data collected has been kept electronically by the researcher in a manner secure and closed to anyone else according to GDPR regulations.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explained the philosophical approach to this research, explaining the qualitative research using comparative case studies. It explains the choice of case studies to explore the research questions and the narrative approach within the thesis.

The methodology describes the use of interviews and archives including those discovered for this research.

The thesis will look in depth at two disputes involving the NGA in the early 1980s. It so doing it has utilised archive materials from government, the Conservative Party and internal government documents that have not been available before this research. It uses the documentation alongside media reports, press cuttings, photographs and ephemera to triangulate the primary and secondary evidence.

## **Case Study – the 1980 NGA national dispute**

### **Introduction**

Previous chapters have reviewed union purpose, formation and how collective occupational identity is a power resource and defining factor in strategic choice. Craft unions are studied in the context of sectionalism as the basis of solidarity amongst an exclusive group at the expense of wider solidarity.

Chapter Four set the political and legal context for an anticipated clash between government and trade unions. The election of the Conservative Government in 1979 heralded a determination to reform trade unions and curb their influence within UK industrial relations (Dorey 1991, 1995, 2009, 2014, Fosh and Littler 1985).

The methodology chapter set out the basis for the research and explained the approach taken to the chosen case studies involving the NGA in the early 1980s

This chapter charts the evidence of how and why the NGA used the powers it had to launch a national action in 1980 to advance its members' interests. The case study addresses research questions around the factors that underpin positional and organisational power to lever significant gains for members and the capacity for strategic choice. The decision to conduct an offensive campaign was taken by a leadership with the confidence of its internal systems of democracy rooted in a strong collective identity amongst members.

The 1980 campaign was led from the top with the leadership calculating that if it did not act then, the opportunity would be lost. Other factors played their part such as personal ambitions and inter-union rivalries. The union deployed a range of tactics that out-manoeuvred the employers, forcing them into significant concessions over pay and working time. These were only possible in a union with substantial positional power, organisational strength and membership loyalty.

This chapter uses archives opened for this research together with interviews from the key participants to examine the way the 1980 dispute unfolded and how decisions were made.

The thesis will go on to contrast the 1980 campaign with the dispute with Messenger Newspapers in 1983, a defensive conflict against an employer determined to bypass the union and one that had profound ramifications for the whole trade union movement. It considers how legal, technological and economic changes reduced the strategic capacity of the union to act.

The purpose of comparing an offensive campaign of action to a defensive dispute is to examine the nature of union decision-making and the degree to which new laws and new technology impacted upon it. This includes considering what evaluations were made of available options and their possible consequences.

### **A closing window of opportunity**

For most of the post-war period, the industry was largely regulated through national agreements between the unions and the employers' federations (Child 1967). The national press was represented by the Newspaper Publishers Association and the provincial newspaper industry by the Newspaper Society. But cross-ownership was common: Associated Newspapers - the Daily Mail group - for example, owned much of the provincial press (Gennard 1990). In commercial printing, where some 85% of NGA members were employed, employers were represented by the British Printing Industries Federation.

Although the commercial printing labour force was significantly larger than that employed on newspapers, the news sector generated more conflict and attention (Musson 1954, Gennard 1990). The newspaper industry attracted big ego employers – the 'press barons' such as Lord Rothermere and Lord Beaverbrook who sought the political influence of newspaper ownership. Robert Maxwell owned the Mirror Group and Rupert Murdoch had acquired the *Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Sun* and *News of the World*. The high costs of newspaper production suited owners if they served to

deter new entrants and competition (Melvern 1986). Fleet Street was often characterised by management weakness, excessive union power and technological backwardness (Martin R. 1981). The battleground within newspapers was largely at local level where competitive sectional bargaining was at its most extreme (Martin R. 1981). Any stoppage would have immediate impact on a perishable product and there was often tension between chapel and national union power (Martin R. 1981, Gennard 1990).

The Federation of Master Printers was formed by employers in 1901 and the Newspaper Society was established in 1920 from the reconstitution of the Linotype Users' Association. By 1914 national agreements covered more than 50,000 workers (Child 1967). For employers such bargains reduced industrial strife and helped prevent wage under-cutting. The national agreements settled minimum terms and conditions, regulated apprenticeship entry into the industry and provided dispute resolution mechanisms (Child 1967).

The NGA had seen consistent growth in membership and in 1979 had 111,541 members. By the September of 1980 this rose to 116,438, its high point before the merger with SOGAT<sup>37</sup>

Like many craft unions the NGA was characterised as politically 'moderate', traditional, conservative, more opportunist and accommodating (Michels 1962, Child 1967). Cole (1915: 216) described independent craft unions of skilled workers as "almost peaceful in character." Their history lists moments of conflict but also a comfortable, amicable relationship with employers and their federations (Child 1967).

Half the NGA's membership contracted out of paying the political levy used to support the Labour Party and associated political activities (Gennard 1990: 338). The NGA saw its engagement with politics as an extension to its industrial activities (Gennard 1990). It did not see radical change to the existing order of society as a

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<sup>37</sup> TUC records

major factor and by and large focused its political engagement on its narrow interests within the printing industry (Gennard 1990, Musson 1954: 467).

The NGA established a degree of joint oversight with employers over matters such as recruitment and training, an approach that supported decades of technological stability and relatively harmonious industrial relations. Large printing companies tended to have a long history and many managers and supervisors rose through a highly unionised and regulated industry. Both sides were familiar with the national agreements, union rules and with each other – often personally – and many managers retained their union membership (Musson 1954: 363).

Having positional power does not mean union leaders opt to use it through industrial action. Disputes sometimes occur when one party or the other opts to test the resolve of their bargaining opponent or where trust has been lost. In 1980 the NGA's positional power was under threat. In testimony for this research, participants recall how the NGA's leaders were well aware of the looming challenge posed by new technology and the new government of Margaret Thatcher elected in 1979 on a platform of trade union reform (Gennard 1990: 311). This research found that if the NGA was going to address what it saw as a stagnating minimum wage now was the time to act.

Joe Wade, the General Secretary was approaching retirement and Tony Dubbins, his Assistant and potential successor, was keen to demonstrate strong leadership and a more robust approach to employers. Interviewed for this research, Dubbins reflected on the mood at the time:

Thatcher had just been elected and it was clear what track she was on. So if you didn't do this in 1980 you would be in no shape to do it in 1981 because of the changes she was going to make. (Dubbins interview 17.8.2017)

At the start of 1980 the membership was not pressing for action despite a stagnating basic wage after several years of government pay restraint. The 1979 National Agreement was the first one in four years conducted through 'free collective bargaining'. As part of its monetary policy, the new Conservative Government raised

interest rates sharply to 15% to reduce inflation but knowing that this would lead to rising unemployment (Matthews and Minford 1987).

The leadership decided to mobilise for an offensive campaign, led firmly from above as Dubbins explains:

To be fair to the members how can you expect them, just a few months after a general election, to anticipate or look in detail at what she is proposing and how it's going to affect you and your families for the next few years. I don't think you could expect members to do it. Members did not in any way suggest that we should accept what had been offered but to what extent they were on board for the campaign was very limited. And it was not until we got the branches on board and we could demonstrate that the employers did not have the wherewithal to resist us if we were sharp and pointed and went for it and leadership were at one in a determination to make advances against employers while the opportunities to do so remained strong.

(interview 17.8.2017)

The progress of the negotiations for the National Agreement is summarised in the minutes of the NGA National Council and Executive. The union presented the employers with demands for a substantial increase in the basic pay and a reduction in the working week from 40 to 37.5 hours. The NGA leadership made the case that such a settlement would: "restore print workers to a standard of living in accordance with their commitment to a successful industry" (Gennard 1990: 410).

Minimum pay rates had stagnated, and although there was little evidence of rank-and-file pressure or a grass roots revolt within the union the leadership calculated that a campaign of action could be mobilised. The National Council in April 1980 was told:

Wade indicated that as a result of attending branch meetings, it was clear that morale amongst the membership was high and they were prepared to accept the lead given by the Council in order to progress the campaign.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> NGA National Council Minutes April 1980 – see Appendix 2

The final offer from the employers would have given a 15.68% increase in average pay, below the inflation rate of 19.1%, a phased reduction in hours but with conditions attached around working practices. NGA leaders rejected the offer and when national negotiations broke down the union pursued a programme of industrial action.

Dubbins explained the situation:

We had a lot of internal discussions about where we go from here. There was a strong lobby that we can only take industrial action – strike or overtime ban in the traditional way we'd gone down the track before. Some of us argued that, no, this time we've got to do it differently, got to do it fast and hard and set the standard that will stand us in good stead in the future certainly as far as working hours were concerned. Eventually the executive came round to that point of view. We went to a meeting of branches and it was not terribly well accepted. (interview 17.8.2017)

Activists on the Left in the union felt all-out action was the best way to proceed but Dubbins believed that an all-out strike may only receive partial support. Rather than pursue national action, selective hit-and-run tactics were applied including all-day chapel meetings, withdrawal of flexibility, overtime bans, reducing running speeds and other tactics that chapels could propose in order to exert maximum pressure. Employers did not know who would be hit, when or how.

The tactics meant the union relied on its strongest chapels to take the initiative and it built up a momentum of the campaign. The selection of employers was carefully calculated to put maximum pressure on the BPIF leadership.

The NGA offered individual companies industrial peace if they agreed to an 'interim agreement' that established a minimum earning level of £80 a week and a two-stage reduction in hours to 37.5 a week. The union guaranteed to revert to the final settlement even if this required concessions to the interim agreements.

A Special National Council held on 24 April was informed that:

The BPIF and Newspaper Society intended to advise their members to suspend NGA members unless the employers' last offer was submitted to a ballot of Association members.<sup>39</sup>

Employers refused to make further concessions, particularly as SOGAT and NATSOPA unions had settled and their ballots had been carried. The NGA leadership stood firm and prepared to face the consequences of the escalating dispute. The outcome of the campaign was by no means assured and carried huge risks for the NGA. The employers seemed united in their determination to resist the NGA.

Small craft unions in which most members are employed in the same occupation or sector run the risk of financial disaster if they face a long national dispute. They lack the option to cross-subsidise a dispute affecting one section of the membership and are therefore vulnerable to a united employer-offensive. The NGA had a high subscription rate and had built up substantial reserves. Its General Fund in 1979 stood at more than £6 million but it could not sustain a full-scale national dispute for long (Gennard 1990: 238). The Financial Secretary advised the Council:

That it may be necessary to pay dispute benefit to approximately 45,000 members at the rate of £20.75 per week. On the assumption that a £6.20 levy was raised from approximately 40,000 members, this would bring an additional £250,000 into the Association's finances. Therefore, there would be a necessity to finance a dispute which would be costing in the region of £685,000 per week.

. . . there was approximately £4 million available by the realising of assets. This sum would possibly cover a full-scale dispute lasting six weeks. (National Council 24 April 1980).

The NGA leadership took strategic decisions in regard to the negotiation, their breakdown and the overall approach and conduct of the campaign with little regard for the position of the other printing unions. Such was its confidence and authority

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<sup>39</sup> NGA National Council Minutes 24 April 1980 – see Appendix 2



to act independently. Having accepted the employers' latest offer, the NATSOPA General Secretary, Owen O'Brien issued a letter to all chapel officers stating that:

This Society has no intention of being drawn into this dispute<sup>40</sup>.

Bill Keys, SOGAT General Secretary wrote to the NGA saying:

We cannot help but feel that the current dispute can only, in the long term, have a damaging effect on the future employment prospects throughout the industry (SOGAT letter to NGA 30 April 1980).

For the Society of Lithographic Artists, Designers, Engravers and Process Workers (SLADE) John Jackson, General Secretary wrote to its branch secretaries:

SLADE members should continue to do their normal work but they should not handle any work diverted to them as a result of the NGA action, nor should they handle work from people who are being used as an alternative to the normal NGA members (25 March 1980).

Dubbins told this research that he found the SOGAT posture particularly "embarrassing". The national agreement contained a percentage differential for semi-skilled workers so SOGAT members claimed the proportion of whatever the craft increase was. The strength of the smaller NGA in achieving a higher rate would therefore result in improvements for other groups. But the employers claimed they could not afford this knock-on effect. This touches on both the merits and tensions of sectionalism. The NGA was able to successfully prosecute the dispute despite the divisions between the unions. The resulting increase in pay and reduction in hours was enjoyed by all. The ballot votes to accept the employers' terms by the other unions demonstrates the potential difficulties in winning membership support for action across the whole workforce.

The case study confirms the potential effectiveness of sectional action and leadership capacity to take decisive strategic decisions. It relied upon extreme

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<sup>40</sup> Correspondence held at Modern Records Centre, Warwick University

positional power and the organisational strength of a disciplined membership loyal to its association.

I was the FoC of the NGA in Orchard and Ind Printers in Gloucester during the dispute. Members took industrial action including an overtime ban and refusal to cooperate with the company's collection of work time data. After an all-day chapel meeting stopped production, the Managing Director called an all-staff meeting. He was also the chair of the regional BPIF. I remember him declaring that he had never known the employers so united and determined to resist the NGA's militant position and warned the union's members that unless they agreed to work normally on the terms offered they would be suspended from employment.



**6.1 - Letter to the author warning of the impending lock-out**

On Monday 28 April 1980, NGA members across the industry were suspended – see letter from O&I Print. I organised a picket line at my place of work in Gloucester and was in close touch with other chapels around the city and beyond. No NGA member broke ranks by accepting the employer's terms.

Individual employers faced the threat of competitors gaining advantage by signing the union's proposed interim agreement.

Throughout the first morning reports were received of employers agreeing to the union's demands. In many small firms,

neither side wanted to be drawn into industrial action so the employer signed the NGA's Interim Agreement. It was clear that the national employers' position was collapsing rapidly, at least in the commercial printing sector.

By 30 April Orchard and Ind was the only commercial printing firm in Gloucester still in dispute. Michael Orchard, the Managing Director, seemed devastated by the failure of the BPIF members to hold the line. He opened discussions with me as FoC

and quickly agreed to the union's terms, even settling on a more rapid reduction of hours to 37.5 a week that the union sought.

The National Council, meeting on 6-9 May was informed:

2,200 firms covering 20,346 members had now signed interim agreements and this represented a 40% coverage of Association members.<sup>41</sup>

The NGA's choice of selective tactics divided the employer resistance and it exploited the competitive and fragmented nature of the commercial printing industry. The newspaper industry, however, showed a more resolute opponent. It was better able to bypass NGA craft workers (or at least threaten to) using non-NGA staff and new technology. The nature of the newspaper industry with national news publishers owning large swathes of provincial papers, however, left them vulnerable to a national union able to inflict selective action across the country.

The National Council met again on 13 May to receive a recommendation that it accepted the terms of an agreement with the Newspaper Society – breaking away from the joint settlement with the BPIF and offering concessions not made for commercial employers. This established an £80 per week minimum earnings guarantee and a phased reduction in hours to 37.5 by 2 November 1981.

The General Secretary warned the Council:

The settlement had to be viewed against the background that there was a grave danger that some members in the newspaper sector would not be prepared to follow Council policy coupled with the fact that the Newspaper Society were likely to attempt to produce on a widespread scale.<sup>42</sup>

In the commercial printing sector it was reported:

. . . there was a total collapse of BPIF resistance throughout the country, it was the officers' recommendation that the request for a meeting from the BPIF should be rejected at the present time.

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<sup>41</sup> NGA National Council Minutes May 1980 – see Appendix 2

<sup>42</sup> NGA National Council Minutes May 1980 – see Appendix 2

On 15 May, Henry Kendall, Director of the BPIF sent a circular to all the employers to report:

The NGA have, however, made it clear that the terms agreed with the Newspaper Society are not acceptable to the union as a basis for settlement with the Federation and that they require from us the full terms which they have been seeking over recent weeks.

The Council has concluded that it cannot approve a national agreement which would require all members to provide terms and conditions which many members just could not afford and which would mean that SOGAT and NATSOPA would feel compelled to abrogate the agreements already reached with them and seek new terms well in excess of anything finally agreed with the NGA.

With no prospect of further negotiation the letter advises members:

. . . to make their own arrangements with NGA chapels on the best terms they can achieve and according to each company's ability to pay.

It was in effect a surrender letter. On 19 May the NGA issued a circular to all branches:

It is clear that the vast majority of members who work under the terms of the BPIF Agreement, are now covered by interim agreements between their employers and the association which meets the NGA's claim for £80 per week minimum . . . and a 37.5 hour standard working week by 23 April 1981.

A deadline of 28 May was given for any remaining companies to agree these terms otherwise:

In the absence of receiving such an agreement you should, as from Thursday 29 May 1980, instruct Association members in the employ of these companies to withdraw their labour immediately.

Dubbins in interview in 2017 reflected on the outcome:

It would have been nice to split the Newspaper Society up the same way we split the BPIF up but the NS held firm for a couple of weeks. We could have sweated it out for a bit longer but we all knew what was coming – it was only a matter of time before ‘direct entry’ and therefore consequential reduction in our influence so you had to do something different with the Newspaper Society to address that and as soon as we possibly could. (interview 17.8.2017)

Although successful in commercial printing, the dispute had exposed vulnerabilities in the NGA’s ability to stop the job completely in newspaper production with new technology able to be run by non-NGA labour. Dubbins in 2017 said:

We got very good support but the employers demonstrated what was to come and we all knew there was going to be a lot of fights in the near future and as the legislation built up step-after-step our ability to resist that just reduced over the years. (interview 17.8.2017)

The National Agreement all but broke down as a result of the dispute and the Newspaper Society broke away from the commercial printing employers. The NGA made a separate settlement within newspapers rather than risk escalation. The news employers went on to pursue a much harder line to exploit new technology to challenge union influence and launched what they called, ‘Project Breakthrough’ (Gennard 1984, 1990, Cockburn 1991).

Chris Newis, NGA National Councillor, believed the big threat in newspapers was the division between unions as much as with the employer. In his interview in 2017 he intimated that the strength of the NGA based on sectionalism could prove an increasing weakness.

Working it out between unions became a major activity about who was going to do this work – less prevalent in the general trade because there was no one else to do it but in the provincial newspaper trade, outside of Fleet Street, it became a big issue. There was a lot of tension around the intro of technology and the relations between unions and how it was going to work out (interview 3.12.2017).

The other unions were largely bystanders to the dispute, whatever their opinions on the NGA's actions. The employers were also obliged to continue to pay their members even though production was halted. The power resources the NGA could deploy meant that its leadership had the capacity to determine strategic actions largely independent of other players. For many NGA members the campaign required little from them except those directly called upon to take action, only those members who had won the pay rise were required to pay the temporary levy to support those still in dispute. This was, for many, the only sacrifice they made in what became the union's decisive victory.

Personalities played their part in the episode. In the 1980 dispute Tony Dubbins, then the assistant to Joe Wade, General Secretary, proved the chief architect and tactician for the campaign.

I don't think Joe would have fought it. Joe was the best negotiator but he wasn't a fighter. He could make all the cases but he wasn't going to get down to it and fight it. (interview 17.8.2017)

Dawson (2014: 388) described Dubbins as a tough, "heroic leader". Interviewed for this research, Owen Coop, West Pennie Branch Secretary and then NGA National Councillor saw Dubbins as the driving force behind the campaign:

I give a lot of credit to Tony Dubbins. And the strategy was absolutely brilliant. (interview 14.2.2020)

### **Union response to the new laws**

The sort of dispute conducted in 1980 would not be lawful under the new regulations and the NGA leadership acted ahead of their enactment. The interviews over 2014-17 with former officers and activists confirmed that they anticipated that the NGA was a key target in the government offensive against union power. Dubbins assessed that the union was in the firing line:

Absolutely top – not top in national importance in the country's economy in a way of the railway workers or dock workers - but from the point of the NGA's

influence and organisation and ability to deal with newspaper employers (interview 17.8.2017).

The NGA welcomed the TUC's commitment to challenge the new Employment Acts. The NGA National Council held a special session to consider the new laws and the union's response to them. Tony Burke, then a NGA National Councillor, explained:

The general view was we are just going to ignore it. We are not going to accept fines and things like that. I wouldn't say it was arrogance. We had never been beaten before. We'd had long hard battles and won (interview 18.2.2014).

The TUC had agreed a position of resistance to the new laws and a collective commitment to rally behind any union threatened by them. The decision to defy the law, however, would be a huge gamble for a small union, especially one that had largely stood aloof from the rest of the TUC for much of its history. The 1982 Wembley conference agreed that no union should participate in ballots under the 1980 and 1982 Acts, not take public funds for such ballots, members should not serve on tribunals arising from the new laws and crucially:

If the TUC General Council feels that a request for support is justified, to coordinate support for an affiliated union in the event of it experiencing legal action from an employer under those laws, including industrial action against the employer concerned and to provide financial support to the union in the event of it experience financial difficulties arising out of such action.<sup>43</sup>

The first four years of the Conservative Government saw the new laws enacted but not tested. It was a period of protest but stand-off and for much of the time it seemed that the unpopular government would not survive. The June 1983 General Election, however, re-elected the Conservatives with a massive majority. It was determined to pursue the assault on trade union power with fresh vigour. John Monks recalled for this research that TUC leaders feared that, with a fresh mandate, the Government would press ahead with further trade union reforms and some felt the time had come to adopt a different approach from the outright opposition as

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<sup>43</sup> Report by TUC General Council adopted at Wembley Conference 5 April 1982 – see Appendix 2

declared by the Wembley Conference. Right-wing union leaders such as Alistair Graham of the civil servants' union advocated a policy of 'new realism'. A change in the election for the TUC General Council led to a number of medium-sized unions – including, ironically, the NGA – being elected for the first time but most were on the 'right' of the movement (Marsh 1992:153).

The landslide re-election victory for the Conservatives in 1983 allowed it to pursue a more radical reform programme. But some union leaders saw some grounds for constructive engagement and argument. The hard-liner, Norman Tebbit was moved to become the Minister for Trade and Industry and his place at Employment was taken up by Tom King, seen by union leaders as a more reasonable politician. Len Murray opened up communications and sought a dialogue with him over any future plans for union legislation.

Interviewees acknowledged that some left-wingers were looking for the fight with the Thatcher Government. Dubbins felt the TUC's initial stance was quite strong, but he acknowledged that other union leaders felt that the 1983 election had changed the whole picture and a new approach was necessary. Newis believed the new laws had to be defeated:

We felt it would have to be opposed and we also saw it as an extension . . . of the Heath's Industrial Relations Act which we had seen off and we would be able to see this off again through our industrial strength (interview 3.12.2017).

It should be noted that the NGA had signed up to the Industrial Relations Act and Newis refers to the battle fought by the wider movement with his own union standing aside. He saw it as a broader battle of class forces:

Always saw the objective was to undermine industrial power of trade unions in order to increase the rate of profit for businesses. Thatcher promised to unleash the power of enterprise from the restrictive practices of unions. Somebody had to do something about organised labour if global capitalism was going to catch on (interview 3.13.2017).



The NGA felt confident of its strength even with the threats closing in on it.

Interviewed in 2017, Dubbins reflected that:

We had just been through the 1980 campaign, we were seen, I won't say 'vanguard' of the trade union movement but certainly up around the front (interview 17.8.2017).

The Government viewed the NGA and other print unions as the more militant faction within the TUC. But a private Conservative Research memo headed *The State of the Union* written by Shipley in July 1980<sup>44</sup> made the assessment that the NGA was vulnerable:

The NGA, for all its hot air, is however, in severe financial difficulties, having spent more than £1.8 million in disputes benefit since the beginning of 1979.

It was not dispute pay that was to cause financial concerns in the NGA, however, it was the sharp rise in unemployment and the consequential strain on its Provident Fund that paid out generous out-of-work benefits. By late 1980 some 1,500 members were unemployed and the Fund paid them a third of the weekly basic wage contained in the National Agreement (Gennard 1990: 243). Members voted to pay an emergency levy of £1 a week but this could not be sustained for long and the growing recession saw more redundancies and closures. A Special Delegate Meeting was called to consider proposals to reform internal finances and break the link between unemployment benefit and basic pay rate.

### **New employers in the industry**

By 1980 new free newspapers were appearing - delivered door-to-door and produced using the latest phototypesetting or desktop-publishing systems. The new businesses were often using the technology in ways the traditional industry was unable to. Dubbins recalled how he opposed the argument made by some at the

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<sup>44</sup> Confidential memo 26.7.80 from Conservative Party archive – see Appendix 3

time that without the restrictive controls of the NGA there would be a flourishing of new publications (interview 17.8.2017).

The NGA National Council established a committee to examine the impact of free newspapers. It found that the number of free titles had risen from around 300 in 1979 to 6-700 by 1983 with an estimated circulation of 21 million.<sup>45</sup> The response by the traditional provincial press was often to take a financial stake in these new operations and in many cases take them over.

Dubbins felt the power still lay in the hands of the major newspaper owners:

Most independents we were able to strike agreements with and it wasn't long before the provincial press were buying up their local free-sheets. It wasn't a major on-going battle. The rise of the free-sheets got them worried and drove them down the path that free-sheets came under their control (interview 17.8.2017).

One new free newspaper operation was the Messenger Newspaper Group that got a mention in the free newspapers' committee after the SOGAT Manchester Central branch raised unspecific concerns about the business.<sup>46</sup>

Looking back, Dubbins explains that he recognised the challenges the union faced in contending with new technology. He believed at the time that employers sought to use new technology to eliminate trade unions:

If we'd had a different political climate we could have regulated them and slowed it down. We ran into a whole range of disputes with individual newspaper employers – a lot of them parts of major groups clearly with a strategy. It was becoming increasingly apparent that that strategy was not about new technology, this was the façade being used, but the reality it was a de-unionisation scenario (interview 17.8.2017).

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<sup>45</sup> NGA National Council Minutes March 1983 – see Appendix 2

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

Concerns over Messenger Newspapers were correct. The employer, Eddy Shah was preparing to break the influence of the NGA on his business and the next chapter will explore the dynamics of this pivotal dispute.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

The 1980 campaign gained a staggering 28.5% rise in the 'basic rate' and a shorter working week for the NGA membership. Its success boosted the union leadership's standing with members. The NGA had shown its capacity to act and became the first union to reach a thirty-seven-and-a-half hour working week. In Gennard's conclusion: "The industrial muscle of the NGA allied to the determination, loyalty, discipline and sacrifice of its members had achieved a significant victory (Gennard, 1990: 413)".

The case study highlights a union leadership shifting its ideological stance to one more identified with the 'Left' of the trade union movement and more adversarial towards employers. Michel's (1962) critique of union leaders describes how they command oligarchical tendencies but this study shows how a leadership can transition to a new ideological posture. With the NGA's positional power under threat from new technology the leadership calculated that time was running out to deploy it for the purposes of advancing its members' terms and conditions.

The study confirms the capacity for a leadership to embark upon a bold, aggressive campaign as part of a strategic choice rather than rank-and-file pressure. Its strong internal democracy and high membership participation, however, gave the leadership the confidence it could mobilise support for its campaign. The union leadership highlighted how the pay of skilled workers had been hit by successive pay limits and how new technology should lead to a shorter working week, deployment of 'sword of justice' for collective mobilisation (Flanders and Clegg 1954).

NGA leaders calculated the level of membership support and how to build and utilise it where they had most leverage over the employer federation. Rainnie (2016: 132) was right to describe the action as a "guerrilla campaign aimed at taking advantage of the highly competitive nature of the general print sector". The highly fragmented

commercial printing industry employers could not sustain a united front against the hit-and-run selective action of the NGA. The strategy to sow division between rival companies rather than adopt an all-out offensive proved shrewd and effective.

In taking the action, the NGA clashed with other unions, especially SOGAT, who were partners in the National Agreement. Relations between the two unions were strained and the NGA leadership calculated that there was little to gain or lose from having SOGAT alongside in the campaign. In 1980, the union did not require such 'associational' power. It was also confident that other workers were unable to undertake their member's duties, even though their unions did not support the action. The union leaders could direct the campaign with little if any reference to the concerns of other unions in the industry. The other unions were largely by-standers in the dispute and the differential agreements meant that they stood to gain from the NGA's success.

This case study is an example of sectional action at its most effective but union division, however, posed a threat to the NGA's longer-term interests. Had the dispute lasted longer than it did the fall-out with other unions may have proved more damaging especially in newspapers. Dubbins still stands by the position he took as leader of the NGA with his criticism of the stance of other unions, especially SOGAT. Relations with SOGAT continued to worsen as technology forced a competition for union positions within the shifting job roles and functions (Gennard 1990).

The NGA paid little if any attention to woo wider union support or public opinion. It did not need assistance from the TUC and by and large set the agenda and sequencing of the campaign. Its power was based on its structural position within the industry and its tight control of the labour market founded upon the closed shop. It succeeded thanks to clever tactics to select targets for maximum advantage where membership support was strong and exploit the competitive nature of the industry to out-manoeuvre the employers. A union without such strong membership bonds and collective identity could not have embarked on such a campaign with any certainty of the result.

The campaign demonstrated the capacity of a small craft union to adopt a strategic objective of improved terms and conditions for its members and pursue it with determination until successful. It was possible to do this because of its strong collective identity and organisational prowess. Its internal democracy and high membership participation gave the leadership confidence it could lead a selective campaign of attrition against the employers without calling on the support of other unions of the TUC.

In the subsequent three years the fortunes of print workers suffered. The economic recession led to redundancies and pressure on pay. High unemployment and falling subscription income created a financial crisis for the NGA. Technological change threatened to replace many skilled jobs, especially in typesetting and the Government instigated its step-by-step sequence of employment laws. The next chapter examines the case study of the 1983 Messenger dispute which exposed how far those changes impacted upon the power of the NGA and its leadership's ability to determine the course of events through their own strategic choices.

## The dynamics of the 1983 Messenger dispute

### Introduction

The previous chapter examined how the NGA waged a highly successful campaign in 1980 against employers across the commercial and newspaper industries confirming its capacity to take strategic actions. It was confident it could count upon the positional power and collective organisation of the union.

The following three years saw profound changes in the political, economic, technological and legal environment. The Conservative Government had built upon its step-by-step programme of employment legislation as described in Chapter Four with far-reaching 1980 and 1982 Acts to significantly restrict union actions especially those used by the NGA.

Unemployment had risen sharply to more than three million. The printing industry was in recession and the numbers of unemployed NGA members had risen sharply. The number of employees in the industry had shrunk from 315,000 in 1975 to 249,000 in 1982 (Gennard 1990: 129).

Printing technology had advanced allowing the user to compose type and pages much easier and cheaper than before. New independent publishers entered the industry producing free newspapers delivered door-to-door a development scrutinised by a special printing unions' committee<sup>47</sup>. One such operation was Messenger Newspapers, based in Stockport, led by Eddy Shah.

This chapter examines how the NGA came to be in dispute with Messenger Newspapers despite the unfavourable conditions for a successful outcome. Shah had calculated the impact of industrial action to his business and had taken measures to

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<sup>47</sup> Minutes of the free newspapers sub-committee of the Printing Industries Advisory Committee were circulated to the National Councils of the unions represented.

limit its effectiveness. The chapter questions his independence or whether he had the sort of backing some in the union claimed.

The NGA had many years' experience of applying external pressure on recalcitrant employers but by 1983 these tactics were 'secondary action' and could result in legal injunctions to desist. The NGA's power relied on the discipline of solidarity between members in an inter-connected industry (Dörre, Holst and Nachtwey 2009, Adăscăliței and Guga 2017). The environment in which the union now operated had changed to significantly favour the employer.

The chapter highlights the legal actions taken using the new employment laws for the first time and how these rapidly escalated. Failure to conform risked a spiral of legal actions but non-compliance was the policy of the TUC resulting from its 1982 Wembley Conference. The policy contained some caveats and was agreed prior to the re-election of the Conservatives in 1983. This led to a shifting in the stance of the TUC with those arguing for some form of constructive engagement with the new government winning gaining majority support.

The research considers the strategic decisions taken by the NGA's leadership and how pressures from activists and emotions played their part in escalating the dispute into uncharted territory for a small union with a legacy of moderate politics and detachment from the wider movement.

When Messenger production continued despite the strike, the NGA sought to use secondary pressures and to blockade the plant with a mass picket. Evidence is given from those who organised and attended the picket as well as from police reports. This action brought further court actions and a robust response from an emboldened and well-equipped police force under pressure from ministers to constrain the picket.

When the NGA refused to comply with the court injunctions, Shah won sequestration of the union's assets, an unprecedented measure. Testimony of union officers show, for the first time, the secret measures the union took to evade the actions.

The State created a legal framework within which individual employers could challenge union power and it could claim neutrality. This 'hands-off' approach is analysed in a section that looks at the role of the police and the state. It considers how the employer and union came to opposite views about the role of government. The study calls upon interviews, media reports, union minutes, and confidential documents between government departments and the Cheshire Police. The evidence highlights deliberations around extending police and state powers including bringing charges for incitement and riotous assembly. The study records how the police and ministers disagreed over the interception of vehicles heading for Warrington.

The chapter uses the testimony of those present, triangulated with press reports and government/police records to highlight the escalating mass picket and the extent to which its organisation was a strategic decision by the union or whether it grew under its own momentum.

### **Shah the independent**

The provincial newspaper industry was dominated by a few large conglomerate employers, often with cross-ownership to national titles. Unions could apply industrial action in one workplace to support members in another. From the interviews with union officers and activists there was an awareness that an independent employer could seek to exploit new technology and the new laws to bypass the union but confidence remained high that such a threat could be resisted using the union's tried-and-tested methods. Some independent producers had already successfully circumvented the NGA, such as TB Foreman, the publisher of the *Nottingham Evening Post*. Dubbins told the 1980 Delegate Meeting of the pragmatic conclusion that: "this is one that we have lost and in time, try to get back and get it organised . . . on a proper trade union basis (NGA 1980: 316).

Shah saw himself an 'outsider' not tied to traditional methods, had never seen a Linotype machine and used Apple computers. On a trip to the US he saw the page



make-up software, *Pagemaker*, being used to produce a newspaper in Seattle Dickinson (1984) who wrote of this visit, makes little of the independent status of Shah, preferring to paint him as part of a wider conspiracy. Goodhart and Wintour (1986) present Shah as the leader of a newspaper revolution. Neil (1997: 82) also credits the “small entrepreneur” with taking a stand unlike the national newspaper proprietors.

Shah said he had no problem recognising the union in the early days of his business and he allowed the NGA to meet his staff. Keen to avoid problems getting his papers printed he even joined the union himself. He says he didn't realise that 'recognition' meant a closed shop.

As expressed in his interview for this research, Shah grew to resent the NGA and the aggressive style of Alan Royston the Father of the Chapel (FoC) and Tony Burke the President of the local Stockport Branch, who worked at the rival *Stockport Express and the Stockport Advertiser*. Tensions grew over a range of issues and the more the members turned to the union for support, the more hostile Shah became.

Royston describes a long line of individually trivial but cumulative examples of secret deals, broken promises and general pettiness. Shah refused to be bound by union rules. The hours crept up to get the job finished. Burke led the initial negotiations recalls Shah getting “very ratty and difficult (interview 18.2.2014)”.

Shah became determined to develop the business without the union. He talked to others in the free newspaper business who advised him that to by-pass the union he would need a web-offset printing press. He bought a cheap second-hand press from the Co-operative Press in Manchester. The company acquired a factory unit in Winnick Quay, in Warrington, complete with its own electricity sub-station. Such preparations show his determination to be ready for a conflict with the union and relations with chapel members deteriorated.

For this research, Shah explained:

We got the paper from Finland brought in through a non-union port. Because we couldn't use union staff I went and found unemployed people who were

desperate for work and within about three weeks we had taught them to use the press and how to make the plates, I learnt as well (interview 7.4.2015).

By setting up a press in Warrington, Shah took advantage of enterprise grants but being in the area of the Manchester Branch meant the union would demand terms laid down for national newspapers printed in the city. Burke explained:

If you were a newspaper you had to pay Manchester national newspaper rates which were pretty good. Manchester branch also has all sorts of strange rules as to who could go for interview and things like that. It was one of the oldest branches one of the founders of the labour movement<sup>48</sup> (interview 18.2.2015).

The collective strength of the NGA gave them high levels of knowledge of the industry. Little happened without the union finding out and in Manchester, the Branch Secretary, Arthur Perrin discovered Shah's plans for the press at Warrington. Owen Coop the West Pennine NGA Secretary also learned Shah had established another office in Bury and it was a hive of non-union activity. The company refused to meet him to discuss the operation so Coop summoned John Ibbotson, NGA National Officer, for assistance but it took weeks to fix a meeting. In November 1982, after a long delay Arthur Perrin got to meet with Shah over the printing press in Warrington. Shah informed him that the machine was already producing papers. On 19 November Shah met NGA officers and announced he was not going to continue with agreements at Stockport including the closed shop (Dickinson 1984, Gennard 1990).

The evidence points to Shah preparing to oust the union from the business. Royston remembers:

They advertised our jobs before we were going on strike. I was finishing off the *Messenger* and there was an ad missing. And Steve Hart (the manager) walks out and plonks this advert in. I said wait a minute, this is an advert for my job, what's going on? I thought we were still talking and I was getting

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<sup>48</sup> The Manchester Graphical Society was formed in 1797.

angry then. That's when it was getting more intimidating. If we are being pulled out of here, let's get on with it because I can't stand this (interview 2014).

Dubbins wrote to Shah setting a deadline of 22 June for a settlement or a dispute would be called. Dispute pay of £80 a week was endorsed for the members involved.<sup>49</sup> Shah responded that his company would pursue legal actions against the union. The deadline passed but the union delayed hoping still for a change of approach. The National Council minutes of 29-30 June 1983 recorded a verbal report by Dubbins declaring there was no alternative but industrial action.<sup>50</sup>

The nature of the printing industry meant that few employers were entirely self-reliant and often needed the inter-connected web of suppliers. Cross-ownership of newspapers meant that few stood alone. These factors gave the unions additional leverage from that emanating from the positional power in the workplace. Shah's independence allowed him to circumvent the union's direct and indirect tactics. His preparations allowed the business to operate despite the NGA's industrial action tactics. The new laws gave him significant new weight against the union and propelled the conflict to a higher, more political level.

### **The dispute and the law**

For most of its history the NGA's positional power meant that if members walked off the job, production stopped. Shah, however, had already isolated the small Stockport chapel from his growing non-union workforce in other offices. Far from fearing the consequences of a strike, the evidence shows he encouraged it.

The strike began on 4 July 1983 and on 12 July Phil Daniels, Alan Royston, Kevin Sherrin, John Noble, Neil McAllister and Stan Hart, known as the 'Stockport Six',

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<sup>49</sup> NGA Executive minutes 13 June 1983 – see Appendix 2

<sup>50</sup> NGA National Council minutes 29-30 June 1983 – see Appendix 2

were dismissed. *The Messenger* newspaper still appeared, if apparently a little rough around the edges (Dickinson 1984).

A report early into the dispute from Royston as FoC admits:

So far our picketing successes have been limited. The mail has to be collected from the Post Office as the postmen refuse to cross our line. A few advertisers have told us they will no longer advertise while the dispute is on and we have managed to turn a small amount of artwork away (July 1983 report by Stockport NGA).

The union entered the Messenger dispute with its positional power all but gone and its usual tactics failed to significantly restrict the business. The union was aware that some of these methods were in breach of the Employment Acts of 1980 and 1982. The 1982 Act, in particular, was wide-ranging and included:

- Made it unlawful to sack a worker for not being a trade union member in a closed shop where the closed shop arrangements have not been approved in 1980 Employment Act terms.
- Outlawed 'trade union labour only contracts' and removed immunity from those who pressurise employers to inhibit non-trade union companies from honouring their contracts.
- Made trade unions open to civil damages between £10,000 and £250,000 for unlawful industrial action.
- Lawful trade disputes were restricted to those disputes between employers and their workers concerning working conditions, wages, etc. This new definition removed immunity from secondary action to pressurise another company where there is no dispute between their workers and employers.
- Empowered employers to fire striking workers and not face unfair dismissal claims.

It is clear from conference debates, union circulars and interviews that the NGA was acutely aware of the implications of the new laws and many believed parts been

drafted with it in mind. The National Council had agreed to carry on and disregard the new laws and it was given a report on the wider trade union response.

So far there has not been an actual case, but there have been a number of 'near misses'. Inevitably there will, at some time be an action by someone seeking an injunction or compensation.<sup>51</sup>

The National Council reaffirmed its policy to refuse to acknowledge the legislation and if faced with sequestration it would:

Continue its position regarding the refusal to pay any damages or compensation and leave open the action to be taken if sequestration becomes an actuality arising from such cases (eg consider "persuading" employers to pay damages or refund money sequestered).<sup>52</sup>

The NGA issued instructions to members not to handle work coming from or going to a company in dispute and the standard circular was sent in regard to the Messenger dispute, including to advertisers asking them to desist.

Unions were reluctant to change their rules to accommodate the new laws but instead established systems and instructions to officers to ensure compliance and control.<sup>53</sup> The NGA National Council instigated ways to impose greater checks on branches proposing industrial action.<sup>54</sup>

Reed International was a large employer of NGA members in the provincial press and it was a shareholder in its rival Messenger Newspaper – a common practice at the time. The National Council was informed:

Following approaches by the NGA, Reed International had agreed to dispose of their shareholding in Messenger Newspapers (Northern) Ltd.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> NGA Executive 13 June 1983

<sup>52</sup> NGA National Council minutes 29-30 June 1983 – see Appendix 2

<sup>53</sup> Unite guide to Industrial Action and UNISON guidelines for example

<sup>54</sup> NGA National Council minutes 29-30 June 1983 – see Appendix 2

<sup>55</sup> NGA National Council minutes 10-11 August 1983 – see Appendix 2

Shah's Bury business obtained a writ from Manchester High Court alleging that Reed International had been induced by the NGA to repudiate a contract to invest £33,000 in the Bury Messenger, an act unlawful under section 15 of the 1982 Employment Act. Shah sought £13,303 in damages. The judge deferred the hearing before making a ruling.

Interviewed for this study in 2015, Shah said he could not believe that the union simply told the court it did not recognise the Acts and they would not pay any fines (interview 7.4.2015).

With production continuing despite the strike the NGA turned to the journalists for assistance. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) were also committed to resisting the new employment laws and it instructed its members not to supply copy or pictures to strike-breaking production workers.

The NGA picket at Stockport remained low key but the journalists agreed not to cross the picket if it was stepped up. In response Frank Walsh, NGA Regional Secretary, sent out a letter to the northern NGA branches asking for support on the picket line (Dickinson 1984).

On 1 September Shah went back to court and using the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts won a writ to restrain the NUJ from: inducing or attempting to induce its members to break their contracts of employment. On 6 September Shah won an injunction to order the journalists to return to normal working. Royston recalled when NUJ Northern Organiser, Colin Bourne had a heated exchange with Shah on *BBC Look North West*.

I remember seeing Colin Bourne on TV with Shah. And Colin said you signed a recognition agreement. Shah went berserk on that programme. He really flipped (interview 2014).

The Stockport Branch of the NUJ successfully urged the chapel to stand by the union's instructions despite the court ruling. Shah stepped up his legal actions and on 13 September gained a writ to restrain the NGA from inducing or attempting to induce a customer to break a contract with his company. On 16 September the NUJ

was found guilty of contempt of court for failing to obey the court's order. Feeling that sequestration was far too draconian a measure, the judge went no further than to express his disquiet and reminded the union that the order must be obeyed. The NUJ Executive confirmed its decision not to obey the order and the Messenger Chapel voted 5-3 to continue the action. Shah offered to drop the legal action if the journalists returned to normal working and this time they agreed and stuck by the decision in spite of efforts by Ecclestone and Bourne. In Shah's memory there was no real dispute with the journalists:

NUJ has always chickened out because we then used the law (interview 7.4.2015).

When interviewed for this research, Shah explained that his secretary gave him a booklet from the Government on trade union laws. He called his solicitor, Mike Grearson who said, "yeah, you've got them". This statement is at odds with the report of the meeting between Shah and Manchester NGA officers to the NGA Executive of 16 May:

He confirmed that the company were prepared for a siege and stated that his company's lawyers and employees were geared up for this. He explained they were getting to a clash situation and stated they were ready to face up to it.<sup>56</sup>

The report said that Shah concluded the meeting by saying that if the NGA go into battle with him, he would win. The NGA Executive met on 13 June and was informed:

Shah warned the union that any action the union took against his company would be illegal and he would proceed with court action.<sup>57</sup>

Shah's comments may have been bravado in a negotiating situation but the evidence such as the purchase of a press, opening new studies, recruitment of anti-union

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<sup>56</sup> NGA National Executive minutes 16 May 1983 – see Appendix 2

<sup>57</sup> NGA National Executive minutes 13 June 1983 – see Appendix 2

staff, points to him having prepared for a conflict with the NGA. It seems rather implausible that such preparations did not include advice on the legal position.

In contrast, the union's leadership appeared initially hesitant:

Although this action was contrary to NGA policy on the Employment Act, the officers were of the view that before proceeding further in this connection that consultations take place with the TUC.<sup>58</sup>

The National Council in September was informed of consultations with the TUC:

It appeared to the officers that there were some doubts and misunderstandings among TUC staff. However, further consultation was to take place between the Association and TUC legal representatives.<sup>59</sup>

This would appear to have been a time for the NGA to take stock of its dispute with Shah but the conflict rolled on. Dubbins denied this amounted to any lack of resolve:

We never had any doubt about what we would have to do but obviously with employment law and bearing in mind TUC's commitment to support unions who ran foul of the employment law so there was a need to consult them. But we had already made up our minds (interview 17.8.2017).

On 14 October the High Court granted Shah two interim injunctions against the NGA under the Employment Acts. One ordered the union to refrain from blacking work emanating from or going to the Group and from asking other unions to black it. The other restrained the NGA from interfering with the business of the Messenger Group through unlawful picketing. Shah returned to the courts to enforce the injunctions of 14 October 1983. Shah claims the judge was about to fine the NGA £5,000 but then the local official told the court that whatever happened the union would not pay it.

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<sup>58</sup> NGA National Council minutes 10-11 August 1983 – see Appendix 2

<sup>59</sup> NGA National Council minutes 21-22 September 1983 – see Appendix 2



I looked at the judge and his eyes were like a pin-ball machine, and the cherries came up. They thought they were above the law and they felt above the law unless it's a really iniquitous law (interview 7.4.2015).

It is hard to see how Shah would have known what was in the judge's mind. Shah recalls that his solicitor had a list of things they could go for and at the bottom was sequestration.

I didn't know what it was and he said, we'll never get that. I said go for it but was told I was not going to get it (interview 7.4.2015).

Judge Eastham ruled that the NGA has been in "blatant breach" but he drew back from sequestration. He warned that: "the time might come when this union must be taught to obey the law by having all its assets sequestered." He fined the NGA £50,000 plus costs (Dickinson 1984).

Dubbins appears generous to the judge in retrospect; in the interview in 2017 he recalled that he would have preferred the parties settle the dispute some other way:

It became a test of the law against this union and undoubtedly the judge just took the line: 'I may not completely agree with this, that there may be other ways to resolve it'. But at the end of the day he had to uphold the law and we got the fines and in saying 'we're not paying them' we were in contempt, no doubt about it, and the consequence was sequestration. I understand exactly the position the judge was in, if he is given a law like that to operate (interview 17.8.2017).

Wade made it clear that the union would not pay the fine. *The Sun* reported:

Jail me if you dare storms union boss

Defiant print union boss Joe Wade yesterday stuck two fingers up at the law over a £50,000 fine. Mr Wade may now become the first trade union martyr in a big confrontation over the Government's new employment laws.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The Sun 23.11.83 – see Appendix 5

Dubbins felt irritated by Wade's posture and the way the media focused on it:

Journalists kept going on about it and it was a load of nonsense. This is nothing to do with going to jail; all about sequestration and stopping the union operating. This government doesn't want people going to jail – victims, people sent to prison – ready-made heroes in that situation. Sticking him in the nick was the worst thing they could have done (interview 17.8.2017).

Shah triggered the first use of the new employment laws. Both government and unions had anticipated a battle at some point and there were eager combatants on both sides. After decades of failed attempts at trade union reform, the Conservatives needed to assert the rule of law and had a fresh electoral mandate behind them. The union policy of non-compliance – set in train at the 1982 Wembley Conference – was in the process of review with the TUC seeking some sort of accommodation with the law. These factors added weight to the significance of the dispute and its outcome.

### **Union leadership and democracy in the dispute**

The traditional model of a top-down managed institution as described by the Webbs (1896) does not do justice to the union's membership engagement and rank-and-file activism. The NGA was a small, tight-knit organisation with an elected leadership at every level. Blissett (2013) studied decision-making in unions in the UK and Australia and used the NGA as a case study for a comparative analysis of policy making. He tests his research against the classical theorists (Webbs 1896, 1920 and Michels 1962) who see trade unions as oligarchs with senior officers as chief decision-makers. This research shows the position for a union grounded in high membership participation and democracy is more nuanced. The rank-and-file membership has a high degree of engagement and influence and is not in a constant battle with the leadership to wrest control of decisions (Fairbrother 2015). The 1980 dispute was one whereby the leadership took a proactive approach to wage a campaign to advance members' pay and conditions and set out to encourage members into

action. In 1983, faced with an employer offensive, the leadership did not command the agenda and was obliged to respond with defensive action.

At the NGA September National Council, Dubbins was declared the winner of the ballot for General Secretary<sup>61</sup>. He took up the position when Joe Wade retired the following year. Elected on a more left-wing stance than his predecessor he now led the response to Shah's challenge.

The structures of the NGA didn't help the situation, however. The industrial power of the NGA lay in the hands of chapels with solidarity action through the inter-connected industry often directed by the branches. The focus for decision-making tended to be at the branch level where chapel reps and activists came together. Branches retained the trappings of independent societies in a federated structure, even called 'Graphical Societies'. Their own bank accounts and directly employed full-time officers were answerable to local branch committees elected by the membership including lay presidents. This structure developed the strong collective identity at local level.

Shah's studio in Stockport came under the Stockport Graphical Society led by Arthur Scott as Branch Secretary and Tony Burke as lay President and National Council member. The Branch could trace its roots back to the Stockport Typographical Society, an affiliate of the Northern Typographical Union in 1835. Shah's Bury office came under the West Pennine Graphical Society led by Branch Secretary, Owen Coop. Warrington, where Shah put his printing press, came under the auspices of the Manchester Branch led by Arthur Perrin.

Coop reflected:

I don't know if things had been different and Shah had set up in Bury rather than Stockport whether we'd could have done something but irrespective of that I believe somebody would have taken us on (interview 14.2.2020).

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<sup>61</sup> NGA National Council minutes 21-22 September 1983 – see Appendix 2



7.1 - Location of Messenger facilities and NGA branch structure

Coop remembers a conversation he had at the time during which another officer suggested:

... what we should have done is drawn a circle around it and pushed it to one side. It would have happened anyway in my opinion, it would have been somebody else (interview 14.2.2020).

There is no evidence of the leadership considering alternative strategies in the face of the new legal restrictions but some signs of hesitancy or anxiety. There is evidence of caution:

greater care would be taken when issuing blacking circulars. Ensure that in any blackings, the full facts are established before action is taken.<sup>62</sup>

By this time the TUC's Annual Report, to be presented to its Autumn Congress, had been published. It showed a softening of approach to the new Government and its opposition to the law. The NGA National Council had concerns over the TUC's position as expressed in the minutes:

Also seek to question the TUC's present contradictory policy by making a statement concerning the problems experienced by the NGA in following Congress policy under the appropriate section of the TUC Report at the 1983 Congress in Blackpool.<sup>63</sup>

Although one of the wealthiest unions, the NGA was facing a significant drain on its finances due to the sharp rise in unemployment benefit payments. The Balance Sheet at 24 September 1983 shows the union worth £10,098,186. A Special Delegate Meeting was called for November to consider ways to stem the losses and a Special National Council was held on 13 October to handle the business of the forthcoming Delegate Meeting. The rate paid to out-of-work members was a third of the basic weekly wage agreed in the National Agreement. The Council proposed freezing the benefit.

The same Council meeting was informed of the writ served on the Association by the Messenger Group. Shah's recourse to the courts raised the stakes in the dispute. No longer was it just a conflict with a small newspaper business and six union members, now it was over union resistance to new restrictive employment laws. The leadership had to decide whether to engage in battle or seek a pragmatic side-step.

The TUC's wavering position could have rung alarm bells. Had the NGA leadership wanted an escape route they had one from the September Congress but recommendations were endorsed to step up pressure through a meeting of news members in the Manchester area including a rallying call to join the picket.

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<sup>62</sup> NGA National Council minutes 29-30 June 1983 – see Appendix 2

<sup>63</sup> National Council 29-30 June 1983 – see Appendix 2

On 5 November the NGA held its Special Delegate Meeting in Blackpool to review the level of unemployment benefits. Emotions were running especially high for Joe Wade, the outgoing General Secretary – the day before the conference he had attended the funeral of Les Dixon, the NGA President and a close friend.

Looking back, Newis felt that passions could have clouded judgements at this crucial moment for the Messenger dispute. He recalled the mood:

We'd been to a funeral of Les Dixon at Bedford Crem. on the Friday and then we got on the coach and went to Blackpool. Joe was very cut-up about Les and he got pissed. He had to be put to bed (interview 3.12.2017).

Coop recalled that Wade was:

Uptight about it all (interview 14.2.2020).

Wade, still apparently under the influence of too much drink, made a special statement on the Messenger dispute. He introduced three of the Stockport Six who were given an ovation from the delegates.

Wade said to the conference:

So the law now says it is perfectly possible for management to move machinery and equipment from one factory to another and that we cannot picket where that work is taking place. The law says we must stop instructing our members not to send work to this office; that we must ask them to become scabs and blacklegs. The law now says we cannot even ask advertisers not to advertise in these blacked newspapers.

We say we are ignoring those injunctions.

I will be joining our friends on the picket line at six o'clock next Wednesday morning. We want as many of you as possible to muster as many people as you can possibly get to get on the picket line because that is the only way we can have some kind of real effect on this dispute (Special NGA Delegate Conference, November 1983).

Wade asked delegates to talk to national officers because he didn't want further instructions recorded. For the NGA this was the moment of no return.

Newis remembers:

Conference itself was quite emotive and I don't know what kind of discussion there had been between Joe Wade and Dubbins over what he was to say but I remember seeing Dubbins' face when Joe said something along the lines of we're all going to Warrington - summon to arms to stop Eddy Shah. I think Dubbins was shocked (interview 3.12.2017).

Interviewed in 2019, Dubbins confirmed the account believing the way the dispute escalated was "bloody ludicrous". He recalled that once Wade had made such a declaration there was no going back.

Don't see how we could pull back (interview 17.8.2019).

The President called Alan Royston to the rostrum. He began nervously:

I am totally unprepared for this. I am not a speech maker. If we still want an industry, if you want to be able to sit in meetings like this, you have got to fight this one – you have got to – because it is no longer a dispute between just the six of us and Shah. It is a dispute for this industry and this union (Special NGA Delegate Meeting November 1983).

Royston told the conference that Shah had made it plain he would be the first person to use the new legislation.

What Shah does today all the nationals and the jobbing offices will do tomorrow. I will guarantee you that. They are all watching. The conference gave Royston a long-standing ovation (Special NGA Delegate Meeting November 1983).

Excessive drink and high emotions played their part. In a rather coded and ambiguous letter shortly after the conference, Arthur Perrin, Secretary of the Manchester Graphical Society wrote to the General Secretary expressing the view of its Branch Committee that:

National Officers and National Council should at meetings of this nature conduct themselves in a manner befitting the positions they hold.<sup>64</sup>

Newis recalled that the dispute took the Council by surprise:

A lot saw it as business as usual dispute and didn't realise the consequences that it was going to have didn't realise what they were getting into a lot of talk about keeping the dispute on and not back down. Debates about whether it should be called off – the right wing and the officers wanted it called off. Not including Tony Dubbins. He spoke in favour of continuing the dispute – he always defended the union. It wasn't familiar territory for the NGA (interview 3.12.2017).

The evidence points to a leadership rocked by multiple challenges with its base of branch officers and activists still confident in the union's power. The small, rumbling dispute at Messenger was inflamed when big personalities clashed, there were complications at least over the fragmented local branch structure, delays and prevarications over the negotiations. The dispute escalated through its own momentum rather than by strategic decision-making by the leadership.

### **The escalating picket**

Nearly 600 print members turned up to the New Century Hall, Manchester on 27 October to hear Dubbins for the NGA, Bill Keys, SOGAT, Ted O'Brien, NATSOPA and Ken Ashton for the NUJ in a public display of print union unity. Alan Royston was cheered when he spoke for the 'Stockport Six'. Ray Williams, the NGA's Liverpool Branch Secretary, a left-wing official with a reputation for militancy and for effective organisation of the union's and City's unemployed gave a passionate address and called for more action to win the dispute.

Williams organised unemployed members into picket rotas and on 1 November some 250 turned up at the Stockport offices for a demonstration of support for the

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<sup>64</sup> NGA National Council minutes 22 November 1983 – see Appendix 2



six sacked members. The police warned the union that there were too many in attendance but took no further action. It appeared that the police were reluctant to escalate matters by intervening.

After the Special Delegate Meeting and Wade's rallying call, arrangements were quickly organised for coaches from across the country to carry pickets for early hours



**7.2 - Lone police officer guards the Warrington printing plant.**

*Photo: Nigel Costley*

on the following Wednesday 9 November. Convoys of coaches pulled off the M6 at the allotted time and, after meeting up, they headed, not for the studio at Stockport, but for the printing plant at Warrington, in breach of the 1982 Employment Act. Hundreds gathered at the Winwick Quay industrial estate on the cold foggy morning. One lone police officer turned up in his Panda car but did nothing except report on the crowd.

The NGA parked its 'battle wagon' near the printing factory, equipped with a PA system and materials needed to sustain a picket line. Wade and Dubbins addressed the crowd for the van steps.

Shah's recollection of that day is of Dubbins as a "thug":

His 'boys' were on strike and he arrives in an XJS<sup>65</sup> so he is getting full pay. Why do they have to think they are captains of industry because they are not? The NGA were known as the storm-troopers of the union movement, more than the miners (interview 3.12.2017).

The factory itself was all locked up and nothing was going to move in or out. Someone painted 'scab' on the door.

Newis explained the argument for a mass picket:

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<sup>65</sup> At that time the NGA leadership had a high-end car with chauffeur

If you are going to stop lorries you need loads of people. No good sending a bloke with a placard. There has got to be lots of you and well organised. (interview 3.12.2017).

Shah, however, interviewed in 2015, described how he had felt alone and without support from government, press or the police. He believes this was due to a fear of unions. He recalls:

The thing I found most amazing during the early part of our dispute even the police didn't turn up to protect us and we had up to a thousand pickets attacking us at that stage. They sent one guy around and he looked like Norman Wisdom. It was terrible. No visible support from anyone (interview 7.4.2015).

The *Daily Telegraph* reported Shah as saying that the picket was “nothing short of Nazism” but played down its impact. Shah called off meetings with ACAS saying he would not negotiate under such duress. Some press reported on the dispute by blasting the pickets and the union: “Dawn Swoop”, “Print Plant Siege” and “bullyboys” (see media list in Appendix and as cited by Dickinson 1984. 96).

In the research interview Shah said that he and his staff had felt under siege with little protection:

They tried to break in once they smashed the window, there was no police there and we really feared for our lives that night and they pushed one of their people got cut and the blood stopped the rest behind. He cut himself on the glass. And whatever people say you cannot say fifteen people against a thousand is an even battle (interview 7.4.2015).

Shah engaged a company called Special Security Services to protect his premises and vans. Run by an ex-Grenadier Guard, Peter Cope, the firm used Land Rovers, uniformed security guards and Alsatian dogs. Royston found them very frightening:

Shah hired these lads to guard the car park. Built like a tank, one guy, this old lady came past and said ‘Doctor Death’ – he’s a wrestler (interview 2014).

In the research interview Shah described how he arranged the security through a Liverpool bouncer and acquired the uniforms from a TV series called *Redcap*. He laughed at how the guards could barely control the dogs they were using.

For this research Williams described one incident with the firm:

We followed them up onto the roundabout to see where they were going. They stopped and saw us. They put it into reverse into the car and caved in all the front in (interview 4.2014).

Royston also recalled their actions:

I remember being surrounded on motorway. Going past van carrying *Messengers*. Two Land Rovers front and back (interview 2014).

As the numbers gathering outside the plant grew, more arrests were made and tensions grew between police and pickets. Burke reflected that:

We needed night pickets – mobilised from around the North. We had lots of support from Fleet Street, dockers and the like (interview 18.2.2015).

Williams organised the night shift picket by running cars and coaches said:

I was getting the unemployed guys up every night. We had about three buses. I was giving them £10 a night, we agreed this at Branch level, these guys didn't have any money, they wanted something to eat (interview 4.2014).

It was late at night when the printed papers emerged from the factory so this was the critical time for the union and Shah. Williams felt he had become a 'target' for the police and they were keen to arrest him. If so, they seized their chance when he threw a brick at one of the vans. Police rushed at him and he knew he was in for a beating:

And this particular sergeant was screaming his head off, going crazy. With a boot into his tackle which had the effect of putting him and the other one was trying to hit me with his stick so I managed to knock him down with a

well-rehearsed right hook and he went down like a bag of spuds then they pounced on me, the rest of them.

I was covered in bruises and bite marks and kept over night and got bailed (interview 4.2014).

Williams' defence that he only threw a pork pie failed to convince the court and he was fined £1,000 and made to pay £740, damage to the vehicle and the attack on the sergeant with three months suspended sentence.

On 22 November a brick wall collapsed and a police officer suffered a broken arm and facial cuts. Shah had a bouquet of flowers sent to him and a group of pickets sent a 'Get Well' card. The Deputy Chief Constable emphasised that the officer was not injured deliberately. The next day another officer was injured, his arm broken when the pressure of about sixty pickets pushed him against a vehicle. The next day The *Daily Mail* ran a story under the headline:

Pickets Clash with Police.

It described the dispute as:

The first major test of the new Employment Act outlawing secondary action.

It reported that the NGA risked having National Council members and officers jailed and the seizure of the union's £11 million assets.

In a private government note:

The police say that their relations with the pickets are generally good. The pickets' main tactic is not to use violence but to try to stop vehicles entering or leaving the premises by sheer weight of numbers<sup>66</sup>

An anonymous account from a member of the Bristol NGA published in the *Somerset Clarion* (1986):

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<sup>66</sup> Confidential memo from Home Office F4 1983 – see Appendix 4

On my first trip the atmosphere was relaxed, even with a hint of friendliness between the fifty or so Bristolian NGA members and the police as we stood around all day warming ourselves by the braziers and even having a kick around with a football.

The TUC General Council met on 23 November and was uneasy about being drawn into support for unlawful action despite the brave words of the 1982 Wembley Conference.

The movement would be drawn into a conflict that would prove vastly expensive and out of all proportions to the original dispute.<sup>67</sup>

The evening of 23 November saw up to 350 pickets with 334 police officers<sup>68</sup>. Two vehicles left the factory with one damaging the roller door of the exit. As the vans were leaving, a picket lay in the road and was arrested for threatening behaviour. He was later taken into hospital where his leg was found to be broken after being hit by one of the vehicles. *The Sun* reported the incident:

Injured picket is held in cell. A picket in agony from a broken leg was arrested and put in a police cell. Print worker Bill Trainer was knocked down by a van bursting out of the Messenger plant.

There were close contacts between the Institute of Directors, apparently acting on behalf of Shah, and the Government. A private note to the Home Secretary, said:

. . . information gleaned from contacts in the Institute of Directors.

We agreed that the right course was to sound out the police about their relations with Mr Shah without revealing that we had any sources of information of our own . . . But the police clearly do not trust Mr Shah whose reaction they regard as unpredictable.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Minutes of General Council, 23 November 1983

<sup>68</sup> Confidential memo from Home Office 24.11.1983 – see Appendix 4

<sup>69</sup> Confidential memo from Home Office F4 1983 – see Appendix 4

NGA minutes indicate the leadership still held the view that the weight of pressure on Shah would force him to concede ground. Its *Dispute Extra*, newsletter of November carried the headline:

#### MASS PICKET SHOWS THE WAY AT THE MESSENGER

The Conservative Party archives show the extent to which they anticipated industrial conflict including mass picketing and large demonstrations as part of their preparations for trade union reform. Police training and resources had been provided with this in mind (Wiles 1985). The initial reluctance by ministers to get involved in the Messenger dispute quickly turned into significant pressure from the Home Office, encouraged, apparently, from the Prime Minister. In the confidential internal memos, the chief constable appears irritated by the degree to which ministers wanted to dictate policing tactics on the ground – arguing over whether to stop coaches some distance from the picket for example<sup>70</sup> (memo to SoS 29.11.83). The police reassured ministers that they had the situation under control and had more than sufficient resources to deal with any attempted blockade.

The dispute Organising Committee, comprising local and national officials, issued a leaflet explaining:

This demonstration is to show your continuing solidarity and support for the six NGA members sacked by Selim Jehan Shah for seeking to uphold Trade Union Agreements.

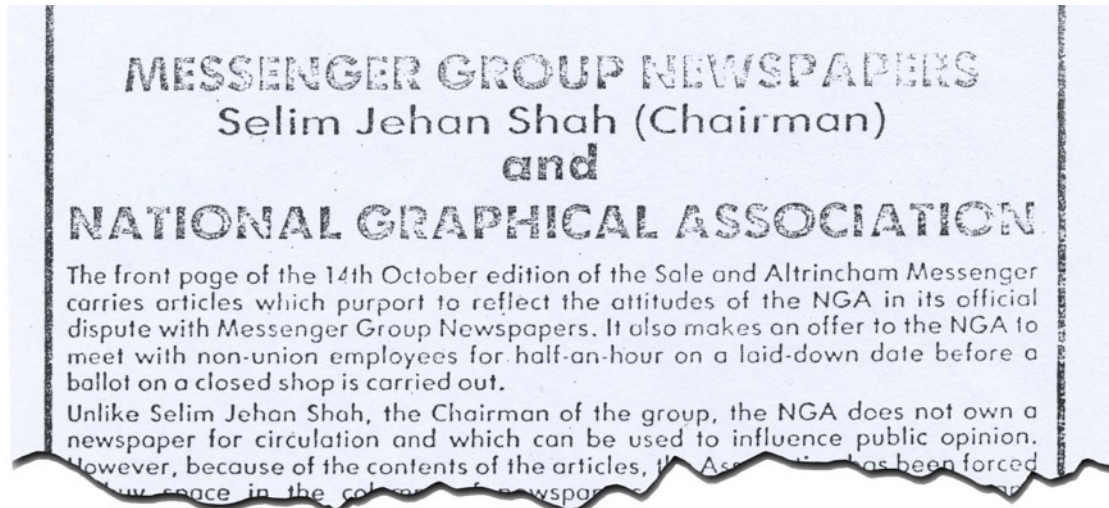
On behalf of the Organising Committee it is requested that the demonstration remains peaceful and you are asked not to attack the building or be provoked into using violence.

Shah was especially angry at the way campaign leaflets used his full Arabic name to stir racist opposition:

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<sup>70</sup> Confidential memos between police and Secretary of State 29.11.83 – see Appendix 3

Everybody knew me as Eddy Shah. But they were saying ‘Selim Jehan Shah’ as if I was some foreign person. I was born and brought up here. They made it racist (interview 7.4.2015).



7.3 - Part of one of the campaign leaflets produced by the NGA using Shah's full name

With increasing appearances in the media, Shah seemed to relish the role of small businessman taking on the mighty trade union in the name of freedom. In the research interview Dubbins explained how he had found Shah almost impossible to deal with:

Shah . . . needed to be seen as a bit of a crusading hero. I think that was part of the reason we couldn't find any reasonable accommodations. He had a big ego and found it very difficult to compromise in face of the dispute and the way it was raging. The reality was he wanted to build up the victim scenario (interview 17.8.2017).

As the dispute intensified through November and December, Denis Boyd, chair of ACAS made a number of proposals to try to resolve the dispute and Dubbins claimed the NGA went further than it had ever gone in concessions to Shah.

The TUC and others argued that the employment laws encouraged conflict rather than promoting negotiation (Dunn 1985). In Parliament, Neil Kinnock, then Leader of

the Labour Opposition, blamed the government for the escalation in the dispute. He said:

It is your legislation above all matters that is the major cause of the nature and scale of this dispute.<sup>71</sup>

In reply, John Biffen, Leader of the House, retorted that the legislation had provided a more equitable framework for dealing with the relationship between unions and employers.

Minutes of the special meeting of the TUC's EPOC Committee on 28 November record that Murray explained the NGA's picketing did not conform with the 1979 TUC guidelines and its intention seemed to be to blockade the premises. He criticised the way the NGA had conducted the negotiations and stressed the TUC could not support unlawful action. That was the inside position, the public statement said:

The present case shows clearly how a small localised dispute, involving an intransigent employer, who has not been prepared to observe established arrangements, can explode into a major issue involving major constitutional and legal questions. The capacity of these laws to be used by employers to try to trample on practices which unions have established over many years is damaging and dangerous – and the Government should re-think these laws urgently.<sup>72</sup>

The *Morning Star* headline on 29 November declared: "All roads lead to Messenger demo" in what was "the biggest class confrontation since the early '70s". Numbers attending Winwick Quay on the night of 29-30 November rose to some 4,000. An anonymous Bristol NGA member described how about 150 members in three coaches set off about six in the evening.

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<sup>71</sup> Hansard 29 November 1983

<sup>72</sup> TUC EPOC minutes 28 November 1983 – see Appendix 2



The scale of police presence against us became apparent when we pulled into a motorway service station fifteen miles or so from Warrington. We noticed we were being tailed by a police Land Rover.

The Cheshire Police had acquired an empty unit on the industrial estate for its command centre and holding cells for 30-40 people. There were Instamatic cameras with which plain-clothed crews could identify targets for the snatch squads and video equipment including roof-top cameras. In 1983, this sort of technology was new and never been used before in an industrial dispute. A large canteen and relaxation area were available for the police with chefs capable of providing 2,000 meals. The police were prepared for whatever the union could mobilise (Wiles 1985).

Andrew Neil lobbied the Home Secretary ringing him at home to demand more be done. Neil claimed Brittan behaved like a lawyer, refusing to interfere in operational matters (Neil 1996). Dubbins recalls:

Brittan was not regarded as a hard-liner, anything but. I remember being told the story that he (Neil) got hold of him and had a real go on the basis that we are here to protect free enterprise, the economy, freedom of speech and the usual bollocks and had a real go at Brittan for not giving the sort of support to Shah to publish his newspapers (interview 17.8.2017).

On the cold November night the crowd was 'entertained' by a running banter by George Jerrom, NGA National Officer from the NGA control van. NGA activist, Megan Dobney remembers:

My abiding memory was George Jerrom who was taking leadership in spite of the union's limpness on it. And the sight of him on the back of the union caravan in his sheepskin jacket issuing instructions which people were very willing to try to carry out (interview 13.8.2016).

The mass of pickets had little to do but mill around, stamping their feet to keep warm. Left wing newspapers were on sale and the contingent of police chatted to

the crowd. Union officers carried walkie-talkies and reported into the control van with reports of the police build-up and crowd numbers. Burke described the scene:

George Jerrom was whipping it up from the van. London Central SOGAT arrived and was greeted like royalty with lots of cheering. It was not that well organised. Lots of people were going down the pub. The hot dog sellers did well (interview 18.2.2014).

It was apparent that the NGA's sixty or so stewards would not be sufficient to control the crowd. An attempt to organise a sit-down occupation of the entrance was soon abandoned. There was pushing and shoving between police and the crowd and a few stones were thrown. Dubbins in the research interviews said he knew there was always a chance of outside interests getting directly involved:

What do you do, just stand back? You've got to go ahead and do the best you can and frankly, at that stage, it was the only pressure point we had. You can never guarantee you can control a picket line (interview 17.8.2017).

Towards the end of the night police rushed at the NGA Control Van. After a short skirmish they entered the van and disabled the communication equipment. A crush of bodies surged towards the back of the vehicle and having disabled the PA system the police retreated. The scenes are shown in the photographs in Chapter 9. Furious National Officers contacted Dubbins and the union's lawyer who drafted a formal complaint against the police.

Shah was told afterwards and embellishes the story:

First thing they did was rip out the speakers and threw them in a skip. It was like a Nazi rally. Then they went in and picked out the ring-leaders (interview 7.4.2015).

When Darlington (1994: 155) interviewed union reps at Bemrose printers in Liverpool, he heard how the tale became exaggerated with the police acting as a militia and how the NGA 'hut' "got turned over, smashed to bits".

Shah said that James Anderton, the Manchester Chief Constable later told him he was going to be all right and that:

Special Branch were following me which I didn't know. Winnick Quay, was quite a big estate and they had nearly a thousand police (interview 7.4.2015).

The Bristol contingent unfurled their banner to the cheering crowd. One member was chatting to a police officer about the closed shop when there was an order to advance.

The policeman stopped talking to me, went thin lipped and white in the face and punched me squarely in the chest sending me reeling backwards. I found it hard to believe what I was seeing. Those pickets directly facing the police were subjected to a kicking, their feet were stamped on and their testicles were grabbed and twisted, the women were pulled by their hair. Now and again a picket was pulled through the police lines where they were made to run the gauntlet out of sight being beaten on the limbs and even stabbed up the anus, where it does not show, with truncheons. They were spat upon and physically and verbally abused.

Another anonymous 'eye-witness' account by '*Wildcat*' in Libcom.org said:

From early on in the night the pickets were left pushing the police backwards and forwards for many hours using up a lot of valuable energy. The police were content to pull pickets from out of the front of the line. They did not arrest them but just gave them a good thumping.

Vince Scott, an FoC from Dunstable when interviewed for this research said:

I went up there three times and I was up there on the final night with the police charge. It was terrifying.

I saw this girl, she had a camera in her hand trying to take a picture of this policeman charging at her. She took a photo 'cause I saw the flash go and he went up to her, he grabbed the camera off her and punched her straight in

the face. Pushed the camera on the floor and stamped on it. I thought blimey this is like East Germany.

Then they started charging, chanting and moving forward. These screams they made walking forward like a Zulu with riot shields. Ohh, ohh, ohh, ohh they would bang their shields (interview 24.6.2015).

A number of protestors interviewed claim that police prevented filming or interfered with photographers. The images in Chapter Nine provide a range of perspectives but there is a noticeable gap in them at the point the police charged into the crowd. This may confirm the allegations of the protestors or may simply have been the speed and ferocity of the police action took people by surprise.

At around 2am the police line parted and a platoon of officers wielding batons raced towards the crowd. Pushing and hitting out the police knocked people to the ground and panicked them into running. Demonstrators were chased away from the site in fear.

Participants that night interviewed for this research expressed their shock at the ferocity of the police reaction. They saw their action in trying to blockade the factory as a peaceful protest against Shah and his business and took no account that the police would use every measure to prevent them.

Dobney recalls:

I remember the police chasing us. It wasn't just a nice flat field it had all bumps in it, it was a mess and with land rovers chasing us across this field (interview 13.8.2016).

A Bristol NGA member described the scene:

They arrived in close formation, at the double, with helmets and truncheons drawn. They charged the pickets from the road trapping hundreds between them and the police lines. The carnage that followed was disgusting to watch. The truncheons came down again and again on screaming men and women trying to protect their heads and bodies. We were halved, then quartered

and finally scattered to all parts of the battlefield. We were beaten back in total disarray and finally we drifted off, licking wounds, utterly depressed and in a state of severe shock.

At 5am the roller shutters to the factory opened and Shah's vans roared out. The Chief Constable reported:

At times, it was a riot with twenty-five police officers taken to hospital and many others receiving injuries. Three police Range Rovers were damaged by riotous behaviour by 300 demonstrators. They were stoned upon arrival, one suffering £1,300 of damage to the window and bodywork.<sup>73</sup>

Lord Harris addressed the House of Lords in December 1983 to decry the NGA's action at Warrington as abusive. He said:

I believe that what has happened in Warrington this week has shocked public opinion in this country. It has been one of the worst episodes of industrial violence which we have witnessed in this country for several years.

I have, I hope, made it clear what I believe the dispute is not about. It is whether powerful men and powerful trade unions are exempt from the laws of this country. It is about whether the British people, or the National Graphical Association, will decide what legislation Parliament will be permitted to pass. My Lords, it is about whether we are to maintain the rule of law<sup>74</sup>

In January 1984, Lord Harris became a Board Member of the Messenger Group.

The sight of police officers in riot helmets charging into the demonstration was a shock to many. The scenes that night were confirmation of the Government's determination to break any attempt to blockade premises as part of industrial action. The police had been trained and equipped for this purpose. *A Financial Times*

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<sup>73</sup> Confidential memo from Home Office F4 1983 – see Appendix 4

<sup>74</sup> Hansard 1 December 1983

report was headed: "Police learn the lesson of facing up to mass picketing" It went on to say:

The police tactics at Warrington show clearly that they have learned the hard lessons of mass picketing. Saltley in particular, where perhaps 15,000 pickets led a completely overwhelmed police contingent to order the shutting of a picketed coke depot, had a deep effect on the police. It was seen by the police as a defeat and indeed entered police vocabulary as a shorthand term for all the problems on how the police and the state were to maintain law and order.

In the end, police commanders accept they would have to respond to management requests for assistance in lawfully getting goods in or out of a factory. The early lesson of Warrington is how far the police have now perfected their techniques for doing so (Bassett FT 1983).

The NGA made a formal complaint about the way the police 'attacked' the communications van and the matter was raised in Parliament by MPs Bob Clay, Dennis Skinner and Dave Nellist. Clay and Skinner complained to the Home Secretary:

That the police wilfully forced their way into the van, dismantled and broke or removed a considerable amount of radio communications and PA equipment; that this occurred at approximately 1am, one-and-a-half hours before any disturbances took place.<sup>75</sup>

In his explanation to the Home Secretary, the Chief Constable denied forcing into the van to dismantle and break PA equipment. He claimed the equipment was being used to incite violence.

A number of demonstrators then began to rock the caravan very violently with the apparent intention of turning it over with police officers inside. If it

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<sup>75</sup> Correspondence with Bob Clay and Denis Skinner to Homes Secretary

was damaged it was likely to have occurred then through the actions of the demonstrators<sup>76</sup>

Monks confirmed that many on the TUC General Council thought the mass picket was counter-productive. As the violence grew the company withdrew its previous offers to the NGA; Shah claimed that the events had so disturbed existing employees that they were no longer prepared to work with any NGA employees.

The NGA called off mass picketing pending talks through ACAS. Dickinson describes it as the “longest day in the life of the National Graphical Association’s history and its reverberations have shaken the union to its core” (Dickinson 1984: 159).

Interviewed in 2015, Monks recalled the TUC’s view at the time of Messenger dispute:

We didn’t like it, intimidation, we know the scenes it produces, pickets fighting police. Once you get to that state you’ve probably lost (interview 12.3.2015).

The picket, designed to blockade the plant had grown beyond the capacity of the NGA to manage peacefully. Relying on weight of numbers was a strategy made without an assessment of the resolve of the police to defeat it. The symbolic victory of the mass picket at Saltley Gate during the miners’ strike was in the imagination of the union protesters but the police had learnt a lot since then and had a government determined not to allow such mass action to succeed.

### **Sequestration**

The escalating mass picket was responding in part to the spiral of court actions engulfing the NGA. On 25 November Justice Eastham declared:

Whatever the union’s feeling about the legislation no one is above the law. The court has no choice but to grant a writ of sequestration.

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<sup>76</sup> Report to Home Office from Cheshire Constabulary 1983 – see Appendix 4

Further the NGA was fined £100,000 plus costs.

Dubbins recalled the sense of inevitability about the action but was shocked by its reach:

We didn't quite know how sequestration would work and how they would address it but we knew exactly where it was heading (interview 17.8.2017).

Four commissioners, partners from Price Waterhouse and Company, London accountants, were appointed to handle the seizure of the NGA's assets.

NGA chapels in Manchester and Fleet Street downed tools and no national newspapers appeared over the weekend of 25-26 November. But this was not the spontaneous protest reaction that Wade had warned of as Dubbins admits:

Fleet Street chapels didn't see it as anything to do with them. Fleet Street stopped. It was an instruction! There was a requirement – pretty tough but it was done. Last time it was ever done (interview 17.8.2017).

Fleet Street press owners knew it to be 'induced action' and increased the legal pressure on the NGA by seeking injunctions under the Employment Acts. Some newspaper owners issued dismissal notices to NGA reps but they were unable to maintain their own unity and four papers broke ranks and appeared as usual on 28 November. Some failed to appear for several days: On its return, *The Sun* said:

Yes, we're back, folks<sup>77</sup>.

*The Times* returned on 30 November apologising for the non-appearance on the previous three days.

All the local societies of the NGA had separate bank accounts, independently audited. On the Monday morning branch secretaries discovered that all accounts were frozen. Banks were instructed to suspend any account that was suspected as being part of the assets of the NGA. Some SOGAT accounts were seized along with chapel funds, Christmas and holiday accounts.

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<sup>77</sup> See list of media reports in Appendix 5



Shah remembers watching the television and seeing NGA staff reacting to the sequestration order. He laughs:

They looked stupid and I thought, you walked into that one. They were all running to their cars with their typewriters (interview 7.4.2015).

The union was unable to have access to funds to pay staff or pay provident benefits. Interviews with officials recall how they quickly asked members to pay subscriptions in cash. A system of transfers was put into place with chapels collecting the weekly subscriptions and passing them to branch officers. Regional secretaries collected the money due to the national union and over the next few weeks large quantities of cash kept the union going.

Burke remembers the sequestration process:

Ian Kershaw (NGA lawyer) advised the National Council on the limits of the order. But every account was stopped. We had to rely on cash. The T&G paid the retired members. Spurious bank accounts were set up such as bowling clubs (interview 18.12.2014).

Dubbins explained how the union was able to revert to its tradition of cash collections to avoid the banks and how money was borrowed from other unions.

T&G were very good. Ron Todd, no matter what was said he managed to produce money from the T&G to assist us (interview 17.8.2017).

The TUC assisted by providing funds to maintain unemployment benefit payments. Dubbins thinks it was not unsubstantial, around a million pounds, but he thought Len Murray hoped it was a sweetener that would buy the union off.

Royston recalled the reaction of his Branch Secretary, Arthur Scott:

. . . he shot off to see a solicitor because he was frightened they'd take his house off him. Went down to bank manager: Have our funds gone? How much will you let us have on one cheque? Can we have £8k? We will leave £50. We put it in a plastic bag. Then we went back with another cheque to get the rest out. Go liquid, get whatever cash you can get. Frank Walsh

outside Manchester Free Hall had a bag with £25k. Loads of money, like we'd done a bank robbery (interview 2014).

The Three Shires Branch Office in Gloucester was one of a number around the country where large safes were fitted into the floor – one for Branch funds and the other to hold national cash if necessary.

Coop explains how his branch kept going:

We went into the Co-op Bank in Manchester and said we want to withdraw £10,000 out and were told you can't do that, that wasn't a normal transaction. So what is a normal transaction? Closing the account? Well close it. And we walked out with about £70,000 in plastic bags. I went along to the Nat West bank opposite the office and saw the assistant bank manager there. He said, I'm a Labour Party member and as far as I'm concerned you can put it in our safes and if there is any sequestration or they're thinking of coming to get it, I'll give you a ring. So we did that and also I opened a bank account – Trustee Bank. There is a place next to Bury called Wyefield and Prestwich and our initials were WPGS – so it was Wyefield and Prestwich Golfing Society and we asked all the companies and FoCs etc to put the money through this account. And every one of them did it. They were as good as gold, even the larger companies (interview 14.2.2020).

The NGA was warned that Price Waterhouse's costs could be as high as £12,000 a day. Cash was the main currency for the union and branches made arrangements for unemployed members to collect their benefit rather than be sent cheques. Full time officers did not get paid as usual.

Newis remembers an account of fears within the union's officer corps and a report of the former-SLADE General Secretary, John Jackson warning Dubbins at a motorway service station about pensions.

If the union was sequestrated how was it going to meet its obligations to officers. All sorts of machinations at the top of the union (interview 17.8.2017).

Dubbins recognised the culture shock all this was to a very conservative institution:

People were anxious about their jobs. Not just staff, officers were very concerned. Fair to say we didn't have an entire left-wing office-corps. There were people around the more traditional approach, the old NGA was gentlemanly and the litho was more free masonry. Just not for them. (interview 17.8.2017).

In anticipation of sequestration, the National Council had been advised:

steps had been taken to protect the Association's assets, funds and property for as long as it was possible.<sup>78</sup>

The NGA represented members across the whole of Ireland and it was assumed that funds held in the Irish Republic would be outside the scope of the sequestration order. When this appeared to be under threat too, Colin James, Financial Secretary was despatched to Dublin, accompanied by Alf Parish, National Officer. They were met from the plane with some local officers who acted as protection. The bank manager requested time to gather the large quantity of cash requested but he refused to release the funds when they returned. After an altercation in the bank the cash was released and some rubbish bin liners were hastily found to hold around £750,000.

The Manchester NGA Branch successfully appealed against the seizure of its funds and the court agreed to lift three of its four bank accounts but only on the basis that the Branch highlighted the whereabouts of NGA assets. The leadership balked at such a prospect and instructed other branches not to follow suit arguing that, if repeated by all its branches, national subscriptions would go into the hands of the sequestration (Gennard 1990).

JB Shaw, the Principal Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Employment said in a letter to Andrew Turnbull, Private Secretary to the Prime Minister and copied to the private secretaries to all Cabinet Members dated 9 December 1983:

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<sup>78</sup> NGA National Council minues 22 November 1983 – see Appendix 2

Because all the union's funds have been sequestered the fines can be (and have been) extracted without the possibility of union obstruction. At this morning's hearing the Court ordered the NGA, at the sequestrators' request, not to move any money into or out of the NGA account with the Bank of Ireland in Dublin<sup>79</sup>

On 19 December the High Court refused a request from the union to relax the order to allow retirement and unemployment benefits to be paid unless the whereabouts of funds sent to the Republic of Ireland were disclosed. Union officers were continuing to sustain the organisation through cash collections and through assistance from other unions. In the New Year the TUC's Employment Policy and Organisation Committee (EPOC) agreed to provide £420,000 for retired and unemployed members.

The Government had drafted the laws to allow employers to pursue injunctions through the civil courts. When these are ignored or breached the employer can claim contempt of court that can lead to fines, imprisonment and sequestration. The unprecedented use of sequestration was a target on the union's assets rather than making arrests and imprisonment of officials.

The evidence shows how the collective identity and sense of solidarity helped the union switch to cash transactions and operate as a clandestine organisation. With the assistance of other unions this lasted several weeks but it was not a sustainable position and the sequestrators had reserve powers to seize physical assets had they chosen to do so.

### **Role of the state and police**

Conservative policy, drawn from the lessons of earlier conflicts, was not to get directly involved in industrial relations matters. But how could it honour this position and, at the same time, show succour to employers in the offensive against union

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<sup>79</sup> Confidential memo 9.12.83 see Appendix

power? A private Conservative note considers the risks of the 'non-intervention' policy and how to reduce them. A briefing to Conservative MPs in November 1983 suggests MPs stress the unwillingness of unions to reform themselves. The hazard of the hands-off approach is the impression of a "carefree indifference" to the crisis and that it might be seen as the government:

standing back from events in deference to some barmy economic dogma<sup>80</sup>.

There was tension between ministers and government departments over the dispute. One note complains about a statement by the Secretary of State for Employment's failure to consult on the text at either official or ministerial level<sup>81</sup>

As the evidence gained by this research shows, ministers were caught off-guard by the rapidly unfolding events. Yet it suited the NGA's mobilisation to paint Shah as part of a wider anti-union campaign by the Government. Newis explained:

It was the severity of what Shah was doing and almost immediately being seen as being run from Downing Street and by the Institute of Directors (IoD). Saw it all as building on Heath's IR Act that had been knocked back and we can knock this back as well (interview 3.12.2017).

Coop remains convinced that:

Somebody was behind all that. It wasn't just Shah (interview 14.2.2020).

Shah claimed he was alone in the battle but the interviews with union activists claim a wider conspiracy. Royston recalled the prevailing atmosphere:

Shah was determined to get us out because he'd set up in Bury and somebody was advising him there. I don't know who it was. I was starting to think there are other influences, other people leading Shah around here (interview 18.2.2014).

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<sup>80</sup> Confidential memo from Utley to Howarth 22.2.80 – see-Appendix 3

<sup>81</sup> Confidential memo from Home Office 24.11.1983 – see Appendix 4

The suspicion that Shah was being manipulated or used by larger, external forces features in the union-side narrative since the 1983 conflict. Coop remains convinced that:

He was advised by somebody. I know he had a meeting in London, but I never found out who it was, prior to him taking us on. To me he was being supported and advised by somebody (interview 14.2.2020).

Shah was a member of the Institute of Directors that was pressing government for tough restrictions on trade unions at that time but there is no evidence that his actions were being determined by them. It supported Shah once the dispute got underway but it does not appear to have played a significant role in the run-up to the dispute. Dubbins gave his opinion:

I don't believe it was a conspiracy to start with. They wouldn't have bothered with a minor freesheet but once it happened I'm absolutely sure there were major newspaper proprietors egging it on and the Government. This was an opportunity for them to achieve more than just the defeat of the NGA in a small minor dispute (interview 17.8.2017).

The union's view that the dispute was part of a wider government conspiracy was supported by the belief that the secret state was already operating against it. Royston says, when interviewed, that he was convinced his phone was bugged. Other NGA branch offices noticed strange things happening to their phone calls. Williams said:

We knew we had our phone tapped. You could hear the clicks (interview 4.2014).

From my own experience at the time, the Three Shires Branch phone started to drop calls without reason and the telecoms union reported that something strange was going on in the switchboard, beyond their reach.

The private papers seen in this study show how the Cheshire Police prepared for the growing picket in 1983. Leave and rest days for officers were cancelled and they

were put on 12-hour shifts. Neighbouring forces were alerted to the possible need to activate the mutual aid system.<sup>82</sup> Shah, however, felt vulnerable and largely unprotected. The Home Secretary was informed that Shah was, “none too happy” with his protection offered by the police.

Last night, he says, petrol bombs were thrown into his premises<sup>83</sup> and he allegedly fears for his staff.<sup>84</sup>

Shah recalls speeding through the area called ‘Death Valley’ near Prestwick. A police car pulled him up and says: “You’re Eddy Shah aren’t you? We’ve all got your number to watch for you.” The police officer didn’t book Shah, saying:

I’m not going to book you, we can’t afford to lose people like you from crashing and then he said, my wife will kill me if I book you. Because your overtime is paying for my holiday this year (interview 7.4.2015).

Shah felt Leon Brittan, the Home Secretary, was not helpful to him, wanting the dispute to be a matter between the union and the company and not get the Government involved (interview 7.4.2015).

Brittan was advised:

So far you have judged it right to limit your personal involvement to an expression of sympathy for the injured police officer. Some public gesture or statement maybe required.<sup>85</sup>

An anonymous memo later that day from F4 Division said:

We agreed that the right course was to sound out the police about their relationship with Mr Shah without revealing that we had any sources of information of our own. The picture is not particularly reassuring. The police have had virtually no direct contact with Mr Shah.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Confidential report from Cheshire Constabulary to Home Office – see Appendix 4

<sup>83</sup> This is the only reference to this allegation.

<sup>84</sup> Confidential report from Cheshire Constabulary to Home Office – see Appendix 4

<sup>85</sup> Confidential memo to Secretary of State 24.11.1983 – see Appendix 4

<sup>86</sup> Confidential memo to Secretary of State 24.11.1983 – see Appendix 4

Unless the police guaranteed a free path to his premises, Shah told the police he would use a private security firm to do so. The police had warned Shah that they could not contemplate the use of a private firm for this purpose and that any security guards should operate only within the premises. The note goes on to record:

the police clearly do not trust Mr Shah whose reaction they regard as unpredictable.<sup>87</sup>

On a separate point, the confidential note mentions that a pattern is emerging of those arrested living a considerable distance from Warrington and that:

one or two significant left-wing associations had emerged.<sup>88</sup>

Shah recalls a conversation a long time after the dispute with an ex-SAS soldier:

He said they were called in, about five of them as SAS and they were told to keep a watch on me. 'We were told by the Lady I don't want see a hair on that boy's head harmed'. We followed you.'

Shah says he got some 3,000 Christmas Cards that year. One of the cards was from the 'boys at Hereford' that Shah took to be the SAS (interview 7.4.2015).

Both sides in the dispute believe that secret forces were involved in some form but there is little evidence to support this. For activists, the anecdotes back-up the conspiracy theories of state power used to crush the union. Papers have since been released or information discovered about operations such as Shield, the secret committee to advise Thatcher on how to tackle left-wing 'subversion' (Powerbase 2018), secret blacklisting against union activists (Chamberlain and Smith 2015) and the covert contingency plans to beat strikes in essential services or a general strike<sup>89</sup>. This research found no evidence of a wider role played by secret police but it cannot be ruled out.

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<sup>87</sup> Confidential memo to Secretary of State 24.11.1983 – see Appendix 4

<sup>88</sup> <sup>88</sup> Confidential memo to Secretary of State 24.11.1983 – see Appendix 4

<sup>89</sup> Confidential memos from Conservative Party archive – see Appendix 3



There was deliberation within government and the police about the powers to intercept people as they travelled towards Warrington. The police considered the tactic unnecessary. The Home Secretary made it clear that police had the power to limit the number of pickets in any one place where they have reasonable cause to fear disorder. The Attorney General added his advice in Parliament:

If they consider there are enough or too many pickets they can stop the buses. It may be a matter of conspiring to incite but each case would have to stand upon its own merits.<sup>90</sup>

The Chief Constable did not wish to divert police manpower away from Warrington and resisted pressure from the Home Office. The Government was determined that the mass picket must not succeed. Local police authorities are autonomous from central government (Wiles 1985) although as seen in the Conservative Party papers there had been deliberations over how to respond to national industrial action and how to direct police resources. The Home Secretary offered complete support for the Chief Constable including if he required additional logistical support but threatened:

The Home Secretary said that if, notwithstanding this explicit support, things went badly wrong as a result of the failure of the Chief Constable to take appropriate action, he would not then be able to support the Chief Constable publicly.

The note went on to point out that Conservatives controlled the local Police Committee:

by virtue of commanding a majority of the magistrates' votes.<sup>91</sup>

The pickets continued to complain about Shah's heavies. Williams lobbied an MP on the matter:

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<sup>90</sup> Hansard 1980

<sup>91</sup> <sup>91</sup> Confidential memo 28.11.83 to Cheshire Constabulary from Home Office

The fact that Shah's heavies seem to be exempt from the law in that they can drive their vans at pickets or vehicles with impunity – the police are just turning a blind eye. I believe that if it's allowed to continue someone will be killed (interview 4.2014).

In a report on the policing of the dispute by the Deputy Chief Constable described complaints from Shah about his lack of protection. Shah's solicitor:

Mr Greerson suggested to the police at this time that they should arrest all pickets to relieve the obstruction, indicating that if the police were unable to do it, they – the company – would have to bring in their own 'private army'<sup>92</sup>

Shah believes that the increased police protection stemmed from intervention from Andrew Neil and Fergus Montgomery MP.

Even the newspapers were against us apart from the *Sunday Times* and that night I thought that somebody was going to get killed. I rang Andrew Neil and I said I'm sorry to ring you, 'I've never spoken to you before I really need some support, tonight someone is going to get killed'. We were scared stiff but we had a resolve (interview 7.4.2015).

This version of events contradicts Neil's who explains that he called Shah first, Griffiths (2006) believes it to have been Shah. Shah said he called Montgomery very early in the morning. The MP had been elected at the same time as Thatcher and Shah believed that the Prime Minister trusted him. Shah believed that Neil rang Leon Brittan to press the case for more action.

Brittan maintained his line that the dispute was a private matter but Maggie then called Brittan and said if that Eddy Shah hasn't got any work in the morning he will no longer be Home Secretary (interview 7.4.2015).

Neil (1997: 83) takes an uncritical view of Shah. He presents him as a hero in desperate need of support, "an innocent man being hung out to dry" and a "kindred spirit". Neil presents himself as some form of saviour, pulling strings in government

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<sup>92</sup> Report to Home Office from Cheshire Constabulary 1983 – see Appendix 4

to marshal support in the form of a riot squad to rescue the beleaguered Shah. He slams other newspaper employers and politicians for their failure to rally behind Shah in taking on the “hard left including militant miners and students”.

The dispute was the centrepiece of a rowdy Prime Minister’s Questions in the House of Commons on 1 December. Neil Kinnock asked the Thatcher to intervene to settle the dispute and waved a photograph of her meeting Shah on 14 October, the day he obtained his first injunctions.<sup>93</sup>

Kinnock asked:

We have heard much of the Prime Minister's policy of non-intervention. On 14 October Mr Shah obtained his first two injunctions under the 1980 and 1982 legislation. That was also the day on which the Prime Minister met Mr Shah in the north and if the Prime Minister wants photographic evidence I have it here. *The Sale and Altrincham Messenger* of 21 October carried two photographs of the Prime Minister in deep conversation with Mr Shah. So much for non-intervention. When she met Mr Shah, did she counsel peace or conflict? Did she advise him to pursue industrial relations by litigation or by negotiation?

Seemingly wrong-footed by Kinnock’s revelation, Thatcher replied:

I advise everyone, employer or employee, to keep within the law, because the law is their best protection. I do not discuss particular industrial relations problems with particular employers. Will the right honourable Gentleman advise the NGA to obey the law and to purge its contempt of court?

Shah later told *News at Ten* that he met Thatcher at a meeting of some 400 Conservative Party members and he had gone along to see what was happening

I just happened to be near the door as she went out. She said hello to me.

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<sup>93</sup> Hansard 1 December 1983

This evidence highlights the contradictions in the Conservative policy at the time. They wished to keep out of industrial relations matters but at the same time wanted to support employers. In the Messenger dispute the policy of non-intervention was the source of confusion and misunderstanding on the part of the employer and disbelief from the union.

### **Incitement and intimidation?**

The confidential internal government and police memos highlight tensions over the degree to which the law and police should be used to control the picket.

In an exchange on 28 November over a reply to the Institute of Directors there are references to officials seeking to 'strengthen' the letter with the draft:

In the light of your conversation with the Chief Constable you would see difficulties in the passage: [There can be no doubt that hundreds of pickets outside the Warrington Messenger must run the very gravest risk of being arrested for committing these offences].<sup>94</sup>

In the actual letter this passage is removed and instead there is an explanation of the legal powers of the police to prevent breaches of the peace and:

In addition, those taking part in unlawful mass picketing may be guilty of intimidation or of unlawful or riotous assembly.<sup>95</sup>

The internal memos feature a discussion over whether the NGA might be prosecuted for incitement to commit criminal offenses. The pressure for this course of action appeared to be coming from the top:

In my conversations with No.10 I stressed the difficulty and sensitivity of this issue. I also avoided giving an assessment of whether any activities

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<sup>94</sup> Confidential Home Office memos 28.1183 – see Appendix 4

<sup>95</sup> Confidential letter from Home Secretary to Goldsmith, Walter IoD 28.11.83 – see Appendix 4

concerning Warrington might come into a category where prosecution for incitement would be on the cards.<sup>96</sup>

The Home Secretary made an uncompromising statement to Parliament about the powers the police and warned those taking part in unlawful mass picketing may be guilty of intimidation or of unlawful riotous assembly.

Home Office officials continue to consider the potential of an incitement charge including asking the Deputy Police Constable about such action in respect to what was 'broadcast' from the NGA's 'control van' on the night of 29/30 November. The potential controversy of such a charge:

May influence the pace at which the police reach their conclusions on whether or not there is sufficient evidence to submit to the DPP.<sup>97</sup>

In all the correspondence and confidential notes between the Home Office and the police there is no description of the nature of the communications broadcast from the van. The archives show that the Home Secretary, however, remained keen to explore the potential for a charge of incitement to be brought against the union. In a note to the Deputy Chief Constable a Home Office official said:

We have, of course, spoken more than once about this possibility in respect of the use of the NGA control van on 29-30 November. I think there may be some who also wonder their action to encourage people to go to Warrington to participate in the gatherings was illegal.<sup>98</sup>

A note from the Home Office Private Secretary said:

The Home Secretary has asked that you continue to keep him informed of the progress which the Cheshire Police are making in assembling material on possible incitement charges and forwarding it to the DPP. The Prime Minister has expressed interest in this.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Confidential memo 2.12.83 – see Appdx 4

<sup>97</sup> Confidential memo from Home Office F4 12.12.1983 – see Appendix 4

<sup>98</sup> Report to Home Office from Cheshire Constabulary 1983 – see Appendix 4

<sup>99</sup> Confidential memo from Home Office 13.12.83 – see Appendix 4

Lord Elton was keen to press the Home Secretary on these points and described the union's actions to pay expenses for unemployed members to attend the picket and public support for the demonstrations as "flagrant breaches of the law". In his reply Brittan said:

I entirely agree that incitement of this kind does damage the standing of the law and could prolong the violence centred around the dispute. It may be, though, these calls are signs of increasing anxiety among union officials about their capacity to sustain the levels of intimidation (amended from the word 'support') that have conjured up hitherto.<sup>100</sup>

The Chief Constable, in a letter to the Home Office stressed the nature of the crowd outside the printing works:

What took place was not 'picketing' but an unlawful assembly at common law. As a civil injunction was in force against the National Graphical Association the gathering of member of the union, and others, was unlawful in itself. However, even ignoring that those who gathered had a common, unlawful purpose – the preventing of the movement of the printed newspapers by physical obstruction which, on the part of many, turned to violence. In fact, at times it was a riotous assembly.<sup>101</sup>

The police reported that 146 arrests had been made during the course of the dispute – 91 on the 30 November.<sup>102</sup>

The official history of the NGA merely states:

Although the night of 29/30 November saw a picket of some 4,000 people outside the Warrington plant, police ensured that there was little disruption of the group's papers (Gennard 1990: 488).

This evidence shows a government and police preparing to go much further to protect the employer's operation and restrict the union protest. Arresting people

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<sup>100</sup> Secretary of State speech to Parliament 14 December 1983, Hansard

<sup>101</sup> Report to Home Office from Cheshire Constabulary 1983 – see Appendix 4

<sup>102</sup> Report to Home Office from Cheshire Constabulary 1983 – see Appendix 4

just for being in attendance at Warrington would have raised the stakes of the dispute still further.

The evidence highlights the extent of serendipity involved in the dynamics of the dispute. The Government had put in place the framework within which employers could legally challenge union power yet ministers and police were initially wary of engagement.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

The evidence from the interviews confirms that union leaders and activists believed the NGA was a target in the government-led assault on union power. Even after the Conservative victory in the 1983 General Election, the union still felt confident it could assert its control over the labour supply through the closed shop and its tactics of secondary action and picketing. The records show that there was no real deliberation over the potential risk or assessment of the potential threat given the new political environment and softening stance of the TUC. The case study shows how the leadership under-estimated the structural and political change.

The union was embroiled in a financial crisis and a number of serious challenges over new technology as the dispute with the Messenger dispute unfolded. Shah, having agreed to the union's terms when he was building up his businesses, came to find them obstructive and irritating. As he recruited non-union workers, the balance shifted against the NGA's positional power. There is evidence of some hesitancy by the leadership in pursuing industrial action, perhaps with some anxiety over Shah's claims of preparedness for a dispute.

The small union chapel seemed eager to take on a management with whom relations had soured. It looked to the union to support them and by tradition expected it to deliver. There was, however, a sense of 'better to go down fighting'. The members had reached breaking-point with Shah and any outcome was better than continuing in an increasingly unbearable workplace environment. Their experience of their union finding members alternative employment as assistance

through strikes and unemployment must have provided some assurance that their interests would be secured. Despite the unsure ground for the union, it was unable to draw back from the escalating conflict.

Although hesitant about the unravelling of relations with Shah, the union's leadership endorsed strike action without much debate over possible outcomes. The strategic choices for the union, once the dispute was underway, was how to deploy its traditional industrial action tactics knowing that these were now unlawful.

The Government built its legal framework so it could remain at arms-length from its enforcement. That was a key lesson learnt from the failure of the previous Industrial Relations Act. But the research discovered that this approach initially caught ministers off-guard. The insistence on standing aloof from the dispute led Shah to believe he did not have Government support. The confidential papers show ministers arguing with each other and the police reluctant to engage in the escalating dispute.

The NGA anticipated an employer would use the new laws against it and it held firm to what it believed was the TUC policy of resistance. For activists in the union there was a high level of confidence it would win and that there was sufficient inter-dependence between employers that would force Shah to retreat.

The industrial action methods were embedded in the mind-set of the union and had proved successful in 1980 the leadership did not contemplate alternatives. The action proved ineffective in halting Messenger's production but faced with a union declaring that it would not comply with the law, Shah pursuing court action.

The injunctions and fines grew until the court imposed the unprecedented sanction of sequestration of the union's assets. This legal process went further than the union and its advisers believed. The research has obtained the accounts of the process for the union and how it tried to circumvent it.

The chapter has described how the picket line failed to persuade the rest of the workforce to join the strike and how it became an attempt to blockade the plant. As numbers attending grew, the dispute became a test for enhanced policing



techniques (Wiles 1985) and it became a centre-piece for national news. The NGA faced criticism from the TUC and increasingly violent scenes at Warrington – and the newspapers were still being published. The leadership called off the mass picket.

Until the final act of the dispute there was no real debate within the National Council over the tactics or escalation of the dispute.

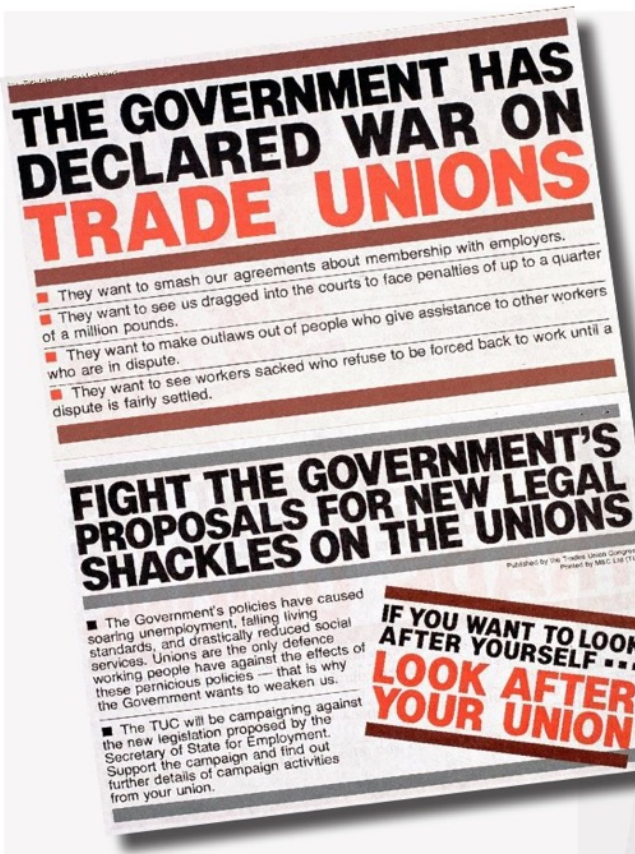
The NGA made a call to arms to defend itself and activists responded with a remarkable level of discipline and devotion. But this was no match for the determined authority of the State.

The next chapter uses photographs collected for this research to illustrate the key issues raised and highlight the nature of the picket at Warrington.

## The 1983 Messenger dispute in photographs

### Introduction

The most critical phases of the dispute between the NGA and Messenger Newspapers can be traced in photographs and ephemera. Photographs can inform but they can also mislead as explained in the methodology for this research but they confirm much of the evidence given by interviewees and archive material.



◀8.1 A leaflet from the TUC as part of its campaign against the Employment Laws introduced by Norman Tebbit, Conservative Minister for Employment. There are no bold claims of mass action.

source: TUC Library



▼8.2 TUC poster against the new Employment Law

source: TUC Library



◀8.3 The NGA picket line featuring some of the ‘Stockport Six’ strikers alongside John Wade, (centre with tie); Tony Burke, Stockport Branch President; Tony Dubbins, Assistant General Secretary; Owen Coop, West Pennine, Branch Secretary; Arthur Perrin, Manchester Branch Secretary; John Ibbottson, NGA National Officer and unknown.

Photo: Stefano Cagnoni Report Digital



◀8.4 ▲8.5 Tony Dubbins, NGA Assistant General Secretary addresses the first significant protest outside the Messenger printing plant on 9th November 1983 at Warrington. The author is featured at the bottom right.

Photo: Stefano Cagnoni Report Digital

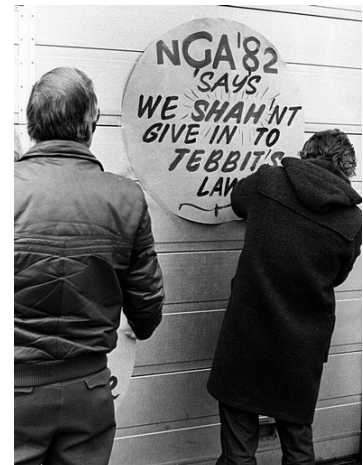


◀8.6 Joe Wade, NGA General Secretary addresses the first significant protest outside the Messenger printing plant at Warrington. The author is featured at the bottom right.

Photo: Stefano Cagnoni Report Digital

▶8.7 Protesters post a notice against “Tebbit’s Law”

Photo: Stefano Cagnoni Report Digital



◀8.8 Tony Dubbins being interviewed at the protest. The NGA was not used to being in the media limelight.

Photo: Stefano Cagnoni Report Digital





◀8.9 The NGA mobilises a protest at Warrington on 9th November. This was not the place of work of the striking members so a picket was unlawful under the new law. The photograph shows a modest-sized crowd milling about with little purpose other than its presence. Shah complains at the lack of police protection.

Photo: Nigel Costley



◀8.10 A lone policeman guards a side door into the plant with added graffiti. It was taken to demonstrate the lack of police presence as well as the minor damage. There was no other physical attack on the building or anyone in or around it.

Photo: Nigel Costley



▲8.11 Joe Wade, NGA General Secretary addresses the crowd outside the Messenger printing plant at Warrington on 9th November.

Photo: Nigel Costley



◀ 8.12 Eddy Shah arrives, looking confident, at the High Court to use the new Employment Laws against the NGA. The photograph gives an impression of the media interest in the story.

Photo: Newline



◀ 8.13 NGA leaders arrive at the High Court. John Ibbottson, NGA National Officer; Bryn Griffiths, NGA President and Tony Dubbins, NGA Assistant General Secretary

Photo: Newline



◀ 8.14 The 'Stockport Six' strikers with Tony Dubbins, NGA Assistant General Secretary

Photo: Newline

▶ 8.15 NGA pickets keep warm during the night picket of the Messenger plant

Photo: Newline

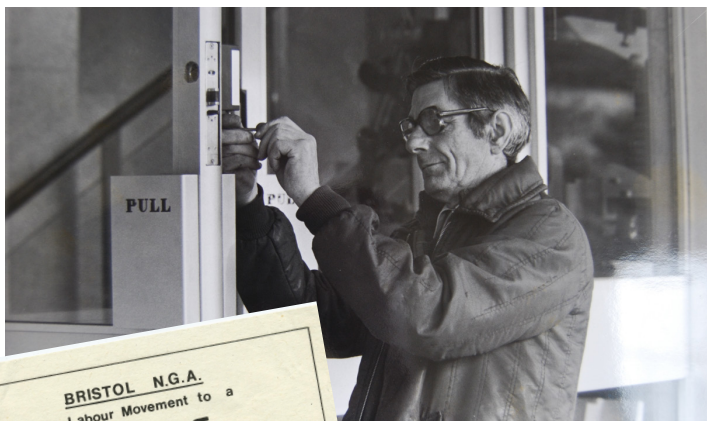






◀8.16 NGA Headquarters in Bedford is guarded by volunteers in fear of seizure by court officials

Photo: Newsline



◀8.17 The locks are strengthened at the NGA Headquarters in preparations for possible attempts to seize the building or from those wishing to process injunctions against the union

Photo: Newsline



◀8.18 Notice for Mass Rally in Bristol

Source: Author's archive



◀8.19 Following the Court decision to sequestrate the NGA's assets, members on Britain's national newspapers based on Fleet Street in London stop work over the weekend of 25-26th November, in what is falsely described as a 'spontaneous reaction' to the verdict.

The employers sue the union for the action but later dropped the lawsuit following divisions between the publishers.

Photo: Newsline



8.20 The mass protest on the night of 29th-30th November 1983. The scale of police presence is clear from the photographs.

Photos: John Smith, Report Digital







8.21 Scenes inside the Messenger printing plant showing the degree of chaos production and sense of determination to print the papers while under siege.

Photo: John Smith, Report Digital



▲ 8.22 Eddy Shah

Photo: John Smith, Report Digital



◀ 8.23 Eddy Shah proudly holds up a copy of the Stockport Messenger

Photo: John Smith, Report Digital



◀ 8.24 Non-union workers take a break with one of the private security guards brought in by Eddy Shah to protect the plant

Photo: John Smith, Report Digital





◀8.25 Protesters sit down in front of police lines on 29th November. Peacefully sitting on the ground would force the police to physically move each person but it also requires a well-disciplined protest and witnesses spoke of stone-throwing which made this tactic hard to deploy. Later pictures show the protesters standing.

Photo: Newslines



◀8.26 Police and pickets on the evening of 29th November. The photograph shows the crush between the two sides.

Photo: Newslines



◀8.27 One of a number of arrests made during the protests

Photo: Newslines

▶8.28 Police wearing helmets march on the demonstration. The first time this was seen in a British industrial dispute. The officers could have changed helmets but more likely they were reserve numbers moving into position to break the picket.

Photo: Newslines





◀8.29 Police and pickets on the evening of 29th November

Photo: Newline



◀8.30 Police seize control of the NGA communications van. They are accused of smashing the equipment inside.

Photo: John Smith, Report Digital

▶8.31 Pickets in a battle over the communications van

Photo: Newline



There is a significant gap in the images at the point the police charge into the crowd. This may confirm allegations that police acted to stop photographers or it could be due to the speed and ferocity of the action.

◀8.32 After a long night, in the early hours of 30th November, a van carrying copies of the printed newspapers emerges through the police lines

Photo: Newline





◀ 8.34 Len Murray, TUC General Secretary emerges onto the steps of Congress House, London late on Monday 12th December to decry the surprise decision of the TUC's Employment Policy and Organisation Committee to support the NGA.

Photo: Newsline

▶ 8.35 NGA members and supporters march through Stockport in the rain on Tuesday 13th December after the union had called off its planned all-out strike across the printing industry.

Photo: John Smith, Report Digital



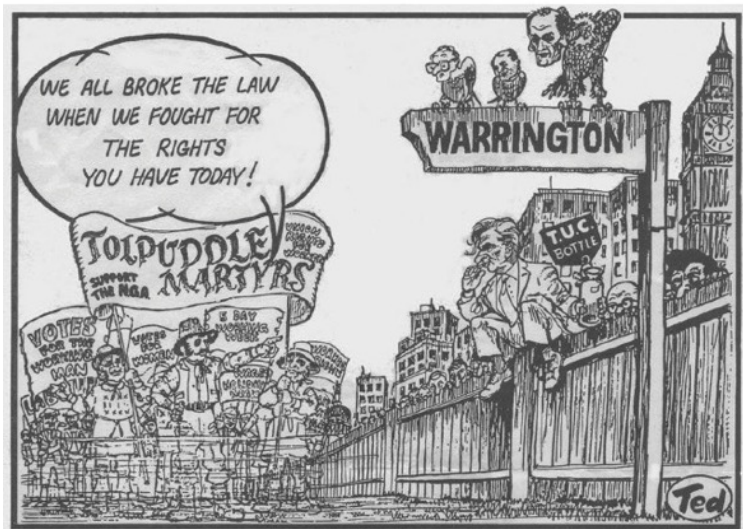
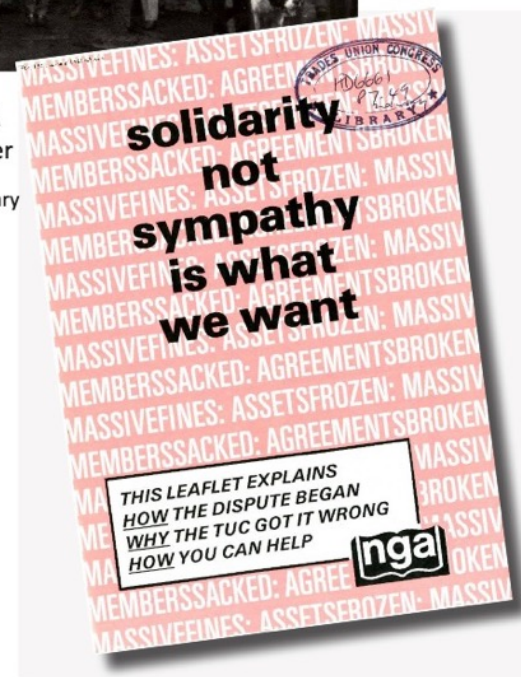
▼ 8.36 Arthur Scargill, General President of the National Union of Mineworkers address the Stockport Rally.

Photo: Newsline



▶ 8.37 NGA campaign flier

Source: TUC Library



◀ 8.38 A 'Ted' cartoon showing the sense of betrayal at the lack of TUC support for the NGA.



# nga'82 PRINT

The official journal of the National Graphical Association (1982) Volume 21 Number 1 January 1984

## THE BATTLE GOES ON!

THE ASSOCIATION'S National Council has decided that the fight to resolve the dispute at Messenger Group Newspapers over union recognition and to secure reinstatement of the victimised Stockport Six will continue.

In the run-up to Christmas urgent discussions were taking place with the NGA's friends in the trade union movement, to see what can be done to mobilise the movement in support of the Association.

This follows the disastrous vote by the TUC General Council to bow to the anti-union Employment Acts.

A majority of TUC General Council members refused to back the NGA when the National Council called a 24-hour strike of NGA members, despite a vote of support from the TUC's own Employment Policy and Organisation Committee.

The majority of the TUC General Council did this despite the fact that Mr. Shah, Messenger Group Newspapers boss, has the support of the Institute of Directors, the Government and the courts; and of the police in attacking the protest demonstration in Warrington, at the Messenger Group premises.

National newspaper employers are claiming up to £3 million in damages for the spontaneous protest stoppages by NGA members on the national newspapers on November 23 and 26. They also threatened to take further actions against the NGA if the 24-hour all-out strike took place.

The Newspaper Society, covering provincial newspapers, also sought injunctions.

### RIGHTS

All this is on top of the £675,000 fines, plus the many tens of thousands of pounds costs that have been scored from the NGA under a court's sequestration order of the Association's assets totalling £10,000,000.

Many trade unions have promised the Association wide ranging assistance to help as the courts attempt to batter the NGA into destruction. But the TUC General Council went back on Congress policies and the initial promises of support.

The General Council said the NGA had a case under the "Wembley 5" provisions that were agreed by a special conference of all trade unions at the beginning of last year. The points agreed at the conference were in order to mobilise the movement to fight the anti-union laws.

This is what Wembley Clause 5 said:

Where the General Council receive a request to assist a union faced by or experiencing legal action by an employer, and are satisfied that assistance from the movement is justified, they are empowered (i) to co-ordinate action by other affiliated unions in support of the union in difficulties, including, if necessary, calling for industrial action against the employer concerned, or more widely; (ii) to provide financial assistance to a union which experiences severe financial problems as a result of damaging actions.

Now the General Council (which at Wembley recommended this course of action) has voted by 29 to 21 against

Continued on back page

### NGA to continue fighting for the Stockport Six

More on pages 2, 3, 4, 5 and back page

### Peace bid .. then new huge fine

THE Association has been fined a further £525,000 for pursuing its dispute with Messenger Group Newspapers — despite its constant offers to negotiate a settlement.

This brings the total of fines imposed by the courts under the Government's anti-union legislation to £675,000. The latest fine came despite repeated offers to settle the dispute by direct negotiations with Messenger boss Mr Shah, long sessions at the ACAS offices in London and Manchester and peace proposals and a unilateral cooling-off period by the NGA, during which it withdrew pickets from the Warrington works.

NGA National Officials even travelled up to Manchester for ACAS talks with Mr Shah, when he insisted that he had to be near his works.

### Blocked

Throughout the talks at ACAS Mr Shah blocked proper negotiations. At one stage agreement was reached on the union recognition issue at the Messenger Group. But then Mr Shah refused to reinstate the six NGA members who had been dismissed during the dispute. Since then Mr Shah has backtracked on the recognition agreement.

NGA General Secretary Joe Wade commented: "We find it completely ironic that someone who purports to be the defender of individual liberties is not only acting as a bully boy by sucking those who dare to disagree with him, but now is refusing to re-employ them.

"Despite this, the TUC asked us to try to renew talks. We did, but Mr Shah has still insisted on victimisation of the Stockport Six. The NGA will never accept that."



THOUSANDS of NGA members and supporters from other unions marched through Warrington last month, in a magnificent demonstration of their solidarity with the Association's stand against Eddie Shah. Full story and another picture on PAGE 3.

### Proud past, proud future

THE NGA is twenty years old this month.

Since its birth in 1964 when the Typographical Association and the London Typographical Society came together, six others joined, the ACT, the NUPT, the NSES, the ASLP, NUWDAT, and SLADE have joined its ranks.

When Slade linked up, we changed our name to the NGA (1982) but we did not change our determination to be a strong and effective trade union for all our members.

The NGA's first twenty years has seen many advances for all our members. Highlights were:

- The 1978 live pay campaign;
- The 1980 dispute which made the 37 1/2 hour week a reality;
- NGA determined opposition to the attacks by Governments on trade union rights.

For each and every member the last two months have been traumatic. The NGA has been fighting an irresponsible and renegade employer who has not only victimised the "Stockport Six" but has used the High Courts to drain the NGA of its funds and assets and has tried to destroy our union.

But we will come through this struggle like others we have met and beaten by the twenty years since 1964.

The NGA '82 will emerge from this fight as strong and determined to defend members' wages and working conditions and rights, as we have done we were formed.

In my 28th Anniversary message to all NGA '82 members it that your strength is your union.

Your union is the NGA '82. We will keep it this way for the next twenty years.

JOE WADE  
General Secretary

See Centre Pages

8.39 NGA journal, *Print*, responds to the Messenger Dispute having called off its call for an all-out strike.

## **From positional to associational power – the NGA and the 1983 Messenger Dispute**

### **Introduction**

Chapter Seven described the dynamics of the dispute between the NGA and Messenger Newspapers with key aspects illustrated through photographs in Chapter Eight. The thesis charts how the employer sought to bypass the union's traditional positional power through new technology operated by non-union members. Production continued despite the strike of six NGA members. The union had very little other leverage as the company had prepared to print using its own press and its traditional pressure through secondary action had minimum impact.

The thesis has described the spectrum of powers acquired by unions due to the position members hold within the labour process, organisational strength, institutional and associational power. With its industrial action strategy unable to bring Shah to a resolution, the NGA turned to associational power through allies in the wider trade union movement.

This was unfamiliar territory for the independent union whose legacy was one of detachment from the TUC (Gennard 1990: 283-286). Tony Dubbins was elected General Secretary with a commitment to increased engagement and he positioned the union within the left of a trade union federation struggling with how best to respond to the Conservative reform agenda, industrial restructuring and technological change (McIlroy 1990: 256).

The NGA had rarely been in the public eye and was not accustomed to winning public support or engaging with the media. This chapter reviews this factor in a dispute that was played out in the glare of publicity and with the national press having a keen self-interest in its outcome.

## Media coverage

Interviewees on both sides of the dispute believed that the national press coverage was intertwined with industrial relations within the newspaper industry. Shah expressed the belief that newspaper bosses were covered by the power of the union whereas NGA officers and activities assumed the union would receive a hostile press and that there was little they could do to influence it.

Shah felt the *Daily Mail* especially unhelpful. On 25 November the *Daily Mail* carried a feature headed: "Six men at the centre of a storm"<sup>103</sup>

It described how the family men didn't consider themselves as militants and stressed their long service in the industry. It is a neutral, even sympathetic, article from the *Daily Mail*, one of the newspapers that didn't dismiss NGA chapel reps who refused to commit to normal working.

On 29 November there is a feature on Shah:

And the man at the centre of it all gets on with his job.

Shah is quoted as saying:

I'm not giving up – law is my only defence and I'll use it.

*The Sun* also seemed to tread carefully in its initial coverage with a headline:

Union chief hits at Shah

The *Morning Star* gave solid support to the NGA and stressed the TUC's backing for the dispute with headlines<sup>104</sup>:

TUC throws weight behind print workers

Full TUC backing to NGA, Print workers big challenge to Thatcher

In the copy it referred to TUC statements and quotes from Murray which showed the TUC support was far from unequivocal. On 28 November it issued a rallying cry to

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<sup>103</sup> Media reports are list in Appendix 5

<sup>104</sup> Ibid

“Back the print workers”, declaring the Tory government and the Fleet bosses were out to smash the NGA.

Newis still adheres to the wider conspiracy theory of the dispute but understood the complicated calculations being made by all sides. He believed the newspaper employers were in some way sponsoring Shah but were nervous or inflaming their own chapels:

Behind the scenes they were saying go on Eddy, have ‘em. If they produced biased copy it wouldn’t have gone out. I think probably the London officers were playing it down because the Shoe Lane Progressives - the broad left group – took a lot of persuading to support the one-day strike to keep tensions down in Fleet Street. (interview 3.12.2017).

Dubbins believed the media balance was tipped against the union.

If they are bad enough when their interests are not involved what did we expect when they had direct interests (interview 17.8.2017).

As the dispute escalated it dominated the media. The front page of the *Daily Mail* on 30.11.83 declared: 4,000 pickets defy the law and inside: “The phoney war is over, now it’s become a union battle the Tories can’t afford to lose.” The report described 4,500 pickets confronting 1,000 police in the “biggest challenge yet to the Government’s trade union laws.” Its 1 December edition was headed with: “New clash as pickets mass again” and “The darkest hour on Winwick Quay”.

*Daily Mail* Comment column (30.11.83) was headed: “Mob rule or the rule of law” and called the picket an “attack on parliamentary democracy and the authority of the judiciary It recognised that: “the Warrington dispute has become the first real test to the point of destruction of the efficacy of industrial relations legislation enacted by the first Thatcher Government.

TV and newspaper photos at the time of the dispute show the scenes of battle at Warrington. *The Times* (1.12.83) carried a large picture of an injured policeman.

The dispute continued to be the main story across the media through November and December 1983.

A four-page “Battle of Warrington” centre-spread ran in the *Sunday Times*, 4 December, including a damning leader article on Fleet Street describing its

. . . pusillanimous management, pig-headed unions and archaic technology.

Woodrow Wyatt’s column in the *News of the World*, (4.12.83) ‘The voice of reason’ was to be on the theme “Mr Shah’s fight is our fight against union tyranny”, but the column ran a black space after the NGA chapel refused to set the type.

See list of media coverage used in this research in the Appendix 5.

The case studies for this research are long before the arrival of social media and 24-hour news. The significance of the Messenger Dispute was not realised immediately but after some initial confusion the main newspaper outlets realised its political importance and potential to damage the NGA to suit their own interests. Even this was not clear cut with news employers calculating the impact on their own internal industrial relations and the intense competition between the titles and proprietors. Shah believed they were beholden to the print unions. The Fleet Street chapels did not want to get drawn into the dispute but were instructed to do so.

The focus for the NGA leadership was upon industrial matters and it had little if any experience or resource for managing its approach to the media. Mass brawls with the police were the ambition of some on the left but played badly when viewed on TV and newspapers. The lack of engagement and assumption of an unfair hearing in the media made it harder to win allies beyond the NGA’s traditional support.

### **Associational power and the TUC**

The September 1983 TUC Congress took stock of its position following the re-election of the Conservatives. It rejected a resolution calling for all-out opposition to the Government. The TUC’s commitment to the ‘Wembley Principles’ had, to all intents and purposes, been shelved.



Len Murray, TUC General Secretary advised the Post Office Engineering Union (POEU) that it was not TUC policy to encourage unions to break the law and it could not grant the union substantial financial assistance in its dispute with Mercury Communications. The POEU's National Executive Committee was divided but after its General Secretary advised that defying the law and facing sequestration would bring financial disaster it decided to comply. The TUC was in little mood for a confrontation with the new Government and it would not support unlawful action.

A composite motion reaffirmed opposition to the laws but proposed reasoned argument with ministers. This was a marked softening of the policy. Motions and amendments that called for non-compliance with the laws were defeated.

The NUJ attempted to propose an emergency motion at the TUC's September Conference seeking industrial and financial support but the General Council refused to table it. The National Council heard doubts that financial support in opposing the High Court Ruling would be forthcoming from the TUC (National Council September 1983).

With the Messenger dispute escalating an emergency meeting of the TUC's Print Industries Committee (PIC) backed the NGA's request for support. This was the first stage of the procedure under the terms of the 1982 Wembley Conference agreement to oppose the Employment Acts. The report to the NGA National Council of 3-4 November included an exchange with David Basnett, a representative of the key TUC Employment Policy and Organisation Committee (EPOC):

Association representatives had stated they considered that widespread support was necessary and that there should be an industrial response from the TUC if NGA funds were sequestrated.

It was the view of the officers that the TUC representatives were luke-warm in their support for the Association . . . and they were attempting to back away from the implications of the dispute.

If the strategy depended upon the wider support from the TUC it seemed that it would be unsuccessful. It was perhaps at this point that the union could have tried

to stop the dispute escalating out of control. Perhaps the TUC was too ambiguous? Building a dispute that would rely on its support would seem ill-conceived but the NGA leadership stuck to its course.

The National Council was informed that NGA officers had met with Murray, TUC General Secretary to insist on the support promised under the Wembley Conference agreements. Murray offered support within the law and declared his belief that there would not be widespread support for unlawful action. He thought the fines should be paid.

The TUC had been advised that it risked being 'joined' in legal action for damages if it backed the NGA's unlawful action (Monks interview 2015). Shah recalled how he had felt that Murray was not happy with the situation but had to give some taciturn support to the union.

He was trying to say: 'we're not really like this'. But he was stuck and there were reports of big infighting between certain trade unions and the TUC. I'm not against unions I just don't like extremism. The extremists appeared to have taken charge of the TUC (interview 7.4.2015).

The TUC's EPOC met on 21 November and was informed that the NGA was not seeking financial support from the TUC to pay the fine. It sought financial and industrial assistance in order to win the dispute and called for an immediate statement of support. Murray explained that he was not in a position to commit the General Council to this. The meeting agreed to back the NGA's right to recognition, opposition to victimisation, and efforts by ACAS to resolve the dispute and report to the General Council (Minutes of EPOC 21st November).

The next day the NGA National Council considered reports on the mass pickets and, as the Minutes indicate, claimed:

the police had advised Shah not to attempt to publish his newspapers<sup>105</sup> . . .  
the police were under pressure from the company and had assisted the firm

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<sup>105</sup> There is no evidence to substantiate this claim

in the distribution of the newspapers by ensuring the vans left the factory (National Council 22 Nov 1983).

The letter from the NGA's lawyers, Kershaw, Gassman and Matthews on the 19 November,<sup>106</sup> was given to National Council members stressing the draconian implications arising from the Sequestration Writ. It warned that:

in the final analysis non-compliance could lead to imprisonment of National Officers and National Council members.

It explained the legal position and that the court was only concerned with the issue of contempt of court. The letter advised the union to abide by the terms of the injunction.

Once Messenger Group have obtained their writ Mr Shah will have achieved all that he wishes and will have put the Association out of business.

It qualifies the risk of committal to prison of officers or members with the comment:

I do not believe that Messenger Group would fall into that error.

The legal advice concluded:

The consequences of the Association continuing its contempt would be disastrous to the Association and I would recommend very strongly that the Association does now comply with the Order.

The Council was again advised of the "muted" support from the TUC and that union should comply with the law. Wade advised that the union was unlikely to receive full unconditional support from the TUC.

Letters and motions in support of the leadership's stance were received from chapels and branches. Despite the clear legal advice and warnings over the lack of wider trade union support the NGA National Council on 22 November voted without dissent not to pay the £50,000 fine.

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<sup>106</sup> Legal advice presented to NGA National Council as listed in Appendix 2

Wade warned of a “spontaneous explosion” amongst the membership should the union be sequestered (*Daily Mail*, 1983). John Fryer, BBC Industrial Correspondent described the NGA as a “tough nut to crack”. He predicted that: “What started as a little provincial dispute is heading for a major confrontation between the unions and Mrs Thatcher (as cited by Dickinson 1984: 103)”.

### **All-out strike summoned**

NGA minutes show that on Saturday 10 December a crisis meeting of NGA National Council debated whether a national print strike would bring pressure on Shah. Such a strike call would open the union up to thousands of injunctions, fines and damages that would mean almost certain bankruptcy. The Newspaper Society and the Newspaper Publishers Association were already in the process of obtaining court orders and preparing to sue for the maximum damages – total claims amounting to around £4 million.

In their interviews, Newis and Dobney recall how they and other left-wing members of the National Council urged for an all-out strike. The National Council was advised that a ‘sounding-out’ exercise indicated members would support a one-day strike but not selective strikes or an all-out stoppage. The members debated the options for the union and recognised the dispute with Shah was not going to be won. They saw Shah being egged on and championed by other employers and the government who wanted to see the NGA broken. A one-day strike would put down a ‘marker’ to other employers who may feel inclined to follow in Shah’s footsteps (NGA National Council Minutes December 1983).

Dubbins in interview reiterated his belief the newspaper employers were complicit in the dispute:

Newspaper employers have got vested interests and probably acting individually and together to put pressure and give support to Shah and Government and we had to counter-act that by demonstrating to them this was not just an issue with Shah this was an issue we had, they were giving

support to Shah and there would be a penalty to be paid. And we had to put down a marker to be sent. It was the only way we had (interview 17.8.2017).

The legal advice to the union was clear and forthright:

I would be failing in my duty to the Association not to stress the consequences of a strike instruction with the utmost vigour. There is no doubt in my mind that any such instruction would destroy the Association utterly. The cumulative total of fines and awards would certainly exceed the total of the Association's assets, any money from the TUC fighting fund and any money that may be available from sympathetic unions.<sup>107</sup>

Dubbins interviewed for this research recalled his belief that an industrial solution was unlikely and the pressure had to focus on a political resolution through the TUC. The next meeting of the TUC's EPOC Committee was set to meet on the Monday evening and he wanted to go with a clear mandate for more action. The National Council agreed to call a 24-hour strike across the entire printing industry on the following Wednesday, 14 December. But tellingly, it arranged to meet again on Tuesday morning to review the position after the EPOC Committee.

Dubbins explained:

We never went to the TUC to close down power or stop delivery of newspapers on the railways or anything like that. We just asked for a statement of support but this is we ran into trouble because Murray in particular was very much a constitutionalist and would not put the TUC at risk. The thought of the government sequestrating the TUC is absolute bollocks – never would have happened, it would have caused such a reaction to it people would have said the government has gone potty. But to have a go at one individual union and six people was a different matter and so we needed the TUC support and we got it (interview 17.8.2017).

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<sup>107</sup> Legal advice presented to NGA National Council 9.12.83 as listed in Appendix 2

Legal costs and fines were stacking up for the union and this would have escalated significantly had it pursued wider strike action across the industry. In 1980, the NGA levied its working members to support those locked-out. It is hard to see how such a tactic could have been adopted in 1983, with the same degree of support. Even if the working members were prepared to pay an emergency levy to sustain the wider struggle, the union would have faced the additional challenge of dealing with it in hard cash transactions. Such a banking-free operation is barely conceivable today but even in 1983, with the tight discipline of the NGA, it proved extremely difficult and as Dubbins recognised, was not sustainable beyond a few weeks. The sequestrators or courts would have soon closed in on some of the ways union officers were using to hide or disguise funds. Subsequent sequestrations, such as with SOGAT and the NUM, proved much harder to evade (Land and Dodkins 2011, Milne 2014).

The 24-hour strike would have escalated the dispute into uncharted waters. It is still not possible to judge whether the strike call was a gesture to strengthen the union's hand with the TUC and would never have been actioned.

The conflict had grown beyond Shah and the battle was to stop other employers following his example. From the testimonies of Newis and Dobney, the Left on the union's National Council made the case in class-war terms, that it was a battle the working class had to win or it faced catastrophic consequences. Decades later it is hard to argue that such analysis was inaccurate but whether victory was possible at the time is another matter.

Dubbins did not think Shah was affected one way or another but the union had to counterbalance the support from newspaper proprietors and the Government.

The closed shop was a big, big, big prize – the basis of the industry. Even if they could put a dent in that let alone smash it up completely, you have won a major victory (interview 17.8.2017).

The Left rallied support for the NGA and held it up as a dispute that must be won. *Socialist Action* devoted most of its 9 December edition to the cause arguing that

challenging the law by breaking it was part of a long tradition in the development of democracy. But the only tactic called for was more mass picketing. It railed against the TUC and the Labour Party leadership for failing to back the blockade. Arthur Scargill is quoted calling for “the most massive picket ever seen” (*Socialist Action* 1983).

The research highlighted the way the NGA National Council was divided between those who thought the dispute could not be continued without active TUC support and those who believed that seeking TUC endorsement for unlawful action was a maneuver by senior officers to “extricate themselves from the dispute by proxy” as Blissett described (2013: 157).

In his appraisal Gennard commented:

Some contend that the NGA approached the TUC to get them off the hook of a dispute which was in danger of getting out of control. Although this is an obvious conclusion to draw it is a false one (Gennard 1984: 17).

He was writing this in a book commissioned by the General Secretary to celebrate the history of the NGA.

If Dubbins, the shrewd union negotiator, believed that a refusal by the TUC to back the union would provide an escape from the hole that the union was in he does not acknowledge it. He worked hard to win support from other union leaders especially on the Left of the TUC. Some within the NGA National Council such as Newis wanted to continue to escalate the conflict.

It would have changed the consciousness of the workers across the NGA. That we were under attack and we had got to support each other. We were building towards a general strike. No conclusion that it would lead to a general strike but the one-day strike would have been a precursor for others – two-day strike (interview 3.12.2017).

Newis dismissed the risk of bankruptcy:

We would have had to face that. It would have meant we would have gone out of business a bit sooner. We had to face that anyway (interview 3.12.2017).

Shah recalled being called by two or three Fleet Street editors or owners.

They asked me what I was going to do. Maxwell especially. I said I wish I could print five million copies because the whole country would buy them whatever I put in them. Maxwell hated me. When we heard they were pulling Fleet Street, I could have cleaned up a fortune. Stopping Fleet Street wasn't going to put any pressure on me. People get so immersed in the game they lose sight of what it's about. I wasn't going to get hurt and I don't know why they thought that closing down Fleet Street was going to affect me (interview 7.4.2015).

Strike circulars were despatched to all chapels on Sunday 11 December along with plans for a demonstration in Warrington. Joe Wade hinted that the action may lead to an indefinite strike which all TUC unions may be called upon to join.

It struggled, however, to connect wider strike action with an independent free-sheet publisher in Stockport. Many of the interviewees still believe in a magic thread that bind an employer class and that Shah would somehow be forced to retreat. The NGA clung to the hope that other printing employers could bring pressure on Shah but it was hard to see a line-of-sight to such an independent business. From the records and interview with Shah it seems that the action was actually reinforcing his determination to hold out. Dickinson recognised the dilemma and called Shah a "self-contained independent with allegiance to no-one but himself (1984: 172)".

Lord Marsh, Chairman of the Newspaper Publishers' Association told Radio 4's *'World this Weekend'* that the NGA is "on a dangerous hook" and urged the TUC to get it off. John Monks recalls:

There was a rumour that Joe Wade was looking to the TUC. He couldn't call Dubbins off, he was on the charge. He was posing to the left of Joe and the TUC might do it (interview 12.3.2015).



On Monday 12 December the glass-fronted reception of its Bedford headquarters was littered with injunctions posted by process servers who were refused entry.

Before the critical meeting of the TUC EPOC that evening Dubbins joined a pre-meeting with the left-wing members to bolster their support. He recalled:

Did a hell of a lot of work on that. In making it clear we wanted a statement of support and nothing beyond that. There was a Left meeting before hand – all on board and we went to EPOC and we got the support, despite Len's reluctance (interview 17.8.2017).

Bill Keys, SOGAT General Secretary, who chaired the EPOC suggested the NGA had reached the end of the road. Murray again stressed the need to bear in mind General Council policy. Wade told the committee that if it did not give full support it would destroy his members' morale (TUC EPOC Minutes 12 December 1983).

The Left in the NGA believed the TUC's aversion to bold action against the law could still be shifted. Newis explained:

They weren't asked to sanction the breaking of the law. They were only asked to support the one-day strike which would have been legal. If you can't have a one-day strike across industries we should have packed it in if that's where we are.

This was about the ability to represent workers and if we backed down now then the future would be parlous. All of my life I've been told – an injury to one is any injury to all – if it's not true, take it off the banners (interview 3.12.2017).

Moss Evans, TGWU General Secretary, made the case for a simple statement of support. The right-wing union leaders believed that this would be a 'blank cheque' to the Government. Tony Christopher, General Secretary of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation questioned the NGA's strategy after the planned one-day strike saying it seemed to be an escalator to nowhere. He believed that there was no basis for mass

industrial backing and the committee should not promise more support than it could deliver (TUC EPOC Minutes 12 December 1983).

Monks was the Secretary to the Committee and recalls that the NGA wasn't sure how things would turn out:

They had Bill Keys lined up, unhappily, but lined up. They had a lot of people trying to find a middle way. Christopher in particular, Jenkins trying to find a middle way of wording which was neither any use to Joe Wade, who needed to be clear with the National Council who were meeting the next day. Len Murray was not going to have weasel words, he was very strong on that. It needs to be black or white, he said this is not a time to fudge. The NGA don't deserve a fudge, they deserve a clear answer and Jenkins and Christopher were trying to fudge (interview 12.3.2015).

Murray again told the Committee to stay within the terms of the General Council statement and an adjournment was called. A form of words including a declaration of support was drafted but Murray amended it to expressing "sympathy". Murray advised the committee that:

Any declaration of support by the TUC would bring the TUC into contempt of court, damages could be unlimited and the TUC could face further legal actions instigated by the NPA, the Court or even the Attorney General (TUC EPOC Minutes 12 December 1983).

Wade argued that a sympathetic statement would not be sufficient and the 24-hour action would be called off. Clive Jenkins, General Secretary of ASTMS proposed "sympathetic and supportive" to which Murray again warned the committee that he would not risk bringing the TUC into contempt and would have to repudiate such a statement. This angered the Left union leaders who felt the committee had primacy over the TUC General Secretary until the General Council could consider the issue further. But this would be too late for the NGA as it had to make a final decision on strike action the next morning. With the committee split a vote was taken and the

Left won nine votes to seven to include the words: “sympathetic and supportive” (TUC EPOC Minutes 12 December 1983).

A number of members were absent, mainly from the Right, who would have been expected to resist such a statement of support. Monks felt that:

. . . the Left wouldn't mind being outvoted and were a bit surprised that they'd won it (interview 12.3.2015).

The decision was a shock and just after midnight Murray read a statement to the gathered media:

I've informed the committee I will be making it clear that the Employment Policy and Organisation Committee does not have the authority to go beyond a decision taken by the General Council and the decision cannot therefore be interpreted as endorsing the NGA National Council's decision to take industrial action on Wednesday. That will be a matter for the General Council to discuss and determine when it meets (cited by Dickinson 1984).

Monks recalls:

Murray believed he was getting the NGA off the hook. And there was nothing he could do to get them off the hook other than what he did. He couldn't mobilise an army of labour (interview 12.3.2015).

Newis recalls his shock:

Enormous battles on the National Council to get the Left to call the strike. I didn't advocate a strike on the basis the TUC would do us a favour and get us off the hook. I was completely shocked to see Murray on the steps of Congress House.

Alan Royston, Stockport Six FoC, was at a rally in Warrington that evening:

I got this whisper through what Len Murray had done. I thought this is curtains for us. Although the Committee had supported, Len was going the other way. I thought this was the end. If he is not going to stand by us it's

going to crumble. I thought the momentum would build and the other unions would support us because they could see the bigger picture (interview 2014).

Dubbins' view now, and at the time of the dispute, is that the TUC is just a coordinating body.

TUC learned its lesson in 1926 and has never recovered from it. That's true in terms of never being a general staff – always been out there in the fucking pay corps rather the front line (interview 17.8.2017).

The NGA was served with more than one hundred injunctions that could have resulted in more than £30 million fines (Dickinson 1984, Dunn 1985: 102, Gennard 1990). The NGA might have hoped to avoid such costs from other employers by threatening further industrial action but the very existence of the union would have depended upon such a gamble.

NGA minutes record that at 9.30 am on Tuesday 13 December, the NGA National Council met briefly to call off the 24-hour strike. Wade explained the surprise statement by Murray had put:

the matter into an entirely different light and which caused bewilderment and confusion (National Council minutes 13.12.83).

Wade told the NGA National Council he felt there could well be a move to seek Murray's resignation.

### **End game for the union and TUC**

In Warrington the *Stockport Six* led a demonstration that attracted some 3,000 people in poor weather<sup>108</sup>. The special meeting of the TUC General Council heard Murray recommend it reject the EPOC decision. The NGA had already called off its one-day strike but the Council still needed to determine its position.

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<sup>108</sup> Granada TV report and PRINT newspaper

Dubbins accepted that the TUC could face legal action but argued it must face up to its obligations under its Wembley Conference decisions. In his autobiography, Clive Jenkins, the General Secretary of ASTMS (1990: 281) wrote that TUC general secretaries had long been afraid of somehow exposing the national centre to legal action of any kind. "It was their virginal horror of this which led to the problems of Len Murray over the Messenger dispute". Dubbins argued that the TUC owed the NGA after its own unlawful action in support of other unions, such as health service workers, ignoring its earlier shortcomings in this regard. He accepted that the NGA could not win the dispute without TUC support. He warned that other employers would take the opportunity to attack the NGA and the whole trade union movement would be severely weakened.

The minutes record:

It was asserted that the General Council had reached a crucial stage in their development of the campaign against the Employment Acts.

The 1982 Wembley TUC Conference declarations foresaw the prospect of unions in breach of the law and the minute goes on:

These policies did not commit the General Council to remain within the law. Trade union development had, on previous occasions, been won by breaking the law and the General Council must recognise that a bad law must be made inoperable by demonstrations against it. If the General Council did not support the NGA, it would mean they had reversed the policy made at the Wembley Conference and the 1983 Congress: in effect they would be instructing unions to act within the law. Unity could no longer be obtained by working out a compromise which was unsatisfactory to everyone. The General Council therefore had to take a clear decision (TUC General Council December 1983).

After nearly six hours in session the Council voted 31 to 20 to 'refer back' the EPOC's recommendation. The TUC would not support an unlawful strike.

That evening Dubbins squared up to Shah on *Channel 4 News*. Dubbins accused him of only becoming converted to a defender of individual freedoms when he found the pay of NGA members were £70 above the rate he had to pay to non-unionists. Shah called Dubbins:

An out-and-out liar and I'm sick and tired of the double-dealing attitudes of professional negotiators like Mr Dubbins against small companies like myself.

He then took out his ear-piece and walked out (Dickinson 1984). All routes of action against Shah had failed and the NGA had no choice but to accept defeat. The union's National Council met on 15 December and decided to continue the dispute but only by lawful means. Joe Wade recognised the dispute was a watershed as far as the employment legislation was concerned.

Later the next year there was a telling moment when Alan Jordan, the influential Secretary of the Birmingham Branch, rose at the 1984 NGA Conference to ask a small but significant question of Dubbins:

This is not meant to be a nit-picking question, Mr President, but is not the penultimate paragraph slightly inaccurate? It says: "The TUC General Council did not support the decision of its own Employment Policy and Organisation Committee and in the subsequent confusion that resulted, the National Council decided to call off the proposed 24-hour stoppage." If my memory serves me correct, the full General Council met on 14 December, and yet our National Council called off the stoppage, allegedly because of the confusion, on 13 December. Is that paragraph slightly inaccurate?

Dubbins angrily replied:

With the greatest respect to you, Alan, I do not know what the rest of our colleagues at Conference here thought but if anybody is suggesting that after that diabolical statement by Len Murray on the steps of Congress House there was not confusion, not only amongst the membership of the NGA but, I would suggest, amongst the entire trade union movement, we are quite

entitled – and in my view it is quite legitimate – to include that phraseology within that report (NGA 1984 Delegate Meeting: 262-263).

This exchange touched the nerve over the NGA's apportionment of blame onto the TUC. There was no reflection on whether the union had done enough to garner support around the General Council or if they had any realistic chance of winning support capable of turning the dispute in their favour. This sequence of events has become part of the narrative. For example, Marsh (1992: 93) records that: "The General Council of the TUC refused to support the NGA action and the NGA called off the proposed strike".

At the Conference Ray Williams moved a motion applauding the *Stockport Six* and the support members showed. It condemned the "treachery" of Len Murray and called for immediate and decisive national action.

Dubbins responded by saying:

On 14 December 1983, whether you like it or not, and we are not using the TUC as a scapegoat, what they did was to give the green light to the Government and the employers to rip this union apart. We were left isolated. . . the TUC abandoned the NGA at a crucial stage in the Messenger dispute. This Council was not prepared to ask our members to commit suicide (NGA 1984b: 267-269).

The motion was defeated 211 to 157. With the TUC blamed for the defeat, Dubbins kept his reputation largely intact as he became NGA General Secretary.



**9.1 - The cartoon shows the miners giving support to the NGA. It clearly links Eddy Shah with the National Coal Board, Rupert Murdoch and the Thatcher Government. - Tony Dubbins' private collection**

The 18 January meeting of the National Council was informed the dispute had to that date cost the union £2 million and the National Newspapers were pursuing claims for damages in the region of £3 million. Added to that would be further court costs, sequestration costs and further claims from Shah.

The National Council agreed to purge its contempt of court and abide by the injunctions. The NGA reaffirmed its opposition to the Employment Acts and announced that it would press for a reversal of the TUC decision at the September Congress. On the same day, Shah despatched dismissal notices to the seven remaining NUJ journalists.

A week later, on 25 January, the Foreign Secretary announced that independent unions would be banned at the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). Mike Grindley, who became the chair of the GCHQ sacked workers, was convinced that this was no coincidence. In a conversation regarding this research he felt sure the sequence was no accident and that it was part of the 'Ridley Plan' to take on trade unions (interview 2014).



On 27 January Wade apologised to Manchester High Court and purged the union's contempt. The judge ordered the funds to be released, less £625,000 to pay fines and costs. The next day there was another demonstration in Warrington. Technically the dispute continued and the Stockport Six continued to picket. In May this was stopped and alternative employment was found for the six members. The Messenger Group returned to court to claim compensation for damages to its business bringing the grand total in fines and damages to more than £1 million.

In March 1984 the National Council minutes record the decision to expel Shah E. (S.19066) under the provision of Rule 41 for carrying on working for Messenger Newspapers after receiving an instruction from the Branch Secretary.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

The TUC was divided between those who wanted to confront the Government and its new laws and those who wanted to find some form of containment and compliance with the freshly elected Thatcher regime. As a small union, marginal to the policy shifts taking place within the TUC, it failed to detect that the ground had moved.

As a result of the Messenger dispute, the new employment laws passed their first real test. The refusal to comply with the law left the NGA in an impossible position in court and Shah made the most of his one-sided prosecution. The civil proceedings ratcheted up until the court made the unprecedented ruling to sequester the union. The employer facing a strike of a handful of workers was given control of the NGA's financial assets. The reliance on civil actions, injunctions and the target upon bank accounts not people was all part of the lessons the Conservatives had learnt from previous failed attempts at industrial relations reform.

With industrial action ineffective, the NGA stumbled into escalating mass action outside the Messenger printing plant in Warrington. The protests grew under their own momentum and beyond the control of the union. Scenes of picket line violence were proving counter-productive as the TUC had advised they would. The shock of

NGA activists who faced the robust police response was palpable in the testimonies and confirmed their belief their union and their class was under attack by all the forces of the state.

The TUC tried to show support without straying into potentially legal challenges itself. The research found it was reluctant and slow to say no to the NGA and in its efforts to avoid giving succour to Shah it led the union to believe it could count on greater support than it was ever going to provide. But the study also found that the TUC provided useful cover for the NGA leadership in its surrender at the end of the dispute.

There may have been rhetorical expressions of support but other unions were not prepared to expose themselves to the sort of escalation of legal action that faced the NGA. They watched the unfolding events with alarm but it took some time for the significance of the dispute to be reflected in a change of industrial tactics.

The case study demonstrates the weakness of associational power in contrast to the sort of positional power the NGA enjoyed. It also demonstrates the investment in time and resources needed to be deployed over a long period to develop allies and be able to assess the potential support amongst the wider movement.

## The aftermath of the Messenger dispute

### Introduction

To assess the significance of the 1983 Messenger dispute it is necessary to review its aftermath and the direct links to subsequent events for trade unions, employers and government.

Interviews given for this research included reflections on the dispute and its ramifications. Key points are featured in this chapter alongside a review of the assessments made in the contemporary literature. It highlights what new knowledge has been gained and what the thesis adds to the current debates over trade union renewal, mobilisation and social movements theories.

The chapter highlights the consequences flowing from the outcome of the dispute, confirming its significance. For trade unionism, the defeat was a heavy blow, marking the start of a series of further conflicts which saw the movement beaten and much reduced in size and stature.

The research confirms how the confidence held by members in the capacity of the NGA to maintain its traditional strength was broken by the Messenger dispute but the strategy to place the burden of blame on the TUC dodged the true causes: new technology and the failure to recognise the changed political and legal environment.

This chapter examines how the Messenger dispute impacted upon industrial relations, especially in printing and newspaper production. Shah was propelled into national prominence and he was encouraged to start a new national newspaper, *Today* (Goodhart and Wintour 1986, Neil 1997). This heralded News International's transfer of production away from Fleet Street to Wapping (Lang and Dodkins 2011).

The NGA recognised the threat from non-unionists (and competition from other unions). It sought to reach out to new recruits and belatedly address systemic levels

of inequality and the exclusion of women. It also pursued a strategy of joint protocols with other unions leading to amalgamation (Gennard 1990).

Unions struggled to find an accommodation with the laws that restrained their traditional actions. For many the choice was between what they saw as properly representing their members or breaking the law. Outright non-compliance as a strategy, however, was lost, even if some continue to argue for it. From that point unions made representations to the courts against restraining injunctions and with a few exceptions abided by the rulings (Evans 1987).

Emboldened by its success, the Government pressed ahead with further restrictions on union activities opening up wider opportunities for employers to pursue court orders to stop union disruption, and imposing conditions on internal union democracies.

For the Government the Messenger dispute was a defining moment in its policy towards trade union reform and employment law. The step-by-step policy was accelerated with further laws to constrain union actions and on tactics in industrial conflict. The Messenger dispute proved a testing-ground for handling disputes and mass pickets as was seen during the year-long miners' strike.

### **The aftermath and reflections on the dispute**

The impact of the dispute was felt most keenly by the six workers on strike. They were supported by the union financially and helped to find other work in the trade (NGA National Council minutes, Royston interview 2014).

The NGA analysed and argued over what had gone wrong far more than it had done over the preparations for the dispute. Bryn Griffiths in his Presidential Address to the NGA's Biennial Delegate Conference in November 1984 stressed the argument of 'betrayal' and blamed Murray's outburst at the TUC for the union's defeat and subsequent events:

That was truly a night of treachery, as far as this union was concerned.

Colleagues, that green light was all Thatcher needed from the movement to encourage her to launch her attack on the union members at GCHQ and to gain greater confidence for the battle against the NUM (NGA 1984b: 118).

Dubbins acknowledged that the union could have acted earlier:

Was the initial strategy, the softly-softly approach used for too long? Is it considered an error to wait until Shah had his own printing press? Yes, in those circumstances of course it is an error. It is an error in the sense that if we had taken action before we might have had more effect on Shah (NGA 1984b: 261).

He acknowledged, when interviewed for this research, that Shah could have been left go non-union as others had done. Yet little attention was given to whether the NGA should have pursued an alternative strategy including opting to dodge the dispute or recognise its futility at an early stage. Goodhart and Wintour (1986) suggested the NGA could have avoided the fight and tried to play down a small business running a non-union print facility. Dickinson (1984) leaves the reader with the impression that the union was the victim of a deliberate attack for which it could only defend itself as best it could. He presents a sense of inevitability and it makes no suggestions of missed opportunities for the union to take a different course and, if so, what options might be available. The evidence shows how difficult such a strategy would have been given the strength of feeling amongst officers and activists. The power of internal democracy, so valuable to the NGA in 1980, tied its leaders' hands in 1983.

In his reviews of the dispute, Gennard (1984) found it was an industrial dispute that escalated out of control into a wider political conflict and not a deliberate action to challenge the Employment Acts.

When a law changes clashes with the basic philosophy of an organisation it becomes difficult to immediately change its rules and behaviour. These far reaching implications for the NGA from the Employment Acts helps explain why it felt unable to comply with injunctions granted against them during the

dispute (Gennard 1984: 12).

This point raises the question of whether a democratic membership organisation with such long-held methods of organisation could have transformed its *modus operandi* as required by the new laws without a major configuration. In a choice between maintaining activist support and legal compliance, the leadership opted to break the law. The research shows how such deeply embedded practices were not going to be dropped without a major existential crisis. Such a surrender to the Thatcher reform agenda was also unlikely given the confidence the union had in itself. The defeat was to rock such self-belief as Burke explained:

We had never been beaten before. We'd had long hard battles and won (interview 2014).

The Messenger dispute “damaged the aura of uncontestability (sic)” of the NGA described by Gennard and Hayward (2008: 4).

The study shows how difficult it was for the NGA to abandon even a small number of members. The democratic force of activists and officers, stirred into action in defence of the union, meant the leadership was unable to adjust its approach to meet new unfavourable conditions. The democracy and high levels of participation within the union combined with a strong, if confusing, federated structure of local branches restricted the options open to the leadership.

In 1983, as the minute books and the interviews show, the NGA had not prepared the activist base or its wider membership for any form of accommodation with the new regulations. All those questioned believed the NGA to be a key target in the Government's assault on union power but it did not contemplate any other strategy other than outright opposition. The NGA had more to lose by way of its traditional conduct in disputes than other unions. The study finds the factors that made the union so strong made the acceptance of change hard to accommodate.

From all those interviewed there is a strong belief that the fight was anticipated and inevitable, if not Shah, someone else. Dodging or side-stepping it in some way would have been the much harder decision to take than allowing the dispute to take its

course. The new leadership came from a more militant orientation and had not prepared the membership, activists or officers for any accommodation with the law.

John Monks, the TUC Officer in charge of the Committee, and later to become TUC General Secretary, recognised the critical nature of the dispute:

Well it was the signal that unions were under the law, they were going to observe the law. Who rules? After that it was the government rules, the rule of law rules. It was a massive dispute in my recollection and set the framework for the rest of the 80s (interview 12.3.2015).

Despite the significance of the defeat, Monks knew the TUC could not back the action and had to act to get the NGA 'off the hook'. He gives his view of what would have happened had the TUC backed the NGA in the way the Left wanted:

It would have been a revolutionary situation. There could have been a great general strike on this, we could have stopped the car industry, the mines and the railways and so on and it would have built up.

What they missed was the pre-entry closed shop, that was at the heart of this but it was important to only a small minority within the TUC. So once people opened up with what it was about: so you could only get a job if you were a white nephew of a bloke who has already got a job there. And that was in Murray's mind as well.

Frankly it was not the way he wanted to take the TUC and he wanted to make it clear (interview 12.3.2015).

The TUC has long mastered the art of crafting carefully worded statements allowing union leaders to escape difficult entanglements with employers. It is by nature risk-averse and compliant with laws and regulations. It has to find points of consensus across all its affiliates. The rhetoric in the call for class solidarity and mutual support simply did not match the mood or capacity of the union movement. McIlroy acknowledged "that the direct independent action from below of a decade ago (1970s) was simply not there." – a situation he partly blamed on the ineffectiveness of the TUC-led campaign to make the ideological case for resistance to the law

(McIlroy 1984: 31). He acknowledged, however, that the debate between Left and Right was never about “pulling the troops out”. The hopes for escalation to the point of a general strike were fanciful.

Lang and Dodkins (2011: 24) repeat the NGA position that: “The TUC’s first major confrontation with the anti-union laws had been met with a resounding back-down and the NGA were left high and dry with no alternative but to call off the strike”.

Murray, who announced his retirement shortly after this episode, confirmed the TUC was never going to stand up to the law and acknowledged the democratic process as distinct to revolution (cited in Darlington and Lyddon 2001). The argument that the NGA was denied support because it did not have a strong enough case and that the next union threatened by the law would get a better hearing was “pure whimsy” by McIlroy (2001).

*Marxism Today* (February 1984) carried a debate on the aftermath of the dispute called: *The Unions: is there life after Warrington?* McIlroy argued the TUC position set a “disastrous course” and marked Thatcher’s greatest success since the election. He stressed that if the law was to be broken, there would need to be a propaganda offensive by the TUC to counter Thatcher’s own assault. He believed the resulting campaign was insufficient. McIlroy argued that “the terrain for a conflict offered by the NGA dispute could not have been bettered.” This is challenged by John Lloyd’s article that argues that the centrepiece of the dispute: the closed shop, was not the cause on which to mount such a fight (Lloyd 1984).

McIlroy (2001) argued that the Left had failed to counter the rise of ‘new realism’ within the trade union movement. Lloyd rebuts the Left’s assumption that all that was lacking was firm, militant leadership. He believed the active assent of the majority to militant action of the kind was not available and that the TUC saved the NGA the considerable embarrassment of asking for it. This research confirms how passionately the NGA activists and officers held to the closed shop and secondary action as key features to maintain the union’s levels of control. But these were not shared by most of the other unions and they were the tactics the Conservatives and



its media supporters had sought to demonise – with success as shown in the Party’s archives.

Lloyd warned that with individual choice, many will choose against unions because they have been given no reason to choose for them (Lloyd 1984: 33). He challenged the assertion that all that was lacking was firm, militant leadership.

Newis acknowledges it was not the best ground on which the union could fight a major battle but stands largely by his stance at the time which was to summon up solidarity support.

People saw it as a series of events rather than a set of activities linked behind which there was a political intent to defeat the organised working class in order to unleash capitalism. It had got to start with the praetorian guard of the labour movement. They had got to be beaten first (interview 3.12.2017).

Dickinson mentions the raw nerve that remained over the way the dispute ended: “Three months later Dubbins was still bitter about the General Council’s decision. If he was secretly pleased it did not show” (Dickinson 1984: 177). Gennard argued that the competitive pressure on commercial printers presented difficulties for employers to take a united stance, as it had in the 1980 dispute, and the membership would continue taking action until any threat of legal action was lifted (1984: 18). This, however, would require extraordinary levels of loyalty to the union and would risk hundreds if not thousands of individual disputes and court orders.

It now seems absurd to think that the TUC, not established as the trade union high command, would summon a general strike to oppose a government that had just won a landslide general election to sustain the closed shop.

The leadership had positioned the NGA alongside the ‘Left’ unions in a movement increasingly divided over how to respond to the Conservative agenda. There appears to have been little assessment, at times when it mattered, of the likelihood of the sort of backing from the TUC that would have made any material difference to the outcome of the dispute. If the tactic was to lay the blame on the TUC for the defeat, it worked, at least for NGA members. Blissett (2013: 158) notes that NGA activists

and members blamed the TUC, not their leadership but he also found that, more than thirty years later, the issue is still shrouded in “ambiguity and acrimony”.

The thesis argues that the NGA had lost the dispute from the outset when Shah continued to produce newspapers despite the strike of NGA members. The stoppage of six workers was ineffective and so the union sought to apply pressure from the outside. McIlroy (1991: 71) was right when he concluded that the law made it extremely difficult for unions to win disputes outside the struck workplace.

McAlevey (2016) stresses the need to organise for super majority strikes in which the overwhelming proportion of the workforce stops work to generate a crisis for the employer. The hard lesson for the NGA at Messenger Newspapers was that they no longer had the sectionalist positional power to stop the job and they were not able to persuade other workers, let alone a majority, to support its dispute. Indeed it appeared that the chapel was almost as hostile to the non-union workers as it was to the management.

The dispute is seen through the lens of a battle between Shah and the NGA. The voice of the workforce Shah hired is not heard and this research was also unable to provide that. Shah admitted the ease to which he was able to exploit high levels of unemployment in the area from which to recruit and how the new typesetting systems required skills akin to typists (Shah interview 2015). Union officers interviewed were convinced the new workforce had been recruited or persuaded to oppose any approaches they might receive from the union and that their role was to help Shah by-pass the NGA.

With production maintained, Shah survived the NGA’s secondary action regardless of its unlawful status. The escalation of the dispute to national prominence was because the laws were used but they made little practical difference to the union’s efforts to halt Shah’s production. The union was fined for taking action that wasn’t even effective.

Megan Dobney acknowledged this point:

Both sides claim the dispute was significant or critical because of the use of the employment laws against the union. But it was technology that Shah used to bypass the union (interview 2016).

Although still stressing the importance of the new laws in the case, Shah also acknowledged:

It was my idea that won, whether the law was there or not we would have won (interview 2015).

The ability to by-pass the union using new technology was the critical factor in the outcome of the dispute but its significance was because of the role of the law. A similar conclusion was reached by Pencavel (2003: 23) who found the closed shop was not beaten by the law alone but by technological change.

The Institute of Directors told Dickinson (1984: 181) their view of the important change in the balance of power between employers and employees due to the enactment of the employment legislation. Goodhart and Wintour (1983: 8) also found that Warrington had become the long-awaited trial of strength over the new legal framework. The dispute, which the union had already effectively lost, was made into a trial of strength over the legislation by both sides.

Dubbins reflected on the outcome:

It wasn't the end of craft unionism. It did tilt the balance of power in the newspaper and media industries away from the union (interview 2017).

Burke's reflections included:

The problem now looking back was we were putting off the evil day. The union tried various things. We proposed an arrangement where we would share the technology a third, a third, a third between the other unions, NUJ, SOGAT and NATSOPA. The other unions didn't like that, they thought they would inherit the power of the compositor. But the power wasn't the compositor typing keys, it was the closed shop and the fact that they held together and stood by each other (interview 2014).

Newis set the outcome in wider political terms:

Thatcher's philosophy was that she would defeat organised labour and unleash technology such as the 'big bang' leading to the ascendancy of global capitalism and the inability of working people to defend themselves against it. . . . And where we are today in terms of inequality and the creation of the global elite stems from that point (interview 2017).

In hindsight, the ground on which the union fought was weak. Shah successfully by-passed the NGA to maintain newspaper production. Had it stopped there, the dispute would have been of little consequence. Shah's recourse to the laws on which unions were intent on breaking raised the stakes and as a consequence increased the significance of its outcome for all concerned.

### **The impact on printing industrial relations**

After the use of the Employment Acts by Shah, the union feared that this would be repeated by other employers but there was no immediate rush to follow in Shah's footsteps. Rainnie (2016: 122) encountered employers trying to exploit the moment with one account of management trying to talk the workers out of the union because of the trouble with the Messenger Group but this was an exception and half-hearted at best. Blissett interviewed officers and activists and found that there was a shift in attitude after the dispute. Employers were "cockier" than before and the dispute had made the union less certain of its ability to defend itself (2013: 159). Dunn (1985: 113) believed that after Messenger, "dismay and bitterness gripped the union" and this made it less amenable to accepting technological advance. He argued that a long-established problem of British industrial relations was the lack of trust between the parties and the use of the new employment laws in the Messenger dispute had given this feature new life.

In his immediate post-mortem, Gennard argued that larger employers would be cautious of taking on the union using the laws. He played down the implications of the dispute by brushing off Shah as another rare example of a maverick non-union firm. He suggested only a narrow range of employers were likely to use the new

legislation and that it was too early to conclude that it was a 'watershed' in the law's influence on UK industrial disputes. Gennard further calculated that the dispute could mark a short-term effect and eventually both employers and unions will accept the 'new game' (Gennard 1984: 14-15).

After Messenger, unions became much more cautious in breaching the law and opted to seek legal defence against court orders. Employers used injunctions to stop industrial action, a device where the case against the union does not have to be fully proven. Evans (1987: 425) analysed the use of injunctions in industrial disputes between 1984 and 1987 and found eighty recorded with the printing unions, NGA and SOGAT receiving twenty-nine. In thirty-one cases the union lifted the action immediately. In nine cases, the employer-initiated contempt of court proceedings after claims that the unions had refused to comply, including NGA and SOGAT. Evans believed that it was in printing where the unions' tactics of the closed shop and blacking made them especially vulnerable.

Contrary to the stated aims of the Government, the new laws reinforced central control by union bureaucracies rather than strengthening worker democracy, as seen in the various union procedures for initiating industrial action. Far from shifting power down, the laws have centralised decision-making within unions and have made union bureaucracies more risk-averse. Undy *et al* described this as: "encouraging oligarchic rather than democratic tendencies" (2011: 230). McIlroy (1984) believes this to amount to "a big nail in the coffin of effective trade unionism".

For most printing employers, industrial relations continued within the framework of a national agreement and the most pressing matters were economic and technological change, international competition and the rise of digital publishing.

### **Time for Today**

Thanks to the Messenger dispute, Shah became a national figure, to many the champion of individual freedom against an over-powerful trade union (Lang and

Dodkins, 2011: 22). In the 1983 annual BBC *Today* poll for 'man of the year' he came second. He set his sights higher than running some local freesheets. On 7 February 1984 Shah met Andrew Neil at the Savoy Hotel and shared with him a two-page paper on how a national newspaper could be produced using new technology (Neil 1997).

Neil is said to have told Shah: "Fleet Street can only be reformed by an outsider" Goodhart and Wintour (1986: 23). It might seem strange for the new editor of the *Sunday Times* to meet Shah to plot the birth of a rival newspaper. Shah, when interviewed in 2015, believed Murdoch would have known of the meeting, if not exactly what it was about.

Trace the line between the Messenger and Wapping disputes and it is peppered with mutual contacts and interests. Neil felt that there was no good reason why, with the employment laws and new technology, a green-field site, non-union, national newspaper could not be produced and suggested Shah go to see the anti-union *USA Today* (Goodhart and Wintour 1986: 22-24, Melvern 1986: 97-98). Shah developed links with Bruce Matthews, Murdoch's senior executive in the UK and Lord Rees-Mogg, editor of *The Times* (Goodhart and Wintour 1986: 147). With News International already making plans to move production the *Today* project was a test-bed for the new technology on the scale of a national newspaper (Griffiths, 2006: 368-371). Murdoch later used the threat of competition from *Today* as part of his justification for the move to Wapping and the break with Fleet Street unions (Melvern 1986: 148-149).

*Today* failed to breakthrough the mass circulation of existing newspapers and within four months Shah sold out to Tiny Rowlands, the controversial Chief Executive of the Lonrho conglomerate. After a succession of different editors, the paper closed in November 1995 (Goodhart and Wintour 1986).

### **Wapping move**

By the autumn of 1985, with secret preparations to produce newspapers at Wapping

well under way, Murdoch told the unions that Shah's planned paper, *Today*, demonstrated that competition could enter the market with the overwhelming advantages of modern technology, one union and a no-strike agreement (Lang and Dodkins, 2011). Murdoch gave the unions three months to agree to transfer to Wapping saying the deadline had been set by Shah (Melvern 1986: 148-149).

The national press used British Rail to distribute newspapers and SOGAT members operated closed shops in the wholesale warehouses. The unions could still call upon their positional power even with the threat of legal action. Shah considered distributing *Today* using road transport but believed it was not feasible (Goodhart and Wintour 1986). News International was a far bigger operation and Murdoch approached his partner in Australia, the TNT transport group, to prepare an alternative distribution system (Lang and Dodkins, 2011). The first TNT lorries rolled down the floodlit ramp at Wapping on 25 January 1986 carrying three million copies of the *News of the World* and one-and-a-half million copies of *The Sunday Times*.

Brenda Dean, the new SOGAT General Secretary told the chapels in London that no other national newspapers would be hit and she called for non-violent picketing (Dean 2007). There would be no point in concealing union funds in fear of court action and she wanted no repeat of the scenes from the Messenger and miners' picket lines. She wanted to set the tone for what she knew would be a massive dispute and she sought to win public opinion (Melvern 1986: 161, Richardson 2003).

As with the Messenger dispute the employer had recruited an alternative labour-force to exploit new technology to bypass the union and maintain production. SOGAT faced a stark choice between unlawfully seeking to disrupt the distribution chain or observing the law and effectively giving up on a dispute of such magnitude. Not to try to use its membership to stop the papers getting out was a step too far for the union's leadership (Dean 2007). An instruction was sent to SOGAT members in the provincial warehouses not to handle the papers (Lang and Dodkins, 2011).

In the first few weeks the newspapers were sometimes late and in short supply. In some warehouses, management stepped-in to handle the papers and in Coventry SOGAT members who refused to touch the work were fired. Fear of dismissal and a

lack of support for the union's Fleet Street membership meant distribution went largely unhindered.

Despite the failure of the union to enforce solidarity action – or perhaps because of it – the company turned to the courts. News International launched a dozen legal actions. SOGAT refused to obey the injunctions and just two weeks into the dispute the company won an order to sequester the union's £17 million assets as well as a fine of £25,000 for contempt of court.

Dean agreed not to obstruct the sequestration and it soon took grip on the union. SOGAT offices and vehicles were seized, phones were cut off and pensions not paid to retired members. Dean argued that there was little point in being strangled by sequestration for an instruction that was being ignored by a significant number of members and not having the impact needed on News International in any event (Dean 2007, Melvern 1986). Like the Messenger dispute, it demonstrated that even with the overwhelming force of the state against the union, the members involved still clung to hopes of victory.

On 8 May 1986 Dean apologized to the High Court, purging the union's contempt (Lang and Dodkins 2011: 111). She met angry striking members who felt abandoned by the action (Dean 2007). It was not just the recognition of the power of the law but acknowledgement that SOGAT members up and down the country were ignoring the union's instruction and handling the newspapers (Blissett 2013).

The dispute lasted more than twelve months with regular violent scenes at the picket lines in Wapping and at distribution depots around the country. The newspapers, however, continued to appear (Lang and Dodkins 2011).

When the SOGAT National Council called off the dispute, Dean was heavily criticised for the defeat (Lang and Dodkins 2011). Blissett (2013) interviewed SOGAT officers who believed that Dubbins and the NGA had deliberately left Dean to take responsibility for a dispute they knew could not be won. The NGA leadership was able to exit the dispute as it had the Messenger dispute, damaged yet united and untarnished.



Dubbins recalled his belief that:

We always had to keep in our minds that although the newspaper industry was politically critical it only made up of about 10% of our membership so it wouldn't put the union down in the earth if we lost the entire industry (interview 2017).

Shah claims Murdoch said:

Eddy Shah won the war, of which I fought the final battle (interview 7.4.2015).

The Newspaper Society ended the National Agreement in 1991 in parallel with a wave of de-recognitions at company level with the imposition of severe cuts in pay and conditions (Gennard and Hayward 2008: 296). NGA and SOGAT members voted to amalgamate their unions and in 1991 the Graphical Paper and Media Union (GPMU) was established. Despite coming from the smaller of the two unions, Dubbins beat Dean in the election to become General Secretary.

New technology allowed newspaper employers to reduce employment overall and replace a largely unionised workforce with a non-union one. Technological change altered power dynamics between workers and employers and largely empowered the employer. Far from threatening capitalism as Cockburn had speculated (1983: 218), the balance of bargaining power shifted substantially away from organised labour for men *and* women. In 1983, Cockburn didn't question whether an institution with such well-established and firmly held structures as the NGA was capable of transforming itself into an organisation that would be able to attract 'new' women workers.

After the dispute, Gennard believed the union would need to reach out to new workers and to come to terms with firms and workers not accustomed to the ways of the trade (1984: 13). The implication was also clear that the union needed to be more open to women recruits. Cockburn (1983) highlighted the challenge for a male-dominated craft seeking to protect itself from change, including from women recruits. In these terms the Messenger dispute looks like a closing stand for male

dominance but the aftermath has little cause for feminist celebration. New workers, many women, did not enter the industry through the traditional apprenticeship route with its in-built teaching of the practices of the union. Such workers were not only unaware of the practices and customs the NGA held dear, but they were exposed to negative opinions of the role of the union from the employer and the wider media. Their pay and conditions were, as a consequence, significantly lower (Cockburn 1991, Dawson 2014). Shah claims it was easy to recruit typists in a period of high unemployment to do the jobs of NGA compositors. Their story is not told in this research, an omission matched in the other literature, and the status of women in the printing industry since the early 1980s warrants further study.

Traditional ink-on-paper printing was in decline and the GPMU was unable or unwilling to recruit and organise in the growing sector of web designers and internet-based publishers. Dubbins, interviewed in 2017, didn't believe this was a plausible strategy.

Cockburn added an Afterword in 1991 to her 1983 seminal book *Male dominance and technological change* in which she acknowledged the dismissal of NGA craft and overwhelming white male newspaper compositors to be replaced by largely younger female workers employed at about half the previous pay rate for an extended 40 hours and reduced holidays (1991: 238).

In her revised edition Cockburn (1991: 248) wrote of the development of women's committees and the appointment of women's and equality officers. But she highlighted how unions remained largely run by men and the collective bargaining agenda still failed to give women justice, points also made by Dawson (2014). Boston (2015) found most unions slow to respond and used a quote from Margaret Prosser's warning to unions including her own, the TGWU as Assistant General Secretary for one of her chapter titles: "Become feminine or we become fringe".

Faced with technological change, the new workforce lacked positional power and the collective identity that helped form the craft unions. Cockburn correctly summarises that as individuals, "women climb out of their disadvantage only by exploiting other low-paid women in their turn (1991: 252)".

In the end the NGA did not follow the job into the rapidly expanding digital world but merged with Amicus which in turn joined the Transport and General Workers Union to establish Unite the Union. The printing industry is now subsumed into the engineering, manufacturing and services sector within the union<sup>109</sup>.

### **The impact on government trade union reform policy**

The significance of the 1983 Messenger dispute was that it enshrined the authority of the law, breaking the hopes of unions that outright opposition might neuter its effectiveness. The sweep of new trade union laws since 1980 severely weakened union power imposing a burden of regulation and limiting the range of industrial action tactics (Auerbach 1993). Rising unemployment and the restructuring of industry also helped secure the quiescence of labour. This research, however, questions the assumption that the law was the critical factor in the outcome of the Messenger dispute even if it became the central issue. Despite both sides citing the significance of the new laws, the real factor in the Shah's favour was new technology enabling him to by-pass union controls using non-union labour. That the law was seen to win heralded a sequence of further regulations to restrict union power.

The Right saw little role for trade unions and continued to pursue every avenue to isolate and marginalise them. Hyman (1989: 199) described the approach of the governments of this period as "coercive pacification". Some union voices still claim the right to break what they believe to be unjust laws and that collective action trumps state regulation. Unite the union, for example, has changed its rule book to remove the qualifying words in its objectives: "so far as may be lawful"<sup>110</sup>. Len McCluskey, the union's General Secretary, posed the question at the Lord Wedderburn Lecture in 2015: "Can unions stay within the law any longer". Yet unions, Unite included, have adapted to the legislation and even used some of the measures to strengthen their bargaining power with employers (Undy et al 2011).

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<sup>109</sup> Unite the Union national industrial sectors

<sup>110</sup> Unite Rule Book 2018

They have centralised control over industrial action in large part to ensure legal compliance.

Hanson and Mather (1988: 29) hailed the success of the Thatcher reforms and pressed the case for individualised contracts rather than collective agreements. Metcalf (1989) found that whilst productivity had improved during the 1980s it was not possible to link this to trade union reforms. He concluded that the reforms had strengthened the hand of managers and weakened union resistance to change but he found highly unionised sectors, including printing, had not seen the sort of performance rise he expected. The changes were not about performance or even employment levels but power. The period had not produced sustainable improvements in UK productivity or competitiveness, instead had widened inequalities and had entrenched employer failure to invest in skills and human capital (Evans, Ewing and Nolan 1992). Issues around unionization and productivity or performance are matters for other research to examine.

### **Policing lessons**

The Messenger dispute was the first real test of new police tactics and resources in handling industrial conflict and the experience of the Messenger dispute was used later during the miners' strike and at Wapping (Wiles 1985: 173).

Officials from the National Union of Mineworkers kept a close watch on the fortunes the NGA in its battle with the Messenger Group. Arthur Scargill, NUM General President was particularly anxious to learn the lessons from the courts' sequestration of NGA assets. The union drew up plans to protect its cash and assets in the entirely anticipated event of court action against it (Milne 1994: 179).

Despite the failure of the mass picket at Warrington, the NUM still hoped the tactic would provide a rallying-cry victory as it did at Saltley Gate in 1972. In the wake of the Messenger dispute, the *Financial Times* concluded that the police had learned hard lessons on mass pickets and how the defeat at Saltley had "entered police vocabulary as a shorthand term for all the problems on how the police were to

maintain law and order” (Bassett 1983). For the NUM, the stockpile at the Orgreave coking plant became the battleground, literally. On 18 June thousands of miners faced some 8,000 police in what Milne described as “the single most dramatic and violent physical confrontation of past war industrial relations” (Milne 1994: 22).

It was a battle the police again won. Just as at Warrington, some on the Left argued that a bigger mass picket could have succeeded. Darlington felt that the NUM had not put enough effort into mobilising support for the mass picket. Had the union galvanised sufficient numbers it would: “have marked a symbolic political and psychological (albeit not necessarily industrial) turning-point in the strike similar to Saltley” (Darlington 2005: 84).

Unlike Shah, the Coal Board management opted not to use the new employment legislation directly. Instead two working miners, Ken Foulstone and Bob Taylor took the NUM to the High Court with funds arranged by David Hart. The judge ruled the strike unlawful due to the lack of a ballot and when the NUM National Executive refused to recognise the judgment a writ was granted against the union.

The legal process against the NUM moved quicker than it did against the NGA. The union was fined £200,000 and Scargill personally £1,000 for contempt of court and on 25 October Justice Nicholls ordered the sequestration of the NUM’s assets. Aware of what the NGA had gone through, the NUM had moved much of its money overseas, including into Swiss bank accounts. The NUM had been expecting sequestration and had prepared for it (Milne 1994: 327). Like the NGA, the NUM continued the strike as an ‘outlaw’, collecting cash in carrier bags and using secret donations. Miners’ support groups across the country ‘twinned’ with individual pits in order to pass on cash or deliver food parcels.

The full force of the secret state was ranged against the miners’ union (Milne 1994). Weir (1986: 135-136), however, believed that it was not the law that defeated the miners’ strike, it was the miners themselves who went back to work. “They did that because the strike was futile, not because it was illegal.”

As with the Messenger dispute attempts to widen the action beyond the mining

industry proved unsuccessful leaving some to blame the TUC for its defeat. The NUM had refused to allow the TUC any direction in the dispute fearing it would seek a settlement unacceptable to it.

The miners' positional power was being diminished by strike breakers and its associational power divided over the strike's legitimacy without a ballot, the impotence of other unions to garner industrial support, a hostile media and the force of the state through the police and courts.

For this research, John Monks reflected on the defeat for trade unions:

The regiments were knocked off, they were put in their place. Not without power and influence but by the end of it we were not a threat to anybody, other than the Labour Party – with the money and the political votes. I think we knew a defeat when we saw one and they knew a victory when they saw one. We don't know how much there was a grand plan behind it. If you talk to some of the senior Conservatives around at the time there wasn't really a grand plan. There were bits of it, like Ridley on coal stocks. They knew there would be a showdown on coal at some stage.

The trade unions were in the premier league of influencers, leaders in the country and after the miners' strike, we were relegated and we've been relegated ever since. At the moment we are barely in the Championship. Things like zero hours contracts, low living standards, inequality are about trade union weakness. That is the significance of our relegation and loss of members (interview 12.3.2015).

### **Chapter conclusion**

This chapter studied the reflections of the participants for this research, contrasting it with the assessments made in the contemporary literature.

It confirmed the significance of the Messenger dispute in establishing the employment laws and breaking the union policy of outright non-compliance. The

step-by-step approach of the Conservative Government secured its first major success and whether as a direct consequence or coincidence further steps were pursued through the banning of unions at GCHQ and more restrictive legislation.

As the dispute emboldened the Government it had a similar, if not immediate effect on employers, especially in the newspaper industry. The research has found no evidence that Shah was being used or manipulated by government or other parties to breach the union's defences but once underway those who supported the assault on trade union power sought to back the independent businessman. In the aftermath of the dispute Shah proved a useful Trojan Horse, especially for News International, by developing a new national newspaper that by-passed the printing unions. Messenger was to prove a test-bed for police tactics and court actions against the miners.

The chapter reviewed how the NGA evaluated the defeat. The research confirmed how the NGA's leadership successfully deflected blame onto the TUC in its refusal to back the union. The dispute justified those who argued that government policies discouraging negotiated settlements to disputes and made conflict more likely (Gennard 1984).

The post-mortem argued over whether the dispute was the best ground on which to wage a battle over the new employment laws. This thesis argues that the hill on which the union had to fight had already been lost but its leadership had little choice but support the six strikers and came under intense pressure from its activist and office base to prosecute the dispute using its traditional methods.

Any recognition that the NGA had to do more to reach out to new workers, especially women, came too late to turn the tide that was to sweep over it during the next few years.

The concluding chapter will return to the research questions.

## Conclusions

After attending a number of retirement parties, I realised I had been the youngest of a cohort of NGA officials and activists who lived and worked through events that traumatised the union in the early 1980s. It was a period that was to shake the foundations of not just the powerful print unions but the whole trade union movement. I was an activist and Father of the Chapel in 1980 and in 1983 the youngest elected officer of the NGA. I went on to become the South West Regional Secretary of the TUC.

Encouraged to research and write the story of these events, I set about unearthing archives and interviewing those I knew had been involved. My career helped open doors and gain access to participants and, with the help of my university, the union's archives that had been locked away for 70 years.

The thesis is partly a historic account with fresh revelations about events and partly contemporary industrial relations research. The research examined two contrasting case studies involving the NGA in the early 1980s. It was a model of a craft union with significant positional power and had built up highly effective organisational strength. These clashed directly with technological change and the Conservative political project to diminish the effectiveness of trade unions.

This research sets out to answer the following questions:

- What factors underpin positional and organisational power and how did the changing environment of the early 1980s impact upon them?
- What was the NGA's capacity for strategic choice and how far did legal, political and technological change constrain it?
- What new knowledge can be gleaned from the NGA case as to the role of the state and police in industrial relations?
- Where did decision-making lie within the NGA between national, branch and chapel levels and were there tensions between them?



- Does a constant tension exist between rank-and-file members and their union leaders?
- To what extent was the NGA's strong collective occupational identity and solidarity based on sectionalism and how far was this a constraint in its survival?
- What contribution do the features outlined above add to the wider debate over the future of trade unions?

The NGA was a well-organised craft union at the zenith of its powers in 1980 but by 1983 the challenges posed by unemployment, technology, industrial, political and legal change exposed vulnerabilities.

The first case study in 1980 was a national campaign for an improvement in pay and conditions and was led by a strong and decisive leadership. It was able to mobilise the membership and resources to conduct an innovative action that exploited the competitive nature of the printing industry and successfully secured its objectives. Just three years later, the Messenger dispute proved a turning-point not just for the NGA but for British industrial relations, pre-empting the 1984-85 miners' strike and the Wapping dispute.

Since the 1980s, the NGA and many other occupational specific unions have merged into more general, conglomerate unions. This poses questions as to the consequent loss of collective identity based upon the job role and suggests further research into this feature of trade unionism.

The research found collective occupational identity to be a strong organisational power resource for trade unions but it can prove a double-edged sword for unions facing significant change. Solidarity based upon sectionalism can be a highly successful for those on the inside but its exclusion can prove a source of conflict and division within the wider trade union movement.

The model of craft unionism, with its emphasis on self-reliance from the employer and 'cradle-to-grave' membership proved a successful model to build strong organisation strength and with it came enhanced capacity for leadership and

strategic choice. But this model relies upon a stable occupational structure based on the means of production and its technology.

### **Positional and organisational power**

- What factors underpin positional and organisational power and how did the changing environment of the early 1980s impact upon them?

For the NGA up to the 1980s, positional power flowed from its control of key parts of the printing production process. At workplace level, leverage came from its capacity to deny the employer essential skills and stop the job. This was based on age-old technology and the system of apprentice recruitment (Musson 1954, Child 1967, Gennard 1990).

The NGA's positional and organisational strength were mutually self-reinforcing. Overwhelming membership density was buttressed through the closed shop. Cradle-to-grave benefits, especially for those out of work provided generous support and fortified the union's control of labour. These in turn built social capital from membership networks and enhanced internal democracy. Winning almost all appropriate workers into union membership was achieved through measures, positive and negative, between the union and the recruits – not between the union and the employer (Dunn 1985). The employer was largely forced to accept the fact that the workforce needed was in the union.

Much of the power of the NGA relied on solidarity support across an inter-connected industry. NGA members were used to a time-honoured rule that they should not handle work going to or coming from a company in dispute with the union (Gennard 1990). As confirmed by the interviews with a number of activists and officers, chapels didn't even need explicit instructions to 'black' work, and they reacted in a traditional manner to a notice informing them of a dispute.

The tight and effective networks gave the union's leaders with the deep knowledge of the industry, its key employers, technological change and membership attitudes.

This research found that these factors made possible the leadership's strategic decision to wage a major campaign in 1980 to achieve significant advances in paying and working time.

The leadership took a calculated decision to embark on such a bold campaign believing that it had to act before the technological, legal and economic environment turned against it (Dubbins interview 2017). It knew it faced a hostile climate and without being forced by rank-and-file pressure pursued a successful campaign mobilising the membership as required. This does not decry or downplay the important of agitation from below (Darlington 1994, 2018, McIlroy 1990, 1991, 2009) but it is not a pre-requisite and the study demonstrates the capacity for strategic action led from the top.

Its positional, or structural power, meant the NGA could go it alone in 1980. Members of other printing unions had voted to accept the employers' offer and remained at work – and paid – an additional financial pressure on businesses. Despite opposition from other union leaders to the NGA action, their members gained from the success of the dispute through reduced hours and differential pay knock-ons (Gennard 1990). The dispute shows the complicated nature of sectional bargaining and the difficult balance between positional strength at critical points in the production process and wider workforce unity. Having a union to cover all workers doesn't prevent it from organising selective action to exert maximum pressure on the employer but it dilutes membership density and weakens organisational power.

As predicted, the fortunes of the NGA suffered in the years after 1980 with economic, political and technological factors undermining its positional power and organisational strength. In 1983 it faced a threat to its closed shop from an independent newspaper publisher, Eddy Shah. Despite poor prospects of success, the union embarked upon strike action that escalated under its own momentum, driven by inflated self-belief and the passion of the union's activist democracy.

The combination of an independent employer, not reliant on unionised resources with the ability to exploit new technology to by-pass the NGA, defeated the union's

traditional method of strike action and 'blacking'. It was non-unionists using new technology that beat the union but the significance of the dispute lies in Shah's use of the new employment laws against the NGA.

The dispute highlighted the fundamental need for a union to be able to stop the job in industrial action – the core of positional power. Without it, the case showed the weakness of other forms of power especially for a union not used to having to win allies or rely on institutional protection from the law.

### **Capacity for strategic choice**

- What was the NGA's capacity for strategic choice and how far did legal, political and technological change constrain it?

The contrasting case studies show how the changing environment impacted upon the union's capacity for strategic choice. The 1980 dispute was an exercise in leadership pursuing a strategic objective. Its success reinforced the sense of invincibility and bolstered the cohort of branch officers and activists that represented a powerful force within the democratic structures of the complicated federation that made up the NGA.

The thesis argues that these 'strengths' prevented the leadership from considering any accommodation with the new employment laws of 1980 and 1982 and led it to escalate its actions when faced with Shah's determination to by-pass the union.

The dispute was notable in forcing unions to accept the rule of a law hostile to their traditional actions. It extinguished the hope that the strategy of obstruction would render the laws ineffective would prove successful for the unions as they had been in the 1970s. The research shows the tight, collective body of activists and wider membership of the NGA found it difficult to adjust its position without being forced to do so by an external crisis. The evidence shows that there was no deliberation over any sort of accommodation with the law, the only strategic choice offered was

outright defiance. When this policy failed it was easier to deflect the blame to the TUC.

This research concludes, however, that the new Employment Laws were not as significant in the union's defeat as both sides present it. Shah successfully continued to produce newspapers despite strike action, blacking instructions, pressure on investors and the mass picket. Measuring the extent to which the new laws gave Shah the confidence to do this is confused by contradictory evidence from him. He boasts of making advance preparations including threatening to utilise the laws but also claims ignorance of the new laws until the strike was underway.

Exactly at what stage he prepared to take legal action is not clear from the research with contradictory statements. Shah claimed there were discussions over using the laws as early as 1981 and he had apparently restructured the company to strengthen his position against secondary action (Goodhart and Wintour 1986: 127). The Conservative Party archives, recently released, cite Shah as preparing in the event of the NGA calling a stoppage. His early warnings to the union may have been bluff and bluster but his later claim that he stumbled across the law after the strike had started seems implausible. Once the dispute began Shah was keen to be portrayed as the victim of union bullying rather than the instigator of the conflict.

The TUC had argued that the new laws would encourage employers to confront unions rather than seek compromise agreements (TUC 1982) and this appears to be borne out by the Messenger experience. But this research concludes the truth is not that clear cut. Shah gives credit to the law for his victory and the union cites the law for its defeat. Both sides had interests to take this position. Making the new law the principle issue of the dispute was the NGA's only hope of getting wider trade union support. Once on the escalator of court actions, however, it found no escape. For Shah, the circumstances offered an open goal. With the union declaring its refusal to comply with the law, Shah had nothing to lose in pursuing court action. The dispute made him a national figure, a hero of the Right and was the launchpad for the project to establish the new national colour newspaper, *Today* (Goodhart and Wintour 1986) which was a Trojan horse for News International's move to Wapping. The threads that followed the Messenger dispute can now be clearly traced.

As seen from the minutes and union's own journal, the NGA blamed the new laws and lack of TUC backing for its defeat. Yet it used all its traditional industrial tactics in defiance of the laws and still failed to stop Shah's production and lead him to reach a resolution. Although rare, Shah wasn't the first to bypass the NGA using the latest technology.

As the research shows, the laws were constructed to empower individual employers to pursue civil actions, especially the use of injunctions to restrain union actions. Given a union's refusal to comply, the laws of contempt of court apply. This led to the unprecedented use of sequestration powers.

This research has been able to outline the measures the union took to continue to function during its sequestration. The contemporary literature was unable to chart this as the NGA would have been understandably reluctant to disclose details of new bank accounts set up to hide the money and the stashes of cash held in underground safes around the country.

Through my special access to the participants I have been able to show how the NGA survived under sequestration through the inventiveness of its chapel representatives and officers, cooperation of the members and financial and administrative assistance from other unions. It required a considerable degree of trust and discipline amongst the membership and its officials at every level to switch to cash transactions and clandestine methods of financing the operation of the union. It was, however, not sustainable beyond a few weeks and almost inconceivable today.

The union was surprised when not only national funds were seized but also the quasi-independent branch and chapel funds. Gennard (1984: 17) noted the court ruling to free the accounts of the Manchester Graphical Society on condition it handed over national funds. He raised the idea of a non-centrally funded union able to live with sequestration and the spectre of a bankrupt national union leaving employers to deal with 120 independent branches. Loose, unofficial groups of workers able to flout or dodge regulations and the stifling of union bureaucracies might appear attractive to some but such an approach cannot offer the sort of assistance expected in today's employment relations let alone develop the sort of

collective organisation sustained by unions.

Chapter Four reviewed the background to this period, especially the debates inside the Conservative Party on industrial relations reform. It settled on a step-by-step attack on union power but there is no evidence that Shah was part of a pre-planned attack or conspiracy. The laws had simply provided the framework within which an employer could challenge a union. The Government provided employers with the ammunition without knowing who would be the first to fire. The Conservatives had a plan to develop a more and more restrictive legal framework on unions, but it would be wrong to conclude they had the sequence fully mapped out with a clear destination in mind. It was an opportunistic process adding layers every time they could.

The Government pursued an 'arms-length' or non-interventionist policy in regard to disputes between employers and unions and stressed the role of management prerogative (Dorey 1995). This was in contrast to the earlier Industrial Relations Act legislation where direct government actions led to it being the target for trade union opposition (Undy et al 2011). Previous governments had accepted responsibility to seek resolutions to significant industrial conflicts and the Conservative assessment found this drew ministers into being blamed and led to the adoption of the role of unions and compromise with them. The new government approach sought to rely on employer actions leaving it to stand aside.

This study has shown how this approach caused confusion at the start of the Messenger dispute. Government records show how ministers were unsure of how to respond and Shah took this non-intervention as indifference and a lack of support.

Union activists, on the other hand, claimed the union was a victim of an orchestrated campaign of attack by an employer in league with the Government. The NGA leadership had been warning its members to anticipate a coming battle with an employer using the new laws. It felt it was on the Government's hit-list of unions to be brought down. Most of the participants on the NGA side gave evidence of the sense of wider conspiracy against the union. It demonstrates the danger of making

events fit a pre-determined narrative even if the final outcome appears to fit the hypothesis.

Dickinson (1984: 31) shared the view taken by the union that the clause in the law to stop action against non-union firms was authored by the British Printing Industries Federation that was still reeling from its defeat against the NGA in 1980 and eager to restrict the union's tactic of 'blacking' work from non-union sources. He presents the conflict as a premeditated action by the employer, with apparent government backing, to break the union but was unaware of the initial ministerial confusion and hesitation.

Shah was a keen Conservative but had few political connections and no contact with government before the strike began. Much was made of his brief encounter with Thatcher but there is no evidence that this was anything more than proof of his political leanings rather than a conspiracy between them. The mechanisms were in place and the encouragements made for a small employer such to challenge unions but this did not mean that Shah was directly supported by the Government.

### **Role of the state and police in industrial relations**

- What new knowledge can be gleaned from the NGA case as to the role of the state and police in industrial relations?

The Messenger dispute demonstrated the reach of the courts, the fresh resolve and enhanced resources of the police. The small chapel organised a picket of their workplace from the outset of the dispute but it failed to persuade anyone else in Messenger Newspapers to support the strike. The journalists were initially drawn into the dispute but soon opted to work normally. The new law permitted strikers to only picket their direct place of work but Shah's production involved a number of premises, perhaps deliberately. For some months the dispute dragged on with little impact. It wasn't until Shah won court orders against the union that the dispute exploded. In response, the union decided to focus upon a mass blockade of the Messenger printing plant at Warrington, further ignoring the legal restrictions. This



was not a picket to persuade workers to join the strike but an attempt to physically blockade the printing plant to prevent a time-critical product from leaving.

Shah describes feeling beleaguered by government, police and media at the start of the dispute. Reviewing the evidence around the initial period of the dispute he has grounds for such a view. Dubbins believed that the police were deliberately playing a low-key role. Shah took the lack of police presence to be a further demonstration of the lack of establishment support.

The confidential papers seen by this research expose the tension in policy between non-intervention and the over-arching objective of undermining union power. The conflict took ministers and police by surprise and they were reluctant to get drawn into it. The records uncovered by this research show how the police found Shah a difficult and unpredictable character to deal with. Shah credits Andrew Neil, the then editor of the *Sunday Times*, and his local Conservative MP for their lobbying of the Prime Minister and Home Secretary. The union's decision to escalate the mass picket brought it hostile headlines over violent struggles with the police which ministers were eager to exaggerate and condemn the actions.

There was little consideration given to the potential consequences of building a mass picket against TUC advice. The NGA had used the tactic in previous disputes with mixed results<sup>111</sup> and the membership of skilled print workers were not, especially on their own, going to supply sufficient numbers of people to overpower a determined police operation. Since 1983, the tactics of mass protest and their policing have changed significantly including through the miners' strike, anti-Poll Tax actions and climate change protests. The questions these raise are for other researchers to pursue.

The police action to seize and immobilise the union's communications van prompted questions in Parliament and complaints from the union. The evidence from those in close proximity – including the author – show the police lied about their actions on the night but also how the story became exaggerated in the telling by union activists.

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<sup>111</sup> Disputes at Parrett and Neves 1968, Sharman's 1975, TB Foreman 1979,

Interviews with people who attended the largest protest highlight their surprise at police tactics and the level of force used against them. The violent picket-line scenes on the night of the 29/30 November, proved a critical point in the dispute. Lang and Dodkins in *Bad News* (2011) claim the police ordered the arc lights turned off to prevent filming. Interviewees talk of police smashing cameras and shutting down filming. In this pre-mobile phone era, the police had greater control over where and what photographers could film. Footage of baton-wielding police may have presented different images from those taken from behind police lines. There is a gap in the photographic record of that night, the few hours between the immobilising of the communications vehicle and the first van leaving the premises with printed newspapers. This was the time when police charged into the crowd and dispersed people over a wide area. Further research is needed to answer whether this was the result of deliberate police tactic to sabotage and prevent photographers from working or a result of the pace of operations catching people off guard.

The police tactics, equipment and deployment at Warrington showed they had learned the lessons of the 1972 mass picket at the Saltley coke depot in Birmingham when pickets overwhelmed the police and were resolved not to be defeated by weight of numbers (Monks interview 2015).

This thesis does not share the view that the union could have secured a resolution had it mobilised more pickets given greater support from the TUC. The mass picket was perhaps the tactic of last resort but the union had to balance its potential impact with the loss of public opinion. It is clear that the police had reserve capacity to deal with a much larger protest. Attempts to blockade the printing factory failed not because of the Employment Acts or the lack of protesters but due to the robust police response. The decision to call off the picket was inevitable. For Shah, the siege hardened his resistance to the union and helped rally supporters to his cause.

## **Tensions in union decision-making**

- Where did decision-making lie within the NGA between national, branch and chapel levels and were there tensions between them?

The thesis examined the formation and development of the printing craft unions and the central role played by the chapel and local society. Chapter Three reviewed how the union's organisational strength came from its positional power and its collective identity across the craft was not restricted to the individual workplace. It was the need to regulate the assistance to out-of-work members that led to the establishment of the first national typographical union and in its formation the local societies retained a high degree of independence (Musson 1954). As shown in Chapter Seven, this fragmented structure added confusion to the decision-making when dealing with an employer with sites across three different society areas. The tiers of power: chapel, branch and national union were key to encouraging and accommodating high membership participation and democratic oversight. The research, however, considered the differences and tensions between them during a period of conflict and change.

In large newspapers the industrial power was exerted more independently at chapel level. The power of the chapel sometimes superseded that of the national union (Blissett 2013) and this could restrict the authority of the national union to take strategic choices. 'Unofficial' action in a time-critical production process was in the hands of chapel officers despite efforts by the employer and union to constrain it through procedural arrangements. This positional power at chapel level was supplemented by the organisational strength of the union and its capacity to enforce controls through the recruitment process and secondary action. This was largely orchestrated at branch level through its complex federated structure. The union was not a simple hierarchical structure with an oligarchic leadership and these case studies demonstrate a much complex set of relationships than outlined by Michels (1962).

The 1980 campaign conducted by the NGA proved an example of a national leadership determining a strategic approach to achieve substantial advances for its

members and executing an industrial action campaign with imaginative tactics. This was not an action demanded by grass-roots power but one where the leadership had to win over and mobilise membership support for its plans. It did so by relying on the traditional discipline and collective support of the membership. The leadership successfully mobilised members deploying arguments over the unfairness of a stagnating minimum wage rate and the case for a shorter working week in the face of advancing technology. The tactic confirms the basis of Kelly's mobilisation theory which lays stress on the need to exploit a grievance or sense of injustice.

Personalities and micro-politic factors cannot be over-looked as Blisset (2013) believes them often to be. The chief architect of the 1980 campaign was the rising figure of Tony Dubbins, the then Assistant General Secretary. He was a shrewd negotiator and strategist, keen to make his mark in the union ahead of the impending retirement of the General Secretary. The research touches on the tensions between the powerful personalities at the start of the Messenger dispute and how decisions to escalate the dispute were made in an almost ad hoc manner in the haze of drink and passion at a tense conference of union delegates. The thesis agrees with Blisset that in the search for overarching theories to explain events, these factors cannot be ignored.

### **Leadership and rank-and-file tensions**

- Does a constant tension exist between rank-and-file members and their union leaders?

In the 1980 national printing dispute, high levels of membership participation and activist democracy served the union well. The evidence demonstrated a leadership making an assessment of the looming threats to the union and concluding the time was critical to mount an offensive campaign to advance pay and conditions. Such a campaign required a thorough knowledge of the industry, its key employers, other unions as well as levels of likely support at every level. The size, structure and discipline of the NGA allowed its leaders to calculate the potential support for such a

campaign, plan the tactics and assess the risks. The findings contradict those who argue that union leaders are under constant pressure from the rank-and-file and only act when pressured to do so (Darlington 2018, McIllroy 1990).

The 1983 dispute, in contrast, was a defensive action against a small business. The evidence shows a lack of preparedness and risk assessment before either embarking on the strike or the tactics used. The thesis describes how the relationship between the levels within the union were complex and cannot be described in simple rank-and-file/leadership relations. In a union of members in small workplaces, the rank-and-file are the chapel officers, branch delegates and other activists. The decision to escalate the dispute in this way was taken at a critical conference of delegates from the whole union. The research found that raising the stakes in the dispute was not as a result of a considered deliberation at the National Council or even within the leadership team. Passionate speeches during an emotional conference created the momentum that turned the dispute into a pitched battle against Shah and with it the Government's reforms. This was a 'call to arms' that 'bounced' the union into ratcheting up the action.

The activist and branch officer base of the union were mobilised into action and the evidence supports the argument that the leadership had the support of the broader membership. Had the leadership wanted to pursue a different or softer course of action, they would have faced severe internal criticism. The strength of the union's internal democracy therefore restrained the leadership from adopting any variation from its traditional responses to the conduct of such a dispute.

### **Collective identity and sectionalism**

- To what extent was the NGA's strong collective occupational identity and solidarity based on sectionalism and how far was this a constraint in its survival?

The Messenger members had high expectations of the union's ability to tackle their employer. The evidence demonstrates their loyalty to the union was far stronger than to their employer.

Most participants to this research believed that had it not been Shah, it would have been another similar employer soon after and probably in printing. NGA members believed they had to defend long-standing articles of faith for themselves. Their passion for the struggle may have been strong but it was not shared across the wider trade union movement.

Characteristics that gave the union its collective strength proved to be barriers to the NGA in considering alternative strategies in handling the dispute and in facing major industrial change. The practices used by the NGA were so hard-wired into the organisation it proved impossible to change.

Cockburn argued the period brought home to the unions the damage they had inflicted on their own interests by sectionalism (1991: 242). It is true that the divisions between the unions in the industry were exploited by the employers who wanted none of them. It was wider factors around the ability of employers to use new technology to eliminate any form of effective trade unionism and it would be wrong to conclude that sectionalism alone was to blame.

### ***Gender and sectionalism***

The research reviewed the literature around gender, a vital dimension when studying a union with a long legacy of male dominance and female exclusion. By the 1980s women across the workforce, including printing, were increasingly demanding equal access to the jobs and rewards open to men (Bradley 1999). New technology opened up new routes of entry to the industry, bypassing union regulated apprenticeships and training systems. This presented opportunities to be exploited by employers. Shah recruited women to operate his equipment creating a further dividing line with the all-male NGA chapel.

### ***Associational power and sectionalism***

In 1980 the NGA acted almost alone in its pursuit of its campaign objectives, calculating the employer response and largely ignoring the views of other unions. The contrast between the two cases studies demonstrates the relationship between positional and associational power. Given the ability to halt production, the NGA had little need to appeal for wider support for its 1980 campaign. The union in 1983 sought support from activists to join the mass picket and wider assistance from the TUC. Its need for associational power flowed from its diminishing positional strength. But no potential alliance could bring Shah to a resolution and the dispute proved a demonstration of the weakness of associational power.

Union decision-makers were swept along on the rising tide of actions until they faced the ultimate bankruptcy of the union. Appeals for wider industrial action were weakened by the union's legacy of isolation within the trade union movement and divisions within the TUC. The union's leadership refused to recognise the changed circumstances after the 1983 General Election that gave the Conservatives a big mandate. As shown in the testimonies for this study, the leadership and activist base rejected the realignment in the TUC towards some form of accommodation with the new legislation and they hoped that the mood on the TUC General Council would swing behind it in the heat of battle.

Having spent much of its history as an independent, almost isolated, member of the wider trade union movement the new leadership took a strategic decision to position the union within the Left of the TUC. Dubbins could see the increasing need for allies and ensured that the union gave full support to the various TUC calls for action in a manner it failed to do in the 1970s (Gennard 1990). The loss of newspapers proved the most visible impact of these campaigns. But perhaps it was too late to establish the NGA, a small craft union, within the complex world of the TUC after being a semi-detached member for so long.

The main feature of the dispute was to protect the closed shop. Most workers, however, were not covered by such arrangements and much of the media had been running a campaign against the practice. Lloyd (1984: 33) believed that an argument over the closed shop was not one a convincing campaign could be based on. The practice might serve those inside the closed shop but not those outside it. NGA members supported their union's defence of the closed shop but they had no narrative to gain the support of a wider audience.

The Messenger dispute was a last redoubt for the closed shop and secondary action. As such its outcome was a major prize for employers seeking to break a key element in the union's organisational structure. Collective identity, however, is not just formed through organisational structures but through the common bond of workers and their mutual interests. Changing technology has undermined such linkages but not eliminated them and has created new occupational identities.

The NGA was not accustomed to having to make its case to the wider public. In 1980 the national printing dispute garnered little media attention, the short conflict was more or less over before becoming a news story. In stark contrast, the Messenger dispute became the main news of the day for several weeks.

The study concludes that the NGA were poorly equipped to engage in a publicity campaign to back up its cause against Shah. It had not had to defend its practices to the wider public and was unaccustomed to the glare of a largely hostile media. The NGA produced materials to make its case, clumsy at best, racist at worst, using Shah's birth name of 'Salim Jehan Shah'.

Reviewed by this research, the press seemed confused by the strike at first. The *Daily Mail* ran a daily diet dripping with bile against trade union power yet gave a reasonably balanced coverage of the Messenger dispute. Shah believes this to flow from what he saw as the cowardice of the national press to confront the power of the print unions. Perhaps ironically, the *Daily Mail* was also the newspaper that advertised job vacancies within the printing industry and was much read by print workers. The Northcliffe Group that owned the *Daily Mail* also owned the largest group of provincial newspapers. It did not join the group of national newspapers that



sacked union reps who refused to guarantee normal working during the Messenger dispute (Gennard 1990).

National newspaper owners had a very real interest in the outcome of the Messenger dispute but their conflicted role was not straightforward. What is clear that after an initial hesitancy, the main national newspapers saw the value for their interests in Shah's defeat of the NGA. There is no evidence to directly link Fleet Street employers with Shah, with the exception of the contacts between him and Andrew Neil, the then editor of the *Sunday Times*. Neil hated the print unions and despaired at the timidity and weakness of management. He saw Shah as the outsider needed to breach their defences.

The politics of national newspaper ownership were complex and even though employers shared the desire to eliminate union power, their self-interests and short-term demands conflicted with collaborative action. The National Newspapers consistently failed to unite in the face of the unions (Lang and Dodkins 2011). Goodhart and Wintour said: "If solidarity is food and drink to the chapels, it is anathema to management" (1986: 40).

Rather than militant unions eager to take on the Government's employment laws, this study found the Fleet Street chapels were reluctant to get involved and could see greater battles looming for themselves. Dubbins admitted that they stopped work for two days, not as a spontaneous reaction as claimed, but after an argument and instruction from the union's leaders.

### **Contribution to wider debate**

- What contribution do the features outlined above add to the wider debate over the future of trade unions?

It is without doubt that the legal restrictions now placed upon unions, embedded after the 1983 Messenger dispute, have limited the options for union leaders. A range of tactics once deployed to enforce union power has been outlawed, others have become conditional on an extensive matrix of regulation. The 1983 Messenger

dispute highlighted how much the post-1980 employment laws had proscribed union actions and the step-by-step process has continued since then during every Conservative-led administration. This study concludes, however, that the strike was lost due to the NGA's inability to stop production and not directly because of new legislation. To blame the legal framework entirely for the demise of union membership and power would be a flawed conclusion.

The research argues that strong occupational identity and the features that were developed from it helped build unions such as the NGA. These have largely been jettisoned as amalgamations have taken place. This model of union serves workers with a particular and specialist skill or job role. It especially suits those with career occupations where the union can develop or build upon training and member networks. Occupational identity, however, can still be used to support workers in less skilled job roles such as the recent example of the IWGB mobilising delivery riders.<sup>112</sup> The debate over union strategic choice needs to include options to utilise occupational identity and common bonds to fit a modern labour market.

Leaders of unions with a narrow occupational focus have the ability to be more focused and chart a longer-term course developed with the support of grass-roots activists. This can be a double-edged sword as they are vulnerable to structural change or from a short-term crisis given they lack the ability to spread the risk over multiple sectors.

When the traditional methods of industrial action used by the NGA failed, it turned to mobilising support from the wider trade union movement. It had to overcome years of indifference by the union to the workings of the TUC. Coalition-building is not an easy option and brings challenges when unions try to do it as an adjunct to their primary function. Effective coalitions are those developed over a long time with reciprocal benefits. They cannot be switched on and off to suit the short-term interests of a group of union members in conflict with their employer. Coalition

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<sup>112</sup> See <https://iwgb.org.uk>

requires a degree of ideological compromise that union leaders may find unacceptable or unpalatable.

Academic debates over mobilisation (Kelly 1998) focus largely upon recruiting and organising workers towards collective actions. It has given little attention to how best to sustain collective bodies beyond periods of grievance. This research shows that sustained collective strength requires high density membership in the workplace drawn together by a range of benefits and activities and not all dependent upon the relationship with the employer.

Social movement theories (Holgate 2014) make the case for wider community and campaign alliances to bolster union influence. These ideas expand the sense of collective identity beyond the boundaries of the job and the workplace. This requires a strategic choice by union leaders to allocate the necessary time and resources into partnership working and needs relationship-building and policy compromises. This research has shown how a sectionalist union, proud of its self-reliance, found such activities hard to progress and opted to pursue amalgamation as the strategy for survival.

Since the time of these case studies the printing industry has shrunk and trade union membership diminished. There is now little collective bargaining and membership density well below the days of the closed shop (Dawson 2014). Joining a much larger union promised a stronger political influence, in part to repeal the laws set in motion in 1980<sup>113</sup>. But membership has fallen and government measures to tighten trade union actions continues.

### **In conclusion**

The research highlights the pivotal period when union's strategy to resist new restrictive laws through outright opposition was defeated. The new legislation reduced the union capacity to act in the interests of their members in ways they had

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<sup>113</sup> Amalgamation proposals for the formation of GPMU, Amicus and Unite

traditionally operated and were expected. Unions now search for methods to restore their position and some believe renewal can only come if the employment laws are repealed. This research, however, argues that a proposition that the employment laws are the main cause of decline is flawed and will lead unions to rely on political remedies without success.

The rhetoric of challenging or opposing unfair trade union laws is still heard and the lessons of this research are worthy of consideration when this course of action is raised. Some activists today know little of the experience of the time when outright repudiation of the law was the union stance. This study looks afresh at this period and draws valuable lessons relevant today.

The hard truth for the NGA was that its positional power had been removed by changing technology and the ability of an employer to recruit non-union workers. The dispute demonstrated the weakness of associational power with the failure of alliance-building inside the TUC to bring any weight to bear on the employer.

The lessons drawn from this study provide a useful contribution to the debate over union renewal and whether sufficient attention has been paid to the value of strong collective identity built through shared occupational interests and the notion of social capital unionism that flows from it.

WORD COUNT: **84,598** including footnotes and source credits

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## APENDIX ONE

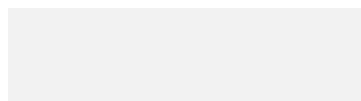
Correspondence in regard to access right to NGA records – some copies in the chain are missing



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### Access to NGA Records

Further to your letter of 9<sup>th</sup> March I am writing to enquire if any progress has been made in allowing me access to the archives. I hope to complete my dissertation shortly and it would be a shame if I cannot see the records of my own union when I have access to confidential government materials from the same period.

Please let me know if there is anything the University or I can do to help unlock these records for my research.

Best wishes

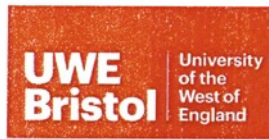
Nigel Costley

cc Stephanie Tailby UWE

Church House, Church Road, Filton, Bristol BS34 7BD  
telephone: 0117 947 0521 [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

Regional Secretary: *Nigel Costley* General Secretary: *Frances O'Grady*





Howard Beckett  
Director, Unite Legal  
Services  
Unite  
Unite House  
128 Theobald's Road  
Holborn  
London WC1X 8TN

Stephanie Tailby  
Professor of Employment Relations  
Faculty of Business & Law  
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UK

Tel +44 (0)117 93283477

[Stephanie.Tailby@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Stephanie.Tailby@uwe.ac.uk)

22 December 2016

Dear Howard Beckett

**Access to NGA Records, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick**

Nigel Costley, Regional Secretary of the South West TUC, is studying for a PhD at the University of the West of England. I am his Director of Studies, supervising his doctoral research together with Prof Sian Moore, University of Greenwich and Dr Mike Richardson, University of the West of England.

Nigel's thesis concerns the issue of trade union strategy, explored through analysis of the 1983 Stockport Messenger dispute. He has consulted relevant secondary sources and completed a set of in-depth, qualitative interviews with key figures involved in the dispute. In addition, he has been seeking (over some period of time) access to examine the National Graphical Association (NGA) records which are held at the University of Warwick's Modern Records Centre (MRC). He is interested in particular in the Executive Committee minutes of 1979-85.

Correspondence with Jim Mowatt at Unite (and his with the MRC) has revealed that these particular records may be among the NGA MRC files that have been archived under a 70-year 'lock down'.

I am writing to ask whether there are actions that can be taken to lift the 'lock down' and provide Nigel with access to the files.

These may or may not yield important new insight into the Messenger dispute and NGA policy. The point, however, is that academic examiners of Nigel's thesis will expect relevant archives to have been searched. If that has not been achieved, they will expect explanation in the thesis of the reasons.

Registered address: University of the West of England, Bristol Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane,  
Bristol BS16 1QY, UK  
Vice-Chancellor, President and Chief Executive Officer, Professor Steven West



Nigel has invested a great deal of effort in his doctoral studies. His ambition is straightforward: to contribute an analysis that clearly demonstrates the standards of academic rigour required for the award of PhD. I am sure he would be happy to discuss with you or others at Unite any insights gained from the NGA records prior to their inclusion in his thesis.

I hope very much that it will be possible to achieve for Nigel the access to the Union archives that he is seeking.

Many thanks for the assistance you are able to provide.

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Tailby  
**Prof Employment Relations**  
**Faculty of Business & Law**  
**University of the West of England**

cc. Tony Burke, Ged Dempsey, Jim Mowatt

Registered address: University of the West of England, Bristol Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane,  
Bristol BS16 1QY, UK  
Vice-Chancellor, President and Chief Executive Officer, Professor Steven West

Unite House  
128 Theobald's Road  
London WC1X 8TN

Tel: 020 7611 2500  
Fax: 020 7611 2555



**CENTRAL OFFICE**

Your Ref:  
Our Ref: **JM/JA**  
Date: **1 November 2016**  
Contact: **Joyce Ajimotokan**  
Extension: **2628**

Mr Nigel Costley

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dear Nigel,".

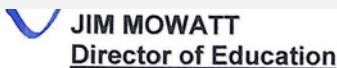
**ACCESS TO NGA RECORDS**

As you know, I progressed this to the University of Warwick Modern Records Centre and they explained that some of the files had been archived on a 70 year lock-down. You will also recollect that I sent Stephanie Tailby a letter dated 11 March explaining that the Union is attempting to have this 70 year rule lifted. Indeed Tony Burke our Assistant General Secretary and our Executive Councillor from the print industry, Ged Dempsey were "pincering our Legal Department to permit access". Indeed we then reminded our Legal Department, Howard Beckett in an e-mail dated 17 March, which enclosed Stephanie's letter of the 9 March.

I will copy this correspondence on to Howard again, and to Tony and Ged, copying in your letter dated 27 October which I received today.

I think it is obvious, Nigel, the ball was out of my court and it's clearly on Howard's desk. Howard is a great colleague and comrade and I am sure he will do everything he can to get you access.

Yours sincerely,

A blue ink signature of Jim Mowatt, consisting of a stylized 'J' followed by the name "JIM MOWATT".

**JIM MOWATT**  
**Director of Education**

Enc.

cc. Tony Burke, Ged Dempsey, Howard Beckett

t&g archives warwick/2016/nigel costley

Len McCluskey  
General Secretary

[www.unitetheunion.org](http://www.unitetheunion.org)

## APENDIX TWO

### **Minutes of meetings used in the research**

TUC Conference of Executives of Affiliated Unions, Wembley, 5 April 1982

Minutes of conference

Report by General Council to be adopted

NGA National Council 1-2 April 1980

Account of wage negotiations

Copies of letters from SLADE and SOGAT regarding dispute

NGA Special National Council 24 April 1980

Account of wage negotiations and national dispute

NGA National Council 6-9 May 1980

Account of wage negotiations and national dispute

Copies of letters from NATSOPA and SOGAT regarding dispute

NGA Special National Council 13 May 1980

Copy of circular to all branches regarding settlement with Newspaper Society

Copy of circular to all branches regarding BPIF dispute

Copy of letter from BPIF to all its members regarding dispute

Copy of notice calling on artists not to pay dispute levy

NGA Delegate Meeting From 27 June 1982

Verbatim report including report of 1980 BPIF National Wage Agreement, trade union legislation, work by-passing the composing room and address by Len Murray TUC General Secretary

NGA Women's Participation Committee 3 March 1983

Megan Dobney elected Chair

NGA Work By-Passing the Composing Room Committee 17 March 1983

Review policy, evidence from US

TUC Printing Committee – Free Newspapers March 1983

Review of growth in free papers, Messenger News mentioned

NGA National Council May 1983

Warning of pending dispute with Messenger Newspapers

Report of meeting between officers and Shah of 16 May

Report of meeting with Messengers members 29 April

SOGAT Delegate Conference May 1983

Verbatim report including motion on NGA encroachment on SOGAT areas of work

NGA Executive 13 June

Report on Messenger dispute – endorsement of dispute pay

NGA National Council 29-30 June 1983

Report on Messenger dispute

Copies of correspondence with Shah

Report from Stockport Graphical Society from Messenger chapel meeting

Motion from Liverpool Graphical Society on trade union laws

NGA National Council 10-11 August 1983

Report on Messenger dispute, Reed to dispose of shareholding, writ from Messenger, agreed to seek TUC advice, report on new laws, agreed to maintain opposition

NGA Executive 1 September 1983

Report on Messenger dispute, ACAS talks breakdown, doubts over TUC support

Confidential report on first meeting on amalgamation talks with SOGAT

TUC Annual Congress September 1983

Verbatim minutes

TUC Annual Report 1983

NGA National Council 21-22 September

Report on Messenger dispute, writ on NUJ

Tony Dubbins declared General Secretary Elect

Financial Report

Report on relations with Newspaper Society, Project Breakthrough, rise in free newspapers

NGA National Council 13 October 1983

Report on Messenger dispute

NGA National Council 3-4 November 1983

Report on Messenger dispute

NGA Special Delegate Meeting 5-6 November 1983

Verbatim report including call for support on Messenger picket-line

NGA, NUJ and SOGAT Organising Committee

Leaflet to welcome people to Messenger demonstrations

Notice regarding strike-breakers at Messenger and appeal for support

TUC Employment Policy and Organisation Committee 21 November 1983

- Debate over support for NGA in Messenger Dispute

NGA Special National Council 22 November 1983

- Report on Messenger dispute
- Draft agreement
- Notes of legal judgement regarding Messengers Newspapers
- Letter of concern from Manchester Graphical Society
- North West Regional Council of the TUC: letter of support
- Copy of legal advice from Kershaw
- Various messages and motions of support
- Copy of TUC Press Statement

Maps of Messenger Newspaper plant in Warrington

Newsletter Dispute Extra – call for mass picket support

TUC General Council 23 November 1983

- Report on NGA Messenger dispute

TUC Employment Policy and Organisation Committee 28-29 November 1983

- Debate over support for NGA in Messenger Dispute

TUC Employment Policy and Organisation Committee 2 December 1983

- Debate over support for NGA in Messenger Dispute

TUC General Council 2 December 1983

- Statement on Messenger dispute

NGA Special National Council 2 December 1983

- Report on Messenger dispute

SOGAT Bristol Branch Committee 5 December 1983

- Motion of support for NGA and details of coaches to the picket

NGA National Council 10 December 1983

- Report on Messenger dispute
- Circular to all branches on Messenger dispute
- NGA Press Statements

Merseyside Trade Union and Labour Campaign Committee

- Appeal for financial support for those facing fines over Messenger picket

TUC Employment Policy and Organisation Committee 12 December 1983

- Agreed to give support to NGA, later denounced by General Secretary

NGA National Council 13 December 1983

Report on Messenger dispute  
Legal advice on dispute  
TUC General Council 14 December 1983  
TUC Press Statement  
NGA National Council 15 December 1983  
Report on Messenger dispute  
NGA leaflet 'Solidarity not Sympathy' critic of TUC position  
NGA – PRINT journal, January 1984  
TUC Employment Policy and Organisation Committee 6 January 1984  
Report on Messenger dispute  
SOGAT Bristol Branch Committee 9 January 1984  
Note of financial support to NGA  
NGA National Council 18-19 January 1984  
Report on Messenger dispute  
TUC circular regarding TUC Strategy  
NGA National Council March 1984  
Report by Tony Dubbins on New Technology  
NGA National Council 24 April 1984  
Notice of expulsions of Messenger Newspapers' management including Eddy Shah  
SOGAT Delegate Conference May 1984  
Verbatim report including motion on new technology, NGA and Messenger dispute  
TUC Annual Congress September 1984  
Verbatim minutes  
TUC Annual Report 1984 including account of NGA Messenger Newspapers dispute  
NGA Delegate Meeting 5-9 November 1984  
Verbatim report including Messenger Newspapers

APPENDIX THREE

## Conservative Party archives

Confidential papers used in this study, held at the Bodleian Library Oxford, now available to researchers following the '30-year-rule- and an application process.

Type	Date	From	To	Subject
Report	30.6.77	Conservative Research Dept.	Economic Reconstruction Group	Nationalised Industries Policy Group: 'Ridley Plan
Briefing	19.1.78	Conservative Research Dept.		Stepping Stones Programme
Memo	4.4.78			What socialism really means – need to recalibrate
Memo	17.1.79	Utley, Peter Daily Telegraph	Howarth, Alan	Strikes in essential industries
Report	April 79	Opinion Research Centre	Conservative Central Office	Attitudes of electorate to trade unions
News-cutting	n/d	Sunday Times		Opposition to closed shop
News-cutting	9.7.79	The Sun		Editorial prompting union reform
Notes of meeting	25.7.79	Centre for Policy Studies		Trade union finances
Memo	26.7.79	Conservative Research Dept.		Trade union finances
Briefing	13.8.79	Conservative Research Dept.		Role and responsibilities of trade unions
Memo	22.2.80	Utley, Peter Daily Telegraph	Howarth, Alan	Strikes in essential industries
Memo	25.2.80	Shipley, Peter Conservative Research Dept.	Howarth, Alan	Strikes in essential industries
Memo	26.3.80	Conservative Research Dept.		Green Paper

				Trade unions and their members
Memo	30.7.80	Shipley, Peter Conservative Research Dept.	Howarth, Alan	The state of the unions
Transcript	n/d			Shrewsbury pickets Evidence at trial
Briefing	n/d			List of links between unions and the USSR
Briefing	n/d			Stepping Stones Communications Programme to promote aversion to Labour-trade unions
Note	n/d	Hoskyns, John		Policies to outflank union leaders
Briefing	25.1.82	Conservative Research Dept.		Employment situation
Briefing	1982	Conservative Research Dept.		1982 Employment Bill
Briefing	14.3.83	Conservative Research Dept.		Green Paper Democracy in Trade Unions
Briefing	8.11.83	Conservative Research Dept.	Conservative MPs	Government intervention in trade union affairs Closed shop
Briefing	1.12.83	Conservative Research Dept.		Notes on NGA Dispute
Briefing	8.11.83	Conservative Research Dept.		Trade Union Bill
Briefing	11.5.84	Conservative Research Dept.		Trade Union Bill



APENDIX FOUR

## Internal government documents

Policing of Warrington Messenger Dispute

In response to request under the Freedom of Information Act the following documents were released:

Type	Date	From	To	Subject	Comments
Letter	4.2.80	Nott, John, SoS, Dept of Trade	Prior, James SoS Employment	Trade union immunities	Hand- written note from PM seeking tighter law
Letter	20.10.80	Nott, John, SoS, Dept of Trade	Prior, James SoS Employment	Trade union immunities	
Note	9.11.83	Parry, R MP	Home Secretary	Injuries sustained by pickets	
Memo	23.11.83	Redacted, F4 Division	Redacted	Picketing: Warrington Summary of conversations with police	
Note	Nd		Prior, James SoS Employment	Draft statement on dispute to PNQ from Montgomery MP	
Hansard	23.11.83			Statement on dispute to PNQ from Montgomery MP	
Memo	24.11.83	Redacted, F4 Division Home Office	Redacted	Picketing: Warrington	
Memo	Nd		Home Secretary	Police powers and pickets Draft reply to Question	
Memo	24.11.83	Robin Harris Private Office, Employment	Prior, James SoS Employment	Information from IoD inc allegations of petrol bombs	

Memo	24.11.83	Redacted, F4 Division	Redacted	Picketing "other sources" "do not trust Shah"	
Memo	24.11.83	Redacted, Principal Private Secretary Home Office	Redacted, Dept of Employment	SoS Employment's failure to consult	Note about subsequent phone call between ministers
Memo	25.11.83	Dept Chief Constable Cheshire Const.	Redacted, Home Office F4 Division	Report on dispute	
Memo	25.11.83	Redacted, Private Secretary	Redacted	Record of phone call with Montgomery MP over Shah's concerns	
Memo	28.11.83	Redacted, Principle Private Secretary	Redacted	Picketing: Draft letter to IoD 'strengthening' it and difficulties with Chief Const.	
Memo	28.11.83	Redacted	Redacted Home Office	Final letter to IoD listing police powers	
Letter	28.11.83	Principle Private Secretary SoS Employment	Andrew Turnbull Private Secretary Prime Minister	Messenger Dispute	
Memo	28.11.83	Redacted	Redacted, Principle Private Secretary Home Office	Picketing Warning Chief Constable if things went badly	
Memo	29.11.83	Robin Harris Private Office, Employment	SoS	Picketing Discussing turning back coaches	News cuttings from Morning Star
Note	29.11.83	anonymous	anonymous	Assessment of picket 29/30.11.83:	

				2,000 pickets, 850 officers deployed	
Memo	29.11.83	Redacted, Home Office F4 Division	Redacted	Picketing	
Memo	29.11.83	Redacted, Home Office F4 Division	Mr Taylor Dept Employment	PNQ	
Note	29.11.83	Office of SoS Employment		Draft statement to House	
Memo	29.11.83	Redacted, Principle Private Secretary Home Office	Redacted	Reference to making letter to IoD public and turning back coaches	
Note	30.11.83	Home Office		Draft statement by Home Secretary to House	
Hansard	30.11.83			Statement by Home Secretary to House	
Note	30.11.83	anonymous		Transcript of interview with Robin Day and Joe Wade, World at One	
Telex	30.11.83	anonymous		Account of comments made by MPs at Parliamentary Labour Party meeting	
Letter	1.12.83	Parry, Robert MP	Gummer, John Selwyn Minister of State Employment	Police handling of picket and NGA van	Copies of letters from Liverpool NGA
Letter	1.12.83	Clay, Robert MP Skinner, Denis MP	Home Secretary	Police handling of picket and NGA van	
Letter	2.12.83	Redacted, Principle Private Secretary	Andrew Turnbull Private Secretary	Messenger Dispute Concerns over ministers	

			Prime Minister	making prejudicial comments	
Memo	2.12.83	Robin Harris Private Office, Employment	SoS Employment	"marker" to review dispute	
Memo	2.12.83	Redacted Private Secretary	Redacted	Concerns over Shah's safety	
Memo	2.12.83	Redacted Private Secretary	Redacted	Prosecution for incitement	
Memo	6.12.83	Redacted	Graham D Deputy Chief Constable, Cheshire Police	Letters from MPs	
Memo	7.12.83	SoS Employment	Prime Minister	Messenger dispute report urging no ministerial comments	
Letter	9.12.83	Shaw, JB Principle Private Secretary Dept of Employment	Andrew Turnbull Private Secretary Prime Minister	Messenger dispute report	
Memo	12.12.83	Lord Elton	SoS	Payment of pickets	
Memo	12.12.83	Redacted Home Office	David Barclay	Intercepting coaches	
Memo	12.12.83	Redacted F4 Division, Home Office	Redacted	Report on picket	
Memo	12.12.83	Redacted F4 Division, Home Office	Redacted Dept Employment	Notes for PNQs	
Letter	12.12.83	Chief Constable Cheshire Police	Redacted Home Office	Letter from MPs: Parry, Robert Clay R Nellist, Dave	
Memo	13.12.83	Redacted Private Secretary	Redacted	Prosecution for incitement	

		Home Office			
Memo	14.12.83	Redacted Private Secretary Home Office	Redacted Lord Elton's office	Prosecution for incitement	
Note	Nd	anonymous		Draft reply re: Prosecution for incitement	
Memo	14.12.83	Redacted F4 Division, Home Office	Redacted	Reports of Warrington Rally	
Letter	15.12.83	Gummer, John Selwyn Minister of State Employment	Parry, Robert MP	Referring letter to Home Office	
Report	Nd	anonymous		Briefing on government policy on the dispute	
Memo	5.1.84	Redacted Home Office	Graham D Deputy Chief Constable, Cheshire Police	Seeking reply to question from Leigh, Edward MP about non- UK citizens arrested	
Memo	Jan 1984	Redacted Home Office	Graham D Deputy Chief Constable, Cheshire Police	Proceeding for incitement	Copy of circular from Newcastle NGA urging pickets with £10 allowance
Memo	5.1.84	Chief Constable Cheshire Police	Redacted F4 Division, Home Office	Cost of policing of dispute	
Letter	12.1.84	Chief Constable Cheshire Police	F4 Division, Home Office	Report of arrests at Messenger	
Note	16.1.83	Redacted F4 Division Home Office	Redacted	Complaint over policing of NGA's control van	

Memo	17.1.84	Redacted F4 Division Home Office	Redacted	Draft reply to Clay, Robert MP Skinner, Denis MP re NGA van	
Letter	18.1.84	Douglas Hurd Minister of State Home Office	Parry, Robert MP	Police handling of picketing	

APPENDIX FIVE

## News coverage of the Messenger dispute

Headlines

Sources: British Library, Morning Star, author's own archive

21.9.83

*Morning Star*

New print union leader pledges anti-Tory fight

23.9.83

*Morning Star*

NGA decides to fight on at Stockport

30.9.83

*Morning Star*

NGA backs Stockport fight

17.11.83

*The Times*

Heavy fines imposed on Warrington pickets

18.11.83

*The Times*

Newspaper dispute criticized

22.11.83

*The Times*

Benefactor may pay NGA fine

*Morning Star*

Front page: TUC throws weight behind printworkers

23.11.83

*Daily Mail*

Pickets clash with police

*The Sun*

Jail me if you dare storms union boss

*Morning Star*

Front page: Printworkers refuse to pay court fine

24.11.83

*Daily Mail*

Peace moves in pickets dispute

*The Sun*

Minister slams fury on picket line

Editorial criticising minister – we still have the tyranny of the closed shop

*Morning Star*

Front page: Printworkers' big challenge to Thatcher  
Editorial  
Break the chains on the unions  
Anger flares on the picket line  
MPs blast paper's 'bully-boy' boss  
Grunwick of the North

25.11.83

*Daily Mail*

Print Chief's warning  
Six Fleet Street papers sack printers

*The Sun*

Injured picket is held in cell

*Gloucester Citizen*

Assets of union siezed

*Militant* – special issue – defend the print workers

Front page: Unite! Defeat Tory laws  
The battle lines are drawn  
Join the picket line  
Step up the action

*Morning Star*

Front page: Printworkers give national strike warning  
Police kept picket in agony

28.11.83

*Daily Mail*

Front page: NGA crisis talks fail and TUC steps in

*The Sun*

Siege showdown as picket army defy law  
Glad we're back

*Evening Post* – Voice of the West

Print dispute: union has its say – letter from J Coles NGA FoC

*Morning Star*

Front page: Back the printworkers  
Big lock-out halts six newspapers  
Stand firm on dispute TUC is told  
Let's ensure Messenger gets message  
It's now defence of all unions  
Lobby to urge TUC: don't pay court fines

29.11.83

*Daily Mail*

Sun and Times not appearing today  
Sacked printers called back  
"I'm not giving up – law is my only defence and I'll use it" – Shah

*Morning Star*

Front page: Fleet Street bosses climb down



All roads lead to Messenger demo  
Editorial: Now for the Stockport Six  
Kinnock blames Tory laws  
Attack on NGA 'clear warning'  
Enthusiastic response to Warrington call

30.11.83

*BBC World at One*

Interview Robin Day with Joe Wade - transcript

*Daily Mail*

Front page: 4,000 pickets defy the law  
The phoney war is over  
Inside siege plant . . . bunks, videos, a freezer full of food  
Pickets and police gather

*Daily Mirror*

Showdown – injuries mount as thousands join print demo

*The Sun*

“This union used its muscle to try to destroy the company by force  
Union Chief hits at Shah  
Think again, says Tebbit

*The Times*

TUC throws its weight behind print union  
Apology for non-appearance

*Daily Telegraph*

Midnight Siege at Warrington  
2,000 police in Shah fight

*The Guardian*

Police confront massed picket at print plant

*Financial Times*

Pressure mounts on all parties in Messenger dispute

*Gloucester Citizen*

Local printer knocked unconscious

*Morning Star*

Front page: Defend the Stockport Six  
Violence to pickets – the grim record  
Employer's confrontation course  
Press bosses join court attack  
Protesters face barricaded plant

1.12.83

*The Times*

Pickets return and defy threat of more court action  
Brittan condemns picket violence as organised anarchy

*Daily Mail*

Front page: New clash as pickets mass again  
Kinnock is taunted: condemn the union  
The darkest hour on Winwick Quay

*The Sun*

Biggest demo yet is called  
A night of nerves inside the stainless steel fortress  
Outsiders are blamed for the violence  
Editorial: Mob rule of the rule of law?

*Daily Telegraph*

Editorial: Above the battle

*Financial Times*

Police learn the less of facing up to mass picketing

*Morning Star*

Front page: Tory Thuggery  
Police line-up to back bass  
Police brutality denounced by Labour left  
Fleet Street bosses win court banning  
Hundreds besiege plant  
Police violence at Warrington  
Chanting riot police wade into demo  
Print union asks TUC for urgent practical support  
Editorial: Defend the movement

2.12.83

*Daily Mail*

Front page: On-Off bid for peace  
How Maggie met Shah

*The Sun*

Kinnock lashes at Maggie in NGA row

*The Times*

Reasonable men of the NGA being used  
Role of Official Solicitor

*Morning Star*

Front page: Unions rally around NGA  
Journalists defy High Court  
PM savaged on Shah meeting  
Build-up underway for next mass picket  
Pickets chained together  
Judge with long anti-union record  
Editorial: Mobilise for massive picket

3.12.83

*Daily Mail*

Peace talks called in print truce

*The Sun*

Print truce as NGA calls of picketing

*The Times*

Sequestrators' questions must be answered

4 12.83

*Sunday Times*

Battle of Warrington

5.12.83

*Daily Mail*

Attack on pickets draws a blank

7.12.83

*The Times*

ACAS talks fail to produce agreement

9.12.83

*Socialist Action*

Front page: NGA must win!

It's time to start fighting

The threat to the NGA

NUJ defy court

It's time for the TUC to pay its debts

Thatcher's boot-boys

Tebbits law: catch 22 for the unions

What Thatcher has in store

The law against trade unions

Injunctions galore!

Editorial: Labour and the law

*Militant*

Front page: NGA Messenger dispute: drawing the balance sheet

What the TUC should have done

On the Warrington picket line

Police tactics to blame for violence

Liverpool NGA rally

Class, the press and the law

Defend the closed shop

Who owns the press?

Defend our unions

*Gloucester Citizen*

Judge orders print union to pay £1/2 million

10.12.83

*Daily Mail*

Front page: Court strips NGA of £675,000

*The Sun*

Front page: £525,000 What now as record fines hit the NGA?

12.12.83

*The Sun*

General Strike threat by the NGA

*Gloucester Citizen*

Papers to be hit

13.12.83

*Daily Mail*

Front page: TUC split over print strike

*The Sun*

Scrap strike, judge orders print union  
Why you may not get *The Sun* tomorrow

14.12.83

*Daily Mail*

Murray's big test on NGA strike call  
Your newspaper reprieved

*The Sun*

TUC row as print men call off the big strike

*Granada Reports*

Film report

29.12.83

*The Times*

BBC poll 'not rigged' – Shah in second place

January 1984

*Print* – the NGA journal

Front page: The battle goes on

February 1984

*Marxism Today*

The unions: is there life after Warrington?

June 1986

*Somerset Clarion*

Warrington – where Wapping began

## Interviews

**Attwill, Steve** Unite Regional Organiser was GPMU and NGA official, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed 12.2019

**Burke, Tony** Unite Assistant General Secretary, was President Stockport NGA Branch at the time of the dispute. 18.2.2014

**Coop, Owen** was West Pennine Graphical Society Branch Secretary, NGA National Councilor, Unite National Officer. Interviewed 14.2.2020

**Dobney, Megan** Southern and Eastern Region TUC, formerly NGA and GPMU activist, Mother of the Chapel and National Council member, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed 13.8.2016

**Dubbins, Tony** was NGA Assistant General Secretary, General Secretary, GPMU General Secretary and Unite Assistant General Secretary Interviewed 17.8.2017

**Harris, Peter** was NGA South West and South Wales Assistant Regional Secretary Interviewed 9.2019

**Field, Anne** was SOGAT, GPMU and Unite Officer, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed 28.8.2016

**Grindley, Mike** Chair of the GCHQ unions and one of the dismissed trade unionists. Interviewed 2014

**Manning, Alan** was TUC North West Regional Secretary Interviewed 8.2018

**Monks, Lord John** was TUC official in charge of the Committee responsible for industrial action support in 1983, was TUC General Secretary. Interviewed 12.3.2015

**Newis, Chris** was NGA National Council member. Interviewed 3.12.2017

**Parkinson, Brendan** Unison officer, was NGA activist, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed 9.7.2015

**Royston, Alan** was Father of the Chapel at Messenger Group Newspapers and one of the 'Stockport Six' sacked NGA members. Interviewed 2014

**Scott, Vince** was NGA activist, joined Messenger Group picket. Interviewed  
24.6.2015

**Shah, Eddy** was Managing Director of Messenger Group Newspapers. Interviewed  
7.4.2015

**Slater, John** was South Wales NGA Branch Secretary. Interviewed 9.2019

**Williams, Ray** was Liverpool NGA Branch Secretary, organised pickets, Messenger  
Group was GPMU President. Interviewed 4.2014

Plus a number of anonymous participants

APPENDIX SEVEN

A palette of mobilising, servicing and organising models

