

The pattern of unionism is changing. Once it was concentrated in the heartlands. Now it is more widely dispersed. Things are now very different.

Mapping out the Unions

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THERE WERE DEFINITE geographical bases to the trade union movement in Britain in the immediate postwar years. To a large extent the pattern reflected the geography of industry. It was, quite clearly, a trade union movement based in a capitalism which was overwhelmingly urban and where different parts of the country retained their individual industrial specialisms. It was a pattern, too, which provided quite particular conditions for union organisation.

During the period of postwar growth, through to the end of the 1950s, the broad outline of this geography was largely reinforced. But since then it has begun to change quite radically. Over the last 20 years major shifts have taken place. While some unions have seen substantial growth in new parts of the country, there has also been massive decline in many of the old areas of strength — a decline which has been dramatically reinforced over the last five years.

Today what is emerging is a more widely-distributed geography of union membership, both overall and within individual unions. We hear a lot about the decline of the heartlands of the trade union movement, and it has been happening. There has also been decentralisation to new areas. And there has been growth in new, more widely-dispersed trade unions.

What we present in this article is some evidence of these changes in the geography of trade unionism in Britain. Our evidence is tentative in the sense that we have not looked at every union, though we believe we have looked at a representative selection.¹ But if the patterns which are emerging so far are in any way general, then they are very significant.

At the broadest level what they imply is a major shift in local conditions of organisation. The new areas and regions are different from the old. Moreover the very process of change can itself present difficulties, as old-established centres of organisation become more marginal, at least in numerical terms, to a union's strength, and new areas begin to assert their increased

weight. What is more, the membership in the new areas is being built up, not in a period of postwar boom, but in a period of restructuring and retrenchment. Put all this together with the other changes which are going on within the unions — shifts in the balance between unions, shifts in the balance of skills and industries, and shifts in gender composition — and one can understand feelings of uncertainty, even a loss of identity. We may mourn or celebrate the changes, but they are certainly a lot to cope with. The purpose of this article is simply to provide some evidence about one aspect of this transformation.

THE DECLINE OF THE HEARTLANDS

In the immediate postwar years, then, trade union membership in Britain was concentrated in the cities and in particular regions of industrial concentration. Many individual unions were overwhelmingly based in just one or two parts of the country. In particular this was true of unions organised in specific industries. In 1951 nearly half of NUTGW's (National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers) membership was in London, Leicester and Manchester, half of NUFLAT's (National Union of Footwear and Leather Allied Trades) members in the shoe industry were in the East Midlands, more than half of GMBATU (General Municipal Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union) was along the Clyde, the Tyne-Tees and in London, and three quarters of the NUHKW (National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Workers) were in the Nottingham and Leicester area. Some unions were even more concentrated into particular localities: the Association of Textile Workers (ATW), for instance, was exclusively confined to the North West of England. The NUM, of course was synonymous with the coalfields.

These are all unions which organised in specific industrial sectors, and their geography simply mirrored that of the industries in which they were based. But other unions, even though they might

spread across much of manufacturing industry, were still overwhelmingly concentrated in the main areas of nineteenth and early twentieth century British capitalism. The AUEW (engineering section, and its forebears) is a classic example. In this earlier period half its members were in five areas: London, Lancashire, Birmingham-Coventry, South Wales and the Glasgow-Paisley area.

It is these geographical bases that we have termed the unions' 'heartlands'. They varied between unions. In some parts of the country a single union might organise most trade unionists — the coal and textile areas are the most obvious examples. But in other places the heartlands of the different unions overlapped to form bases of trade unionism more generally — above all this was true of the cities. Since the 1960s all these varied heartlands have, in one way or another, been seriously eroded.

In part this dramatic overall loss reflects the decline in total membership of unions which were almost entirely confined to particular areas. But it is also the result of differential patterns of loss and gain. What is striking about the changing geography of membership in these unions is that it is their old bases which have seen the greatest proportional loss of membership. The timing has varied considerably between

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unions, but overall the pattern is clear. Figure 1 shows the geography of loss and gain over 30 years for the garment workers; and the same tendency to a flattening out of membership between different areas is repeated in a whole range of other unions. In the AUEW, for instance, the shift in balance has been quite dramatic. In 1951, the union had over 3,500 more members in

We would like to thank the many trade union officials and members who provided us with information and guided us through the pitfalls of interpretation.

its old base areas (London, Lancashire, Birmingham/Coventry, South Wales and Glasgow/Paisley) than in the rest of the country; by 1979 these areas had 120,000 fewer members than what had once been the union's periphery. Moreover this shift has been dramatically reinforced through differential patterns of decline since 1979. Between 1979 and 1981, total membership of the AUEW fell by 17%, but the decline in its heartland areas was 22%.

But even in the earlier postwar period not all unions were so tightly defined spatially. General unions, such as the GMWU, and unions more directly related to population distribution (mainly service sector unions such as USDAW) had much more widely dispersed geographies of membership. To the extent that their members *were* clustered, though, they were again in the cities, thereby adding to the urban element of the concentration of the union movement as a whole. What is fascinating is that trends even within these unions are reinforcing the tendency towards a more dispersed geography. For even here membership is becoming more dispersed. In 1961, 28% of the GMWU's membership was in the urban areas of the North West and its London and Eastern region and only 20% was in the whole of the North and Scotland. By 1979 these magnitudes had been almost reversed. A similar shift happened within USDAW.

So one of the things which the trade union movement is having to cope with is the absolute and relative decline of many of the geographical areas which used to be the bases of its strength. In itself this is some

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kind of loss of identity, of history.

By no means all of the areas of numerical strength, of course, were areas of militancy, still less of political radicalism. The dominance of localities by single industries and single unions can as easily lead to paternalism and class complicity (and concepts of the economy of 'our region') as to independent union strength. But some of them were the geographical heart, symbolically and organisationally, of the movement. In different ways this has been true of some of the coalfields, and of the complex of car-industry-related unions in the Midlands. Different again have been the cities. Tony Lane has written of the rich texture and diversity of the network of

unions which made the cities so good for (certain forms of) organisation.² And, inevitably, because they were home to so many of these unions, it is the cities which have been hit particularly hard. As ever, the process has been differentiated. The Birmingham area remained relatively buoyant until the late 70s when the manufacturing union base of many other cities had been rocking for years. Its present decline is very much a phenomenon of Thatcherism. If one city stands out as having suffered from declines in almost all these unions, it is London. The timing and rate of decline has varied between unions, but the combined effect is startling. And (it is getting tedious repeating the point) since 1979 the collapse has been disastrous.

WHY HAS IT HAPPENED?

So what lies behind these enormous post-war changes in the geography of these unions? To some extent the shifts reflect organisational changes within the unions themselves. There have been mergers and amalgamations, and changes in recruitment strategies. But more importantly there have been massive changes in the sectoral composition, technology and geographical organisation of industry itself. These changes have been complex and multifarious but, in order to get a broad picture of what has been happening, we have identified three crucial components.

The decline of older industries

First, there has been straightforward industrial decline. It has hit different sectors and unions at different times as the deindustrialisation of Britain has spread through successive generations of industry. Among the first to decline were old labour intensive, and characteristically female-employing, consumer goods industries. Increasing imports and a wider international reorganisation of production had dramatic effects on the clothing, shoe, and textile industries and consequently on NUTGW, NUFLAT and the ATW.

The decline of other industries, for instance engineering, began in the 60s and 70s, taking with it sizeable chunks of unions such as the AUEW. Finally, deindustrialisation has also affected the geography and internal composition of the more general unions. The decline of the EEPTU in Merseyside, Humberside, South Wales and London between 1974 and 1983 is related to the fall in membership in the older manufacturing sections of the unions. Similarly, the decline of the GMWU in London,

especially in the 60s, is associated with the steady destruction of that city's manufacturing base.

The search for cheaper labour

In response to intensifying competition there have also been geographical shifts. Within Britain there has been a movement both out of the major conurbations towards smaller towns and from the central regions towards peripheral areas.

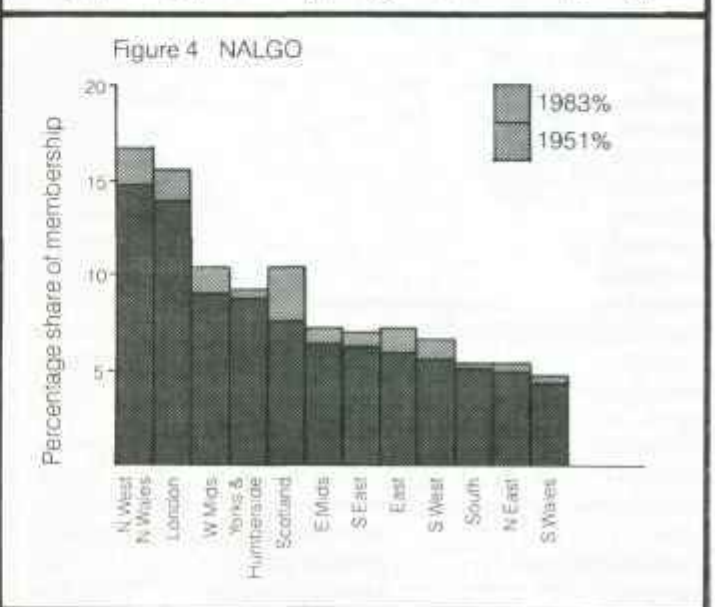
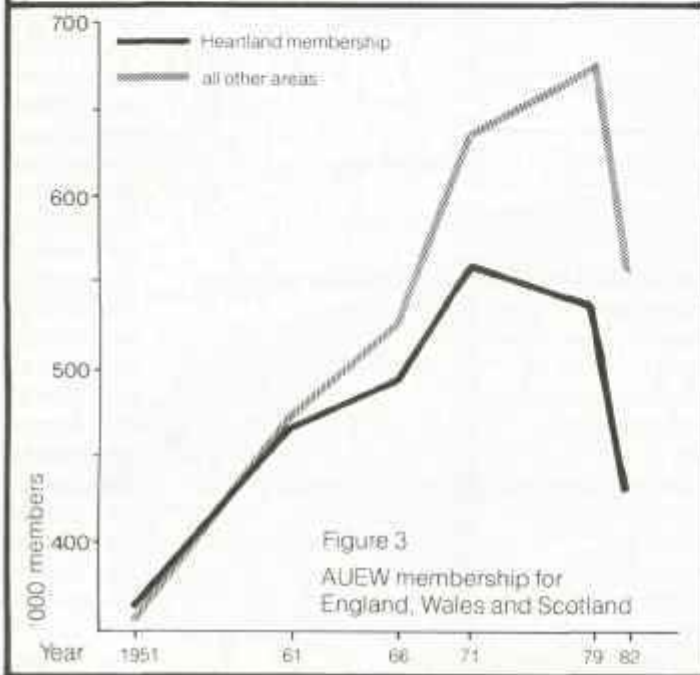
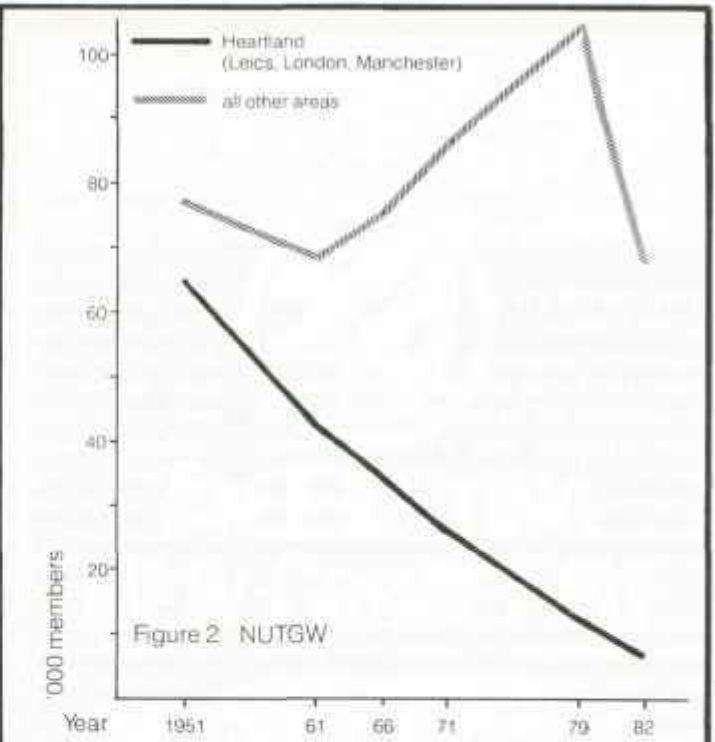
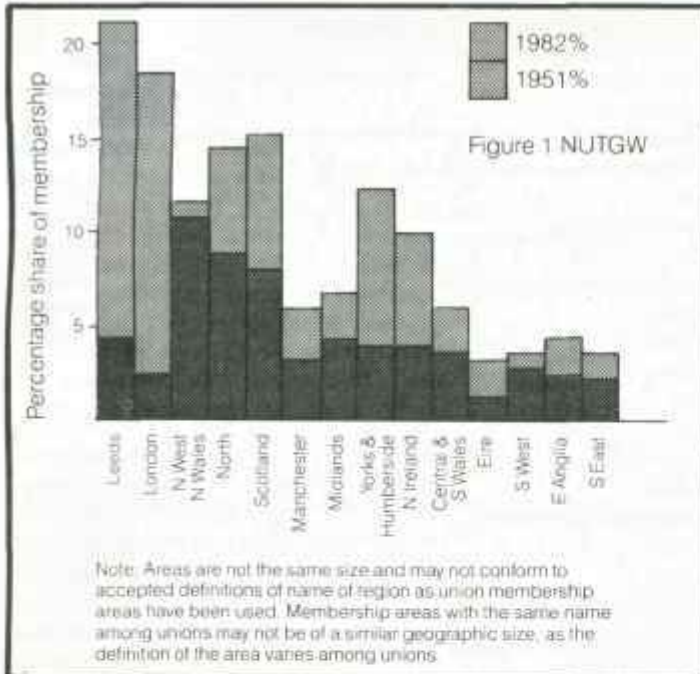
The changing geography of the NUTGW clearly shows this process. Figure 2 tracks the changing balance between the original geographical base of the union and the rest of the country from the early 50s to the early 80s. The old base shows continuous decline but, before the post 1979 collapse, there was an absolute growth in membership in other regions. The clothing industry, trapped between low cost imports and rising competition for labour in its established locations, moved to new areas — the North, Scotland, parts of Yorkshire and Humberside, Northern Ireland, the South West, East Anglia and the outer South East — in search of cheaper labour. The same pattern can be seen for instance, in the case of NUFLAT.

Similar kinds of spatial restructuring have occurred in other industries, particularly in engineering. Here, though, the processes and their timing have been different. Figure 3 plots the course of events for the AUEW. The union grew in total membership until 1979, as did both centre and periphery of the union's geography up to 1971. Only after 1971 has growth in the periphery been at the expense of the old heartlands. But when actual movement *has* occurred it has been not just to find cheaper labour, but also to escape *well-organised* labour. The numerical strength of the heartlands has been associated with an organisational strength which itself has become part of the reason for its own relative decline.

In other unions yet other reasons underly the decentralisation of membership. In USDAW, for instance, it seems likely that some of the present-day greater geographical spread is due not so much to the movement of industry as to the movement of population. Here the pattern of decentralisation is primarily towards less-urbanised areas.

Changes in production process

There have also been considerable changes in the technology of production. The introduction of automated and computerised equipment has in many instances reduced the numbers of skilled manual workers



while increasing the numbers both of technicians and of relatively unskilled 'machine minders'. This process has been yet another to affect detrimentally the older 'craft' unions within manufacturing. But it has been associated with increases in unions representing technicians and general workers. Sometimes these changes have taken place within the same plant, or the same locality. In other cases, though, they have been associated with changes in location. Indeed, once again, geographical mobility can make life easier for management, especially when technological change implies potentially disruptive changes in work-process, skill definitions, and the social composition of the workforce.

The reflection of this process can be

picked up, not only in the changing balance between unions representing different types of workers, but also in the changing membership composition even of individual unions. Within the GMWU, for instance, there has been a dramatic rise in female membership. Feminisation often — unfortunately — reflects the downgrading of skills. And in the GMWU it has been greatest in those areas, particularly Development Areas, to which there has been decentralisation. Since the 1960s the proportion of women members in the North, Scotland and South Wales has risen faster than anywhere else. Feminisation is also, of course, due to changes in the sectoral composition within the union (from shipbuilding to local government and

food and drink, for instance). The point is that together they have brought about significant changes in both the internal composition and the geography of the union.

Summary

Examination of the processes behind the patterns reveals even more of the complexity of what has been going on. First, it is clear that geographical shift has not just produced new problems for unions to deal with and new conditions to organise in. It has also been actively used as a weapon *against* trade unions. Second, it is not only that unions are faced with new geographical

² 'The Unions: Caught on an ebb tide' Tony Lane *Marxism Today* September 1982.

contexts in which to organise; at the same time there have often also been changes in the labour process (themselves often an attack on labour, regardless of location) and in the social composition of the workforce. Finally, there is a further element of change, to which we now turn.

THE GROWTH OF THE NEW UNIONS

Changes in geography have been brought about also by the growth of other unions, in particular the white collar unions which have expanded both within the public sector and outside. Both the initial geography of these unions and subsequent developments have reinforced the changes we have been talking about.

Take first the public sector unions. By their very nature they have been spread across the country. Moreover their growth has been associated with a shift in the balance of their membership from the conurbations to surrounding regions. For NALGO (National and Local Government Officers Association), between 1951 and 1983 the gains in membership outside the London, West Midlands and North West conurbations were greater than those within them (see figure 4). For NUPE (National Union of Public Employees) regional membership data, which is only available for dates after 1970, shows a similar pattern. Between 1971 and 1983 the share of membership in the union's 'periphery' of the North, South West and Wales increased from less than 7% to over 20%.

There are a number of reasons for the increasingly dispersed nature of the public sector unions. First, there are important geographical differences in union traditions. In the case of NUPE's health service membership, union officials pointed out that it is generally more accepted and expected for nurses, for instance, to join a union in Scotland than it is in some other areas. A second factor promoting dispersion is the general decentralisation of population from conurbations. Moreover, there have been significant changes over the last decade in the allocation formula applied by central government in distributing resources among regions. These changes led in the 70s to greater emphasis on public services in 'problem' peripheral regions. Since 1979 the decentralisation has been more from conurbations to less urbanised areas, as the shires have benefited at the expense of metropolitan areas.

Taken together, the increase in membership of the public sector unions (between

1951 and 1983 NALGO and NUPE together grew by over a million, over half of this increase occurring since the beginning of the 70s) and the increasingly dispersed nature of the unions highlight their growing weight in the new geography of the trade union movement as a whole.

White collar unions in the private sector were more concentrated than those in the public sector, but not as concentrated as the craft or industry unions. Moreover, these unions, too, have become more evenly distributed. For AUEW-TASS (Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section), between 1951 and 1982 the proportion of the membership in London and Manchester declined, and although that for the West Midlands increased so did the proportional share for the South West and South Wales, Northern Ireland, and Southern England.

Similarly, the membership of ASTMS (Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staff) has recently become more dispersed. Whereas the proportion of

what is being built looks like being very different

membership in the West Midlands has markedly declined over the last four years, the decline in the West, the North, and central Eastern areas has been smaller and there have been gains in East Anglia and Northern Ireland. The recent decline in membership in London, as in the West Midlands, is related to the collapse of industry. Ironically, however, one characteristic of Britain's role in the world economy is the strength of financial services. ASTMS membership in this sector has been growing and has, to some extent, compensated for the union's London losses in manufacturing.

NOT JUST A NEW GEOGRAPHY

The changes we have been discussing reflect shifts in social structure, changes in

the composition of the paid workforce, and a radically restructured geography of the British economy as a whole.

Yet there is one final factor to be considered. What is needed in the face of all this is — to be banal — a positive, imaginative response. The problem is that the new geography is being constructed under very different conditions, economically and ideologically, from the old. The old geography grew along with the growth of the British economy. Today the very reason for the new geography of industry (both deindustrialisation and decentralisation) is the changing, mainly declining, international competitiveness of much of British industry. Two serious consequences of all this are already evident.

First, the combination of high unemployment, declining union membership, and the increased geographical flexibility of industry sets off a desperate competition for jobs between workers and regions. In that context it is not just a new geography, but new structures of unionisation within plants, that are being established. Single-union arrangements are the most obvious example. The problem is that these changes are generally being introduced on management's terms rather than the unions'. Nissan is one of a number of recent examples.

Second, evidence on non-unionisation is harder to come by, but the problems of organising within 'growth sectors' are well known. Foreign-owned electronics multinationals are one example. The 'high-tech' belt of southern and eastern England is another. In these industries, and particularly in that part of the country, an individualistic ideology of 'high-status' workers, and anti-unionism, is strong. In that context, the GCHQ episode might have wider — and longer-term ramifications than can yet be identified.

Responding to such a situation demands both strength and imagination. And what is being built looks like being very different. •

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