

## The Legacy of Thatcher's Anti-Union Policies: Economic Growth vs. Social Rights Decay

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The Falklands War had freshly drawn to a close, but in 1984, Margaret Thatcher faced a new enemy—unionized miners, “the enemy within,” who were “more difficult to fight, but just as dangerous to liberty<sup>1</sup>.”

Thatcher had announced a series of 20 colliery closures, sparking nationwide miner strikes. More than 187,000 miners walked away from their posts, pouring into the streets<sup>2</sup>. Strong and increasingly strike-prone trade unions had stumped three of Thatcher's predecessors (Wilson, Heath and Callaghan). In one particularly humiliating moment, the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers even parked tanks on the lawn of Harold Wilson's Downing Street<sup>3</sup>.

In contrast, Thatcher's government rode out the strikes, then continued its trend of sweeping reforms that sapped trade unions of their power. Her legislation substantially drained the legal and financial resources of unions<sup>4</sup>, and union membership fell by half between the late 1970's and late 1980's<sup>5</sup>. Union numbers have never since recovered.

This essay explores the implications of Thatcher's anti-trade unionism on the British economy as a whole. I will begin by establishing trade union reform as a critical element of Margaret Thatcher's legacy. Next, I will give an account of the effectiveness of these policies according to traditional economic measures (increasing productivity and decreasing unemployment). Here, I will argue that Thatcher's policies achieved a modest positive effect on economic health, as they managed to bring a lagging UK economy to par with OECD levels.

In the second half of this essay, however, I revise the traditional framework by introducing social rights as a critical marker of a successful economic policy. I then trace the slow fall of three key sources of labor rights: collective bargaining, collaborating with social justice movements, and securing workplace safety. Despite achieving modest growth for the economy as a whole, I argue that Thatcherite anti-union legislation left the British economy more unequal. As a result, the report card on Thatcher's reforms is mixed, and the laws would have fared better in conjunction with legislation that protected important social rights.

### ***Thatcher's Industrial Legacy***

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<sup>1</sup> Hanson, Charles. "Thatcherism, Trade Unionism and All That." (Adam Smith Institute. October 16, 2013. Accessed June 10, 2019. <https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/politics-government/thatcherism-trade-unionism-and-all-that.>)

<sup>2</sup> "Miners' Strike Revisited." BBC Inside Out. February 2, 2004. Accessed June 10, 2019. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/eastmidlands/series5/miners\\_strike\\_coal.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/eastmidlands/series5/miners_strike_coal.shtml).

<sup>3</sup> Hanson, Charles. "Thatcherism, Trade Unionism and All That."

<sup>4</sup> Brown, William, Simon Deakin, and Paul Ryan. "The Effects of British Industrial Relations Legislation 1979-97." (*National Institute Economic Review* 161, no. 1 (1997): 69-83. doi:10.1177/002795019716100105), 76.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, Adam. "Margaret Thatcher Fought One Huge Battle That Changed The UK Forever." Business Insider. April 08, 2013. Accessed June 10, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/thatcher-versus-the-unions-2013-4?r=US&IR=T>.

Between 1980 and 1995, Parliament passed eight major acts that regulated industrial relations and collective bargaining<sup>6</sup>. These acts were among a broader Conservative strategy of economic reform, which included weakening union power, reducing government influence on market outcomes, and expanding self-employment<sup>7</sup>. Given the limited scope of this essay, I will focus only on industrial relations legislation passed between 1980 and 1990 (during which Thatcher was the Prime Minister). However, I recognize that all of the policies passed during this era operated in tandem; thus, it is impossible to attribute a macro- or microeconomic change entirely to any individual piece of legislation. I claim instead that industrial relations were at the heart of a significant change in the structure of the British economy, and are therefore worth special consideration.

Even Ian Gilmour, a Thatcher critic, regards trade union reform to be Thatcher's most important achievement<sup>8</sup>. As alluded to in the introduction, most of the legislation was aimed at making it more difficult for unions to take collective action. Historically, the British government had a voluntarist approach to unions, whereby Parliament minimized legal intervention<sup>9</sup>. Thatcher's government instead required collective action to take place within a strict framework. Her government outlawed common striking tactics such as secondary picketing and actions in defense of a closed shop. It demanded ballots with separate majorities in each workplace, and it stipulated that collective action could take place only after the balloting process<sup>10</sup>.

Thatcher's government also removed statutory immunities against suing trade unions, making them liable for fines and civil damages<sup>11</sup>. The sharp increase in legal costs substantially drained unions' financial reserves, leaving them with fewer funds for bargaining purposes<sup>12</sup>. These structural changes thus strongly contributed to—though by no means were the sole determinant of—rapid union membership decline in the 1980's. A well-noted fact is that, owing to slowed manufacturing<sup>13</sup>, union membership had declined across all advanced economies during this decade, even in countries with strong union support such as France and Spain<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, the sustained weakening of union power is attributable to legislative change rather than a mere cyclical decline. In Britain uniquely, the coverage of worker agreements drastically fell<sup>15</sup>. Freeman and Pelletier (1990) found that "favourableness of industrial relations laws to unionism" is the determining factor on union density, and Metcalf (1993, 1994) bolsters

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory, Mary. "Reforming the Labour Market: An Assessment of the UK Policies of the Thatcher Era." (*The Australian Economic Review* 31, no. 4 (1998): 329-44. doi:10.1111/1467-8462.00077), 331.

<sup>7</sup> Blanchflower, David, and Richard Freeman. "Did the Thatcher Reforms Change British Labour Performance?" (*CEP/NIESR Conference: "Is the British Labour Market Different?"*, April 1, 1993. doi:10.3386/w4384), 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Blanchflower, David, and Richard Freeman, "Did the Thatcher Reforms Change British Labour Performance?", 5.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory, Mary. "Reforming the Labour Market: An Assessment of the UK Policies of the Thatcher Era", 331.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, William, Simon Deakin, and Paul Ryan, "The Effects of British Industrial Relations Legislation 1979-97," 71-72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>13</sup> Martin, Ron, Peter Sunley, and Jane Wills. "The Geography of Trade Union Decline: Spatial Dispersal or Regional Resilience?" (*Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18, no. 1 (1993): 36. doi:10.2307/623068), 53.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, William, Simon Deakin, and Paul Ryan, "The Effects of British Industrial Relations Legislation 1979-97," 75.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

this analysis<sup>16</sup>. By 1998, most newly-established workplaces (75%) were failing to unionize, even in traditionally union-dominant industries<sup>17</sup>.

Thus, Thatcher's anti-union policies had a significant impact in directly weakening trade unions in the UK. Scholars have since evaluated whether labor reform achieved its intended effect. In the next section, I find that, according to traditional measures of economic success, these policies led to a moderate increase in productivity and decrease in unemployment.

### ***A Moderate Economic Success***

Productivity and unemployment are among the most common markers for economic health. Volgy, et. al. (1996) names four critical markers—productivity, inflation, unemployment, and global trade—for measuring economic well-being in relation to worker bargaining power<sup>18</sup>. In this paper, I focus on high productivity and low unemployment, with an emphasis on high productivity. After all, this was Thatcher's own aim: "We hanker after a West German standard of living," she said in 1979, but "you cannot have a West German standard of living with a British standard of output. ... The result has been the most uncompetitive industry...in the industrialized world<sup>19</sup>."

By this standard, the broad academic consensus is that there was, indeed, modest economic growth in the 1980's. Blanchflower and Freeman (1993) found improvements in growth, such that, post-1980, "The UK moved from doing worse to doing about the same as other countries" in the OECD<sup>20</sup>. Gregory (1998) also concluded that there is "a positive association between a diminishing union presence and productivity improvements, suggesting that as unions weakened[,] productivity change was pushed ahead<sup>21</sup>." Unemployment fared similarly: whereas UK unemployment stood substantially above the OECD average in the 1980's, by the 1990's unemployment had been reduced to be close to the OECD average<sup>22</sup>.

One question is whether diminished trade union presence caused this improvement. Peter Nolan, a critic of Thatcherite reforms, counters that unions actually *increase* productivity because "their presence introduces a 'measure of due process' in the workplace... [and] may 'shock' management into adopting the most productive techniques by closing off other routes to profitability<sup>23</sup>." On the other hand, Moene and Wallerstein (2003) point out that collective bargaining techniques, especially at the national level, can decrease productivity. Individual

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<sup>16</sup> qtd. in Gregory, Mary. "Reforming the Labour Market: An Assessment of the UK Policies of the Thatcher Era", 332.

<sup>17</sup> Metcalf, David. "British Unions: Dissolution Or Resurgence?" (*Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 7, no. 1 (1991): 18-32. doi:10.1093/oxrep/7.1.18), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Volgy, Thomas J., John E. Schwarz, and Lawrence E. Imwalle. "In Search of Economic Well-Being: Worker Power and the Effects of Productivity, Inflation, Unemployment and Global Trade on Wages in Ten Wealthy Countries." (*American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 4 (1996): 1233. doi:10.2307/2111749), 1233.

<sup>19</sup> Qtd. in Downie, Leonard, Jr. "Thatcher Attacks British Unions." (*The Washington Post*. October 13, 1979. Accessed June 10, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/10/13/thatcher-attacks-british-unions/b1da532e-7d61-4933-8a7d-6a38faba2727/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.0023086c95cb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/10/13/thatcher-attacks-british-unions/b1da532e-7d61-4933-8a7d-6a38faba2727/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0023086c95cb).)

<sup>20</sup> Blanchflower, David, and Richard Freeman, "Did the Thatcher Reforms Change British Labour Performance?", 8.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory, Mary. "Reforming the Labour Market: An Assessment of the UK Policies of the Thatcher Era", 337.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>23</sup> Nolan, Peter. "Walking on Water? Performance and Industrial Relations under Thatcher." (*Industrial Relations Journal* 20, no. 2 (1989): 81-92. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2338.1989.tb00055.x), 88.

regions—and even the motivations of individual workers—have unique economic considerations, yet “with centralized wage setting, all wages must be raised together<sup>24</sup>.” As a result, productivity suffers.

In order to resolve this apparent contradiction, I claim that these two analyses take place on different levels of scope. Nolan’s analysis is true of local or regional unions, which have a more direct connection with employers. Moene and Wallerstein focus on the national level. Indeed, at the peak of union power in the 1970’s, executive branches seemed to “run the show,” and “the individual member feels remote from union affairs<sup>25</sup>.” The fact that nationwide collective bargaining did not take local affairs into account decreased productivity.

This explanation justifies Thatcher-era growth. Thatcher actually redistributed power from national trade unions to local ones— she required nationwide decisions to wait until each local workplace had achieved a majority<sup>26</sup>. While national unions lost steam, local strongholds remained: Penn and Scattergood’s 1990 case study found “little evidence of a serious weakening” of unions in towns such as Rochdale<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, both analyses are correct: the policy increased productivity by tapping into accountability mechanisms (giving power to local unions) and reducing disillusionment (disempowering national ones). In this way, Thatcherite anti-union reforms have both an empirical and a theoretical reason to claim some success.

However, the traditional framework of measuring economic health—using metrics like productivity, inflation, unemployment, and global trade—is incomplete. In the next section, I propose a revised framework that incorporates social rights into our analysis of the anti-union policies’ impact. Ultimately, I will argue that the benefits of economic growth came at a sharp cost to social rights.

### ***The Labor Rights Tradeoff***

Karl Polyani, writing of the Industrial Revolution, once described a “double movement” of market expansion and social institutions: social rights must accompany economic growth<sup>28</sup>. The ability to have a larger pie must be weighed against the possibility that the extra slices are disproportionately given to the few.

Crucially, social rights are not a concept opposed to the free market. They are in fact integral to the market, and are “conceptualized as a form of institutionalized capabilities that enable people to participate effectively<sup>29</sup>.” The market is not free when marginalized groups—women, people of color, people with disabilities—are cut from it. Thus, setting economic policies demands an accompanying duty to maintain a standard of equal access.

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<sup>24</sup> Moene, Karl Ove, and Michael Wallerstein. "The Economic Performance of Different Bargaining Institutions: A Survey of the Theoretical Literature." (*Wirtschaft Und Gesellschaft* 19, no. 4 (1993): 423-50. Accessed June 10, 2019. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/32e7/14c33bd11e0c90d0b68bab20fb3fe6b510d4.pdf>), 435.

<sup>25</sup> Musson, A. E. *Trade Union and Social History*. London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1974, 75.

<sup>26</sup> <sup>26</sup> Brown, William, Simon Deakin, and Paul Ryan, “The Effects of British Industrial Relations Legislation 1979-97,” 72.

<sup>27</sup> Martin, Ron, Peter Sunley, and Jane Wills. "The Geography of Trade Union Decline: Spatial Dispersal or Regional Resilience?," 56.

<sup>28</sup> Fudge, Judy. "The New Discourse of Labour Rights: From Social to Fundamental Rights?" (*Comparative Labor Law and Policy Journal* 92, no. 1 (2007). [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=974915&download=yes](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=974915&download=yes)), 29.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Maintaining equal access at times requires state intervention, but it is often unnecessary. Rather, the idea of social rights “function as interpretive norms and principles of institutional design<sup>30</sup>”—as long as institutions are in place such that the least well-off can voice concerns and participate in the market, a basic standard of rights remain.

My argument here is that the same policies that brought productivity growth also hampered important conduits of workers’ voices. My analysis in this section will focus on the loss of three mechanisms of protecting social rights: collective bargaining, providing solidarity with social movements, and protecting workplace safety.

The loss of these labor protections should therefore be weighed against the gain in productivity. An exact formula to weigh these tradeoffs is far beyond the scope of the paper. My claim is merely that the Thatcher government could have done better in mitigating the harms to social rights, and that, in failing to do so, created a far less equal economy in Britain.

### *Collective Bargaining*

Among trade unions’ most central, and arguably most effective, goals is the ability to negotiate higher wages. The threat of nationwide strikes (such as the crippling Winter of Discontent) produces a bargaining chip against employers, driving wages up. The ability to bargain is often a pure numbers game: the more disruption that unions can threaten, the more influence they can wield at the negotiating table. Collective bargaining gave union members a “*de facto* minimum wage policy<sup>31</sup>” and often sought to fix the standard rate for a job throughout the country<sup>32</sup>—meaning that higher wages spilled over to non-unionized workers in the same sector. It is for this reason that advocates argue that trade unions, and their benefits to wage moderation, are public goods<sup>33</sup>.

Thatcher’s policies cost Britain a powerful equalizing force. Because all union members have the same base pay rate, female union members earn 8.7% more than women who are not part of a union, and non-white union members earn 8.4% more than their non-union counterparts. Union members with disabilities or health problems also receive greater financial returns<sup>34</sup>.

These higher wages had helped to close the pay gap, empowering historically under-represented minorities in the workforce. Between 1979 and 1990, the standard deviation of earnings increased from 0.53 to 0.61—indicating a substantial rise in earnings inequality after Thatcher’s policies<sup>35</sup>. The legislative change of her era “contributed directly to the widening of pay inequalities in contemporary Britain<sup>36</sup>.”

Thus, while the economy became more productive as a whole, socioeconomically disadvantaged workers lost ground to more well-off peers. Margaret Thatcher’s political

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>31</sup> Metcalf, David. "British Unions: Dissolution Or Resurgence?", 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Moene, Karl Ove, and Michael Wallerstein. "The Economic Performance of Different Bargaining Institutions", 424.

<sup>34</sup> Metcalf, David. "British Unions: Dissolution Or Resurgence?", 10.

<sup>35</sup> Blanchflower, David, and Richard Freeman, "Did the Thatcher Reforms Change British Labour Performance?", 14.

<sup>36</sup> Brown, William, Simon Deakin, and Paul Ryan, "The Effects of British Industrial Relations Legislation 1979-97," 79-80.

philosophy also precluded her from taking action that would have reduced these inequalities. Thatcher reduced unemployment benefits<sup>37</sup>, rejected the idea of welfare benefits<sup>38</sup>, and took no action to strengthen equal pay legislation<sup>39</sup>. In this way, anti-union policies were an economic success but a social failure.

### *Solidarity with Social Movements*

A second conduit of workers' voices is engagement with social movements. In 1979, at trade unions' peak, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the women's movement joined forces to march in demonstrations supporting abortion, which had come under legislative threat. "This iconic moment of joint action between the women's movement and labour movement saw an estimated 80,000 people marching to express their opposition to the Corrie Bill<sup>40</sup>." The collaboration exemplifies the ability of trade unions to magnify the voices of adjacent social movements; by serving as a platform for women's rights, the TUC pushed dialogue about abortion into the mainstream.

This sort of collaboration, even if it occurred today, would be far less effective owing to union membership loss. But more crucially, the social impetus for collaboration was snuffed out. Thatcher's anti-union rhetoric "penalised unions for engaging in 'political' or solidaristic action," forcing them to turn inward and focus on the immediate interests of union members<sup>41</sup>. Simultaneously, the same rhetoric "operated to discourage feminist interest in working with the unions. "The heady possibilities of a wider collaboration between the women's and labour movements were among the casualties of the Thatcher years<sup>42</sup>."

### *Workplace Safety*

Third, unions simply save workers' lives. Metcalf (2001) notes that unions most commonly form in accident-prone industries, where the likelihood of injury is 8% higher than industries without union presence. However, within an industry, workplaces with unionization have one-quarter fewer injuries than those without<sup>43</sup>. Litwin (2000) notes that, because unions check employers' financial motivations, they push employers above and beyond minimum legal requirements for safety. Unions often fund educational programs that "employers would

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>38</sup> Bashevkin, Sylvia. "Tough Times in Review: The British Women's Movement during the Thatcher Years." (*Comparative Political Studies* 28, no. 4 (1996): 525-52. doi:10.1177/0010414096028004002), 528.

<sup>39</sup> Makepeace, Gerald, Pierella Paci, Heather Joshi, and Peter Dolton. "How Unequally Has Equal Pay Progressed since the 1970s? A Study of Two British Cohorts." (*The Journal of Human Resources* 34, no. 3 (1999): 534. doi:10.2307/146379), 535.

<sup>40</sup> Phillips, Anne. "The Very Fact That Thatcher Can Be Lauded as the Woman Who Broke the Mould Is Indicative of the Challenges Which Women Still Face in Contemporary Politics." (*LSE Public Policy Group: The Legacy of Margaret Thatcher*, 2013, 13-15. Accessed June 10, 2019.

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/files/2013/05/Thatcher-final.pdf>), 14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p15.

<sup>43</sup> Metcalf, David. "British Unions: Dissolution Or Resurgence?", 13.

otherwise not choose to fund<sup>44</sup>.” They also “crack the public goods problem associated with research into health and safety” by investigating issues that employers may deem too inappropriate; they publicize risks about specific workplaces and create legal protections against firing injured workers. “This ground level institutionalisation of ‘voice’ over ‘exit’ will lower injury rates, as ‘trouble makers’ will be listened to rather than banished, thus preventing similarly caused injuries from recurring<sup>45</sup>.”

Thatcher’s panacea—the free market—was an ineffective cure for safety problems. Whereas unions can incorporate higher working standards into the collective bargaining process, individual workers cannot do so on their own, because workers who bargain unsuccessfully have no alternative jobs. “This lack of mobility...renders market-based solutions implausible<sup>46</sup>.”

### **Conclusion**

After Thatcher resigned as Prime Minister, she left behind a Britain that had experienced economic growth but social rights decay. Her free market ideology had done few favors for problems such as wage inequality and workplace safety, since these issues are often caused by market failures.

Against expectations, subsequent Labour governments never repealed Thatcher’s policies<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, Thatcher-era legislation came to define industrial relations in Britain for decades to come. Present-day trade unions remain unable to pursue many of the striking and collective action tactics that once produced their success.

Trade unions, as it turns out, are not so much dangers to liberty as they are protectors of social rights. And in a world where UK trade union membership stands at less than half of its peak numbers<sup>48,49</sup>, the next defender of these rights remains to be seen.

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<sup>44</sup>Litwin, Adam Seth. "Trade Unions and Industrial Injury in Great Britain." (*Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science*, April 2000. Accessed June 10, 2019.

[http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/20169/1/Trade\\_Unions\\_and\\_Industrial\\_Injury\\_in\\_Great\\_Britain.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/20169/1/Trade_Unions_and_Industrial_Injury_in_Great_Britain.pdf)), 3-4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Crossman, Alf. "Labour, the Unions and the Breaking of the British Working Class." *The Conversation*. June 11, 2013. Accessed June 10, 2019. <http://theconversation.com/labour-the-unions-and-the-breaking-of-the-british-working-class-14506>.

<sup>48</sup>Gilfillan, Scott. "Trade Union Membership Is Growing, but There's Still Work to Do." *TUC*. June 25, 2018. Accessed June 10, 2019. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/trade-union-membership-growing-there's-still-work-do>.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis, Simon. "How Union Membership Has Grown - and Shrunk." *The Guardian*. April 30, 2010. Accessed June 10, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2010/apr/30/union-membership-data>.

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