

Collectivists, Functionalists

& Critics: What do teachers
think of their unions?

Summary

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Foreword

Summer 2011: teachers strike over pension reform. Government ministers label the action ‘militant’ and ‘irresponsible.’ Trade unionists assert their right to strike and their position as the voice of the profession. Both declare that the 40% ballot turn-out rate proves their point. The day soon passes and whilst the debate rages on in Parliament and press, hundreds of thousands of teachers get back to teaching, as if little had happened.

The opinions of the silent majority who chose not to give a preference in the strike ballot were almost entirely missing from the general furore. Given the vast number of teachers who hold union membership it is surprising that the ‘ordinary voice’ was so absent. According to the Office of National Statistics, in 2010 only 27% of all employees in the UK were members of trade unions. In education the figure was almost double that and that figure includes all of education not just teachers (Archur, J., 2010). Indeed if you were to combine the Department for Education’s (DfE) figures for the total teaching workforce (DfE, 2010¹) and union membership numbers (Certification Office, 2010), it would appear that 130% of teachers are union members. This is partly explained by independent school teachers and partly by retired, unemployed and ex-teachers who remain in unions. Either way, it would seem fair to describe the profession as almost entirely unionised.

A first question is why, when union membership has declined in almost every other industry, it has remained so high amongst teachers. Secondly, if the unions are so popular, why is engagement in industrial action ballots so low?

In 1894, as unions rapidly gained prominence amongst English workers, Beatrice Webb argued that unions provided a way in which workers could work collectively to realise the individual benefits of improved conditions in their workplace (Webb & Webb, 1894). This could take the form of locally organised support, for example through insurance mutually paid for by all members of the union or petitioning employers for improved health, safety and pay. However, continuous improvement in health, safety and equality laws meant that by the end of the 20th century much of what was once fought for by unions was now commonplace. Meanwhile, whereas people once worked in one industry throughout their career, greater flexibility in employment, combined with greater access to education, meant that few people now remained in one profession continuously.

These reasons, combined with legal changes designed to weaken unions’ ability to compel worker membership, meant unionism rapidly declined. Yet in education the figure remained as high as ever despite widespread press vilification. The journalist Mike Baker describes how he overheard an editor demanding that photographers attending a national teacher union conference “Get the sort of photographs that give our readers nightmares” (Baker, 1994). On the other hand, left-wing papers such as The Guardian and The Independent give a much more positive view of union leaders. Such a polarised and opinionated press makes it difficult to know why teachers themselves chose to remain so unionised.

Academic studies are no clearer. Some focus on the impact of teacher unions on effectiveness and treat teaching unions as a barrier to innovation and reform (Eberts & Stone, 1987; Raham, 1999),

unnecessarily hiking up the cost of education (Machin & Wadhvani, 1991; Metcalf, 2003; Hoxby, 1996) and leading to a focus on the needs of adults over pupils (Bascia, 1997). Others have shown unions to have no discernible effect on productivity (Feldman, 2000), a potentially positive impact on standardised test results (Steelman, Powell & Carini, 2000) or to improve workplace stability by reducing teacher turnover (Pfeffer & Davis-Blake, 1990).

Much of the debate in the US is focused on so called “reform unionism”. On the one hand, advocates of “reform unionism” argue that a new age of unionism has dawned in which management and workers are no longer trapped in the zero-sum battles of old. They argue that unions are providing “possibility” (Moore Johnson, 2004, p.34) by engaging in reform and beginning to build “a more collaborative, less adversarial relationship with management” (Henderson, 2004, p.21). For Moore-Johnson, this shift is partly a consequence of changes in education which have made old-style “industrial unionism” with its tendency to standardise, outdated (Moore Johnson, p.40). In contrast, others see unions as a source of “paralysis” (ibid., p.34) and reform unionism as “among the most influential and seductive forces in American education (but)... also one of the most misleading” (Moe, 2011, p.271). According to Moe, teaching unions are rational actors and given that teachers join unions to defend their own rights, unions must inevitably prioritise these special interests. When teachers’ interests conflict with those of schools and pupils (which he argues they frequently do), unions act as “advocates for the best interests of teachers, not for the best interests of children” (ibid., p.203).

Whilst these studies raise plenty of important controversies and contradictions, they do not focus on giving a voice to teachers; the people who spend their days teaching rather than writing studies or giving quotes to national newspapers. Do they think being in a union makes a difference to their working life? Is their high rate of membership attributable to a belief in the value of a collective professional voice, or because of individual legal and financial benefits? Do they share founding leaders’ belief in the value of the ‘mutual benefit’ whereby the individual accrues benefits by being part of a wider community? Is their unionism ultimately about collectivism or functionalism?

So far these difficult questions have rarely been asked of teachers, perhaps because there is a scary potential for rebuke. At present it is easy for politicians to dismiss the views of unions as being those of a vocal minority unrepresentative of their members, but if the voice of the unions really is the voice of hundreds of thousands of teachers, policy makers may find themselves needing to sit up and take notice. When Terry Moe asked these difficult questions in the US he found that:

“union leaders are not bosses who have little regard for member preferences. Within union organizations, Democrats outnumber Republicans by two to one... And union leaders are right at the center of it, engaging in political activities that members regard as representative of their own views and beliefs.” (Moe, 2011, p.94)

On the other hand, what if teachers’ allegiance to unions is weak? Unions might then be left wondering “where does that leave pay bargaining?” or, “what if people dislike militancy? Should we stop striking?” Such findings might throw much into question, but if true then they should be confronted. Unions and politicians cannot live in a bubble, ignoring the elephant in the room because they are afraid to ask the important questions.

This report is an opportunity to bypass political distortions and to actually ask teachers what they think. What are the thoughts, feelings and values behind their decisions to join, stay or leave a trade union? Within that membership what are the things that they enjoy, value, dislike or even disregard? Asking people to speak honestly about their union experiences affords a middle ground in the debate, and is what we hoped to achieve in this research.



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Executive summary

Teachers come to their unions from a range of perspectives and therefore experience them in a range of ways. We follow teachers' journeys from joining a union to interacting with it and finally, to forming a judgement on it. As we follow teachers on this journey we find that they fall into three broad camps, although we avoid reifying these as rigid groups (Fullan, 1982). The first is comprised of the 'collectivists' who feel strong affiliative ties to other teachers and think it is their duty to work together towards shared benefits and public goods. The second group are the 'functionalists' who have a defined set of benefits they are seeking and contentedly securing from their union, either individually or collectively. Thirdly there are the 'critics' who, even if they are often pleased with the benefits they receive, do not feel that unions have a positive impact on education.

Joining a union

- Teachers primarily join unions for protection against disputes and allegations. At least 80% of those in our sample consider these areas "very important".
- Whilst all teachers consider individual protection
- important, many also value a variety of other functions.
- Collective bargaining and a strong collective voice are very important to some teachers but not all. This suggests that some teachers see unions as a way of individually procuring protection whilst others feel that benefits need to be won collectively, even if in a lot of cases (although not all), their ultimate goal remains individualistic. Approximately half of the teachers we surveyed considered collective bargaining and voice "very important."
- Campaigning on wider education issues by unions is not a priority for teachers. Just under a quarter of our respondents considered it very important.
- The right to industrial action was one of teachers' lowest priorities when joining a union. Forty per cent of our respondents did not think it was important.
- When teachers initially join a union their choice is often fairly random or circumstantial but they frequently change later on in their career. This is often for political reasons or because they have changed role. Forty five per cent of our respondents had changed union.
- Teachers frequently have clear (although not

Feelings about unions

- Teachers' overall satisfaction with unions is very high. Satisfaction varies according to unions' different functions but the functions which teachers expressed the lowest levels of satisfaction with tend to be those which teachers consider least important (such as communicating information about teaching, pedagogy and policy). Approximately three quarters of teachers we surveyed were satisfied with their union.
- Whilst satisfaction amongst respondents was generally high with functions which relate to individual benefits, it was lower on collective or public goods such as campaigning on wider education issues (49% of respondents) and raising the professional status of teachers (57% of respondents).
- Teachers are split in their views as to whether education is better as a result of unions' work. Fifty one per cent of those surveyed believed that education in the UK is better as a result of the unions. Forty five per cent felt that joining a union is every teachers' duty.
- Those teachers who said the Conservative party most closely represented their views tended to be much less satisfied with unions' work in campaigning (only 40% were satisfied) and to feel that unions are not improving education (only 17% felt education was better as a result of the unions). However, over 60% of Conservative respondents were still satisfied with unions overall, suggesting that unions are successfully performing the functions that matter most to these teachers.
- Most teachers consider union membership "valuable and worthwhile" (almost three quarters of our respondents) but tend to see it as "necessary rather than desirable" (two thirds of respondents). A quarter of teachers surveyed would prefer not to be in a union if an alternative were available.
- The events of the last year or so have had a polarising impact on teachers' views of unions. A quarter of respondents felt more positive about unions and a quarter felt less positive.

necessarily accurate) conceptions of what different unions are like and can find their approaches attractive or repellent.

- A small number of teachers are not in unions. This can be for either circumstantial or political reasons.

Interacting with unions

- The support teachers' request from their union varies from light touch advice over the phone to support with dramatic, life-changing situations. As a result, unions frequently deal with highly emotionally charged situations and teachers express huge gratitude for union support which can have a profound impact.
- Satisfaction rates with support are extremely high. This is generally due to the support received being both personal and backed by a strong weight of experience. Almost 80% of respondents who had asked for support said they were satisfied and almost 60% very satisfied.
- Occasionally unions mishandle situations and this leaves teachers extremely angry. Reps play a crucial role in ensuring interactions are successful.
- The vast majority of Heads are satisfied with their interactions with unions. They frequently work with reps constructively and in mutually beneficial ways, even where this involves removing members of staff. Sometimes this is not the case and Heads can be seething about negative experiences at the hands of under-skilled reps. Almost three-quarters of the Heads in our survey were satisfied with their interactions.

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The full report is available to buy from Amazon or as a download from www.lkmco.org.uk