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The **Hidden Wealth** of NATIONS
The Scourge of Tax Havens

Gabriel Zucman
with a foreword by
THOMAS PIKETTY

London Review of Books

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Vuvuzelas Unite

Andy Beckett

Trade Union Bill (HC Bill 58)
Stationery Office, 32 pp, July

Trade Union Membership 2014: Statistical Bulletin
Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 56 pp, June

The headquarters of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) is a basement room beneath a dry cleaner's in Central London. From a loading bay behind a row of shops, concrete steps lead down to a flimsy door, with a pile of leaflets beside it and 'IWGB office' scribbled above it on a piece of A4. Behind the door is a whitewashed space with metal shelves, neatly stacked with placards and furled banners, and four desks. Nearest the door sits the IWGB president, Jason Moyer-Lee. He is a stubbly American in his late twenties, dressed in a T-shirt and chinos, as if he were working for an internet startup. He has been involved in trade unions for four years.

In 2012 Moyer-Lee helped found the IWGB in order, as its sometimes self-dramatising, revolutionary red website puts it, to organise 'the unorganised, the abandoned and the betrayed'. In June, when I first visited the offices, Moyer-Lee told me it already had six hundred members. 'The vast majority are cleaners, bicycle couriers and security guards,' he said. 'There's a whole goldmine of opportunity out there, in low-paid, outsourced work.' So many people want to join the IWGB, he went on, that they don't have the resources to cope. 'We've put a temporary freeze on membership. We're turning people away.'

Membership costs between £4 and £8 a month, depending on whether you're in part-time or full-time work. In return, among other things, your workplace grievances will be addressed by the IWGB's activist machine. 'Our approach is, hit employers where they're weak,' Moyer-Lee said with a smile. 'Ramp up public pressure, using social media and by staging loud and disruptive protests, surprise protests, mini-occupations. Keep applying that pressure until they cave. We've won a number of campaigns in the last year merely with the threat of confrontational tactics. In December, we went to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and said, "We're giving you a month to improve your offer to our members," who are cleaners there. The day before the month was up, the school agreed to give our members up to 35 days' holiday and six months' sick pay a year.' Moyer-Lee leaned back behind his busy desk and smiled again. 'You have to create an incentive for the employer to offer something.'

Sometimes in Britain, trade unionism can be a pretty straightforward business. But not often. 'For almost three centuries,' Keith Laybourn writes in *A History of Trade Unionism: c.1770-1990* (1992), it 'has been rejected, both formally and informally, by the state and the employers who saw it as a dangerous movement which threatened the free operation of the market and restricted the introduction of much needed technological change'. Or as the employers' pressure group the Confederation of British Industry put it more bluntly in evidence to a Commons committee in 1993, 'there has never been a system of union rights in Britain; no right to organise, no right to strike, no right to representation.'



Andy Beckett's
Promised You a Miracle, about Britain in the early 1980s, has just been published.

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Laybourn's book describes the range of weapons used against British trade unionists: policemen, troops, blacklists, blacklegs (strike-breakers, or 'agency workers' as the present government calls them), and above all 'the large body of legislation' that emerged from the 18th century onwards 'to restrict their activities'. Even in the rare periods when unions have been powerful and comparatively unmolested, such as the 1970s, if you look beyond the version of history told by union-bashing journalists and politicians and popular historians – that is, most of them – it is striking how contested and limited that power and freedom actually was.

In 1976 workers at the Grunwick photo-processing plant in North London went on strike over working conditions and their employer's refusal to let a union represent them. For two years the strike gathered a widening coalition of trade union allies, from local post office workers to Yorkshire miners. Grunwick's mail-order business was boycotted, its premises besieged by mass pickets. Right-wing Britain convinced itself that all this constituted, as Margaret Thatcher put it in her autobiography, an 'outrageous abuse of trade union power'. But the strikers lost. One key reason was that the Labour government – supposedly the unions' creature – refused to give pickets the legal right to detain vehicles. Without this, no amount of crowd muscle could ultimately stop Grunwick, aided by the police, moving goods and replacement workers in and out. The unions' hold over the British workplace from the 1940s to the 1970s, the historian Robert Taylor concluded in 1994, was 'always more illusory and less substantial than their many enemies liked to suggest'.

The same goes for union militancy in general. The graph of working days lost annually in Britain to strikes and other labour disputes is flat for most of the 20th century. Two periods of sporadic confrontation – from shortly before the First World War until the mid-1920s, and from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s – stand out. So far, the 21st century has been more placid still. Since the 2008 financial crisis, despite an almost unprecedented squeeze on wages and the public sector, where British trade union members are disproportionately concentrated, the number of working days lost to strikes has been lower, each year, than in any year between 1900 and 1990.

Behind the rhetoric, union legislation has often been as much about taking advantage of union weakness as curbing union dominance. Thatcher had been an unpopular and, it sometimes seemed, possibly unelectable opposition leader; she became prime minister in 1979 largely through her use of the union issue. 'Someone's got to grasp this nettle,' she told the big political interviewer of the day, Brian Walden, in one of her many telling interventions during the strike mayhem of the 'winter of discontent'. But once in government she bided her time for more than two years, waiting until the increased unemployment caused by her economic policies had eaten into union membership and self-confidence. In late 1981 she made her move, appointing Norman Tebbit as employment secretary. Tebbit believed, as many Conservatives always have, that unions should be subservient organisations: 'Their prime role,' he lectured Len Murray, the general secretary of the TUC, in 1983, 'should be to help improve the performance of their firms which provided their members with jobs.' Yet Tebbit, like Thatcher, let increasing joblessness and other changes in the British economic and political climate do much of his anti-union work for him. By the time he finally introduced union legislation in October 1982, there were more than three million unemployed (the number had nearly tripled since Thatcher's election), but her government had been made almost impregnable by victory in the Falklands War earlier that year. The unions' postwar heyday was already over.



Further laws followed in 1984, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1990 and 1992. Often euphemistically called Employment Acts, the new laws first restricted or ended the unions' most expansive powers: the closed shop, which made union membership compulsory in some

workplaces; and the secondary picket, the common strike practice of picketing enterprises related to the one where the primary dispute was taking place. Then the legislation turned to the unions' most basic weapon, requiring that the vote to strike be carried out not by a workplace show of hands but by secret ballot, and that employers be informed of the intention to hold such ballots well in advance. Finally, the acts targeted the unions as institutions, forcing them to open their finances to ever closer inspection by an outside regulator, the certification officer.

All these laws were devised by the Conservatives but eventually accepted by Labour. On 31 March 1997, with Labour about to return to power, but still anxious to establish its mainstream credentials, Tony Blair chose to highlight his acceptance of the anti-union consensus in an article for the *Times*: 'Let me state the position clearly, so that no one is in any doubt. [Under Labour] the essential elements of the trade union legislation of the 1980s will remain ... The changes that we do propose would leave British law the most restrictive on trade unions in the Western world.'

Blair and his successors in government have stuck to that promise. It's generally accepted that British unions are more legally contained and closely scrutinised than any of their European and North American counterparts – and for that matter, probably any other British social institution. How unions raise funds; how they distribute funds; how they behave in relation to party politics; how they consult their members; how they function in the workplace; how they decide to go on strike: a legislative ratchet has tightened around all these things for almost a quarter of a century. The current Trade Union Bill is the latest, and especially punitive, turn of it. The bill passed its second reading in the House of Commons on 14 September. According to the rather congested summary on the Parliament website, the bill would, among other provisions,

Introduce a 50 per cent turnout requirement for industrial action ballots ... [and] in 'important public services' require a positive vote by at least 40 per cent of those entitled to vote in addition to the 50 per cent turnout threshold ... Extend the period of notice unions must give employers prior to industrial action, from the current seven days to 14 days ... Provide that industrial action ballot mandates ... expire after a four-month period ... Introduce new legal requirements relating to the supervision of picketing ... for example, that a picket supervisor must take reasonable steps to communicate information to the police ... Change [union member] political fund contributions from an opt-out to an opt-in arrangement ... Require unions to publish details of political expenditure in their annual returns if this expenditure exceeds £2000 ... Introduce a power whereby a Minister may ... [in the] public sector ... restrict facility time [union activity during working hours] ... Reform the role of the certification officer ... [by giving them] investigatory and enforcement powers; the power to impose financial penalties ... [and] require trade unions ... to pay a levy, funding the performance of his role.

The summary also mentions, almost in passing, that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) – hardly a name for a ministry that envisages much of a role for unions – is considering 'repealing the existing prohibition on hiring agency staff to replace workers participating in industrial action', a measure that would make many strikes close to impotent. Finally, the government 'intends to amend the bill to abolish check-off in the public sector ... [the] system whereby union membership payments are deducted from union members' salaries by their employers and paid over to unions'. Even the unions' most anodyne perks are to be ended.

The bill has upset a strikingly broad range of people. The former business secretary and leftist Liberal Democrat Vince Cable called it 'vindictive, counterproductive and ideologically driven'. In September, the Tory civil libertarian David Davis told Rupert Murdoch's *Sky News*, an unlikely place to hear a defence of unions, that 'there are bits of [the bill] which look OTT, like requiring pickets to give their names to the police force. What is this? This isn't Franco's Britain.' The next day, the *Financial Times* said the bill was 'out of proportion' and would 'threaten basic rights of assembly and free expression'. 'Over-regulating unions,' the editorial concluded, 'risks fomenting more workplace disruption.'

Yet at the TUC Congress last month, there seemed at first to be more resignation than indignation. 'Let's be clear, we have some difficult years ahead,' said the TUC president, Leslie Manasseh, a schoolmasterly former civil servant, in his opening address. The Sunday afternoon seafront in Brighton was sternly autumnal, and the presence of a few wind-battered pamphleteers was one of the few signs that the city was hosting the TUC's 147th annual showpiece. Inside the Brighton Centre, a hulking, rather worn building which was opened by James Callaghan in September 1977, shortly before the close working relationship between unions and Labour governments collapsed, seemingly for

good, the conference hall was quiet and two-thirds full. The upstairs galleries had been curtained off, and an audience of fewer than a thousand delegates, mostly middle-aged or older, listened to Manasseh and a succession of other middling speakers with expressions of mild interest.

In an adjoining exhibition room and in the lobby downstairs, there were three dozen stalls. A few were slick and elaborate. Unite, the largest British union with 1.4 million members (more than one in five of the national total), had a glossy red and white stage set with an arch, through which its general secretary, Len McCluskey, could be seen giving frequent television interviews. Most of the other stalls were smaller and more homespun. Two were for campaigns about the victimisation of union members: the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, which fights for recognition of the brutal treatment of miners by the police during the defeated strike of 1984-85; and the Shrewsbury 24 Campaign, 'seeking to overturn the unjust prosecution of 24 building workers who were charged following the first ever national building workers' strike in 1972'. The trade union movement does not forget. That is one of the things that keeps it alive; but sometimes the past seems to matter too much.

Introspection is another, related flaw. The delegates were more diverse than at most political conferences: a single block of seats accommodated, among others, the Fire Brigades Union, the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists, and the Professional Trade Union for Prison, Correctional and Secure Psychiatric Workers. I heard speeches in Kentish and Scouse and posh North London accents; and saw delegates with 1980s feminist crops, long 1970s rock star locks, hipster beards and sports sandals. Yet there was a sameness to the proceedings, a sense of business as usual, of a long-established culture talking to itself – through composite motions and section ballots and other familiar rituals – and not thinking too much about the outside world. Even the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader the day before was hardly mentioned in the opening speeches. The Congress programme had him down to speak at a fringe meeting ('Creating a Trade Union Response to Attacks on Welfare by the Tory Government'); his surname was misspelled.

Dave Prentis, general secretary of the public sector union Unison, Britain's second biggest union, has been immersed in this culture for half a century. 'Since I was probably 14,' he told me, 'the only job I wanted was within the trade union movement.' Prentis is slight, watchful, a weigher of words. He is in a different tradition of union leadership from the combative alpha male Len McCluskey. When I visited Prentis in July at Unison's pointedly restrained new headquarters in London, all beige surfaces and consensual open plan, he was looking unusually tanned and I asked if he had been abroad. He gave me a knowing look that spoke of decades of press monsterings of 'union barons': 'Don't ever tell a journalist where you've been on holiday!' he said.



Prentis cut his teeth as a union negotiator in the 1970s. He still speaks about the experience in the slightly formal, by-the-book language of the trade unionists of that era, who expected employers to listen to them. 'We were all-powerful within electricity – I was the negotiator for electricity staff. We sat on the consultation bodies. The decisions were not made without us being involved. We had big, big industrial complexes where we had 60 per cent, 70 per cent membership. And you spoke for 100 per cent [of the workforce], because anything you agreed [with management] applied to everyone.' When negotiations reached an impasse, strikes were easy to mount: 'The London Weighting Dispute, '73, '74,' he remembered, as if it was only weeks ago. 'We wrote the [pay] claim. We ran the action. All over London, everybody came out, and we paid them full take-home pay. No [strike] ballot, no picket needed.'

However, he said, 'we were always vulnerable. The vulnerability didn't come necessarily from policies adopted by governments, it also came from the whole world of our members changing. Because since the 1970s the world of work has fragmented ... It's much more difficult to recruit. Our heartlands were privatised: gas, electricity and water. Then postal [strike] ballots were introduced by the Tories, and our ballot turnouts collapsed. When you get a ballot paper through the post, you put it on the mantelpiece. You leave the voting to someone else. The union doesn't operate in the home, it operates in the workplace.'

Other political, social and economic changes cited in the extensive literature that has built up since the 1970s on the decline of British unions include the rise of self-employment; the rise of temporary employment; the rise of part-time working and the service industries; the fall of manufacturing; increased competition from less unionised foreign economies; growing individualism; the disappearance of newspaper labour correspondents and informed union coverage; and the increasing extent to which being in a union at all is an aberration. I have been in one for twenty years, but barely 14 per cent of private sector workers are now union members, according to the annual survey of unions conducted by BIS (the document is neutrally written but quite helpful, you might imagine, for those concocting anti-union bills). In the public sector, 54 per cent of employees are union members, but both this percentage and the total number of public sector trade unionists are falling steadily as Conservative spending cuts shrink and casualise the workforce.

By European standards, the proportion of Britons who are union members is still respectable: lower than in Italy and Scandinavia, but higher than in Germany or France. Unions have been shrinking across Europe since the 1980s. Yet outside Britain, they often retain considerable power: in Germany, through their participation in influential works councils; in France, through the willingness of non-unionised workers to follow the unions' lead in disputes with employers. Meanwhile, the modern trajectory of unions in Britain has come to be regarded by Continental trade unionists and writers on industrial relations as a cautionary tale. The all-time peak for union membership in the United Kingdom was 36 years ago, just before Thatcher began the great workplace counterrevolution, when there were more than 13.2 million union members. Now there are 6.4 million. Since the late 1990s, the decline has slowed and occasionally, almost imperceptibly, gone into reverse – thanks in part to legislation put in place under Blair, which gave employees stronger rights to union representation. To the Blairites, wider union membership was tolerable, even desirable, so long as the members didn't behave as if it was still the 1970s. The unions also remained a major source of Labour's political energy and funding. Yet given that the UK population has risen by a tenth since Blair's election, the subsequent stabilisation of union numbers is less impressive than it looks.

In some ways, British unions have adapted to the modern world. In 2014, 55 per cent of their members were women. A higher proportion of trade unionists are professionals than in the workforce as a whole. At the TUC Congress, speakers sounded more at ease discussing the environment, or sexual and racial prejudice, than delegates at most British party conferences. Many of these changes have been taking place in the movement since the 1970s or before. The striking workers at Grunwick were mostly Asian women. During the mass pickets on their behalf, an ex-miner told me in 2006, he and other participants from the National Union of Mineworkers mingled with gay rights activists – almost a decade before a similar alliance during the 1984-85 miners' strike, which was stirring but exaggeratedly portrayed as a breakthrough in the film *Pride* (2014).

It has suited opponents of unions to ignore all this in favour of cloth-cap stereotypes. But there are some respects in which obsolescence does threaten the movement: 38 per cent of trade unionists are over 50, compared to 28 per cent of UK employees as a whole. Membership is much more common in economically fragile regions such as the North-East – the steel plant in Redcar that was threatened with closure last month is heavily unionised – than in the ever more dominant South-East. Even without the headwinds of the current trade union bill, most unions are at best running to stand still. Prentis told me: 'Last year we recruited 162,000 members. We lost 180,000 members due to austerity.'

Jason Moyer-Lee has no time for such talk. The IWGB's precise origins are complicated and contested, but essentially it began as a breakaway from Unite and Unison. Along the way, during 2012 and 2013, there was a bitter dispute between some future IWGB members and Unison about how to get better working conditions for cleaners at the University of London; and more broadly, about how to do modern trade unionism. 'The trade union movement in the UK is overly bureaucratic and averse to confrontational

tactics,' Moyer-Lee told me, 'and while the model of work has changed since the 1970s, I'm not sure the [mainstream] model of union organisation has. Cleaners work three or four jobs. The idea that you can leaflet them in their lunch hour is over.' The IWGB is not part of the TUC. 'The advantages,' Moyer-Lee said, 'don't jump out at me.'

Was he worried about the trade union bill? He shrugged. 'The intention of the bill is to kill trade unionism. But the [voting] thresholds they're talking about, we always exceed them on our strike ballots. We get 75 per cent, 95 per cent in favour. I'd like to think other unions could get that sort of turnout.'

I asked Prentis about the IWGB. 'The question I would have about the union you're talking about,' he said quietly, 'is if the membership is doing things, or is it just the leadership saying things that they can't achieve?' There was a danger, he went on, that 'you just become an individual who spouts off.' He paused. 'That's not to say we're not a militant union. Last year we took more industrial action than all the other TUC unions put together. I've had more than thirty years overseeing industrial action. But the aim of the action has got to be a show of power in order to reach an agreement. It's not going to change the world.'

*

Since 2014 the IWGB has been recruiting among the cleaners at the Royal College of Music opposite the Albert Hall. The college building is like a grand Edwardian hotel, with brass door handles and mosaic floors and endless wood-panelled corridors along which students rush between rooms full of precious instruments and equipment – not easy to clean, in other words. The work is contracted out to Ocean Integrated Services, an ever diversifying British company which since its foundation in the 1970s has ridden the great outsourcing wave and now offers public and private sector clients everything from cleaning to carpentry to security, while, as its website puts it, 'driving down costs' and 'increasing operational efficiencies'.



The company considers six cleaners sufficient for the Royal College. The cleaners, all of them in the IWGB, disagree. 'The work is too much,' one of them, like many IWGB members a Latin American immigrant, told me when we met at the union office. 'The students are not the cleanest. They leave garbage on the ground right next to the bin. We pick it up, clean the instruments, pick up glasses, mop the floors, polish the windows, clean the toilets, clean the rugs, clean the patio between the buildings. Every day, there are visitors, events – there is more mess. Once, a manager from Ocean came for our entire shift and timed how long it took us to do every job. Ocean are always trying to add things to our contract; clean the ceilings, which are very tall, or clean the glass ceiling lamps from the inside ... There can't be any dirt, the building has to be spotless. We work at night, and in the winter it's very very cold. In the summer, it's extremely hot. You get sick from the changes in temperature.'

If illness prevents them from working, the cleaners are paid nothing for the first three days, and after that only the statutory minimum of £88.45 a week. In April, the IWGB began campaigning for the cleaners to receive much better sick pay, holidays and pensions – the combination of demands which the union and its forerunners have skilfully publicised across London in recent years as the 3Cosas ('three things'). Instead of taking on Ocean directly, the IWGB announced on its website that it would be 'targeting the institution', the RCM.

Moyer-Lee told me to be there at 1 p.m. on 19 June. At a quarter to, the front of the building was almost deserted. The odd tourist wandered past towards the Albert Hall; a student stood on the pavement with a cello on her back. A sign by the college entrance said: 'Exams are taking place today. Please keep noise to a minimum.' Then a taxi pulled

up, Moyer-Lee got out, and from different directions two dozen IWGB members materialised around him, carrying drums, vuvuzelas and banners. Latin American and British, middle-aged and much younger, men and women: they all milled around on the pavement for a few minutes while Moyer-Lee, with two microphones stuffed into his back pockets, set up a portable amp. From the front steps of the college, he made a short speech. Then he began chanting: 'Sick Pay! Holiday Pay! Pensions Now!' The others joined in, and started stomping around in a circle on the pavement, drums banging, vuvuzelas blaring. After several minutes, still chanting and banging, they formed a semicircle, facing in towards the main lobby of the college, and the exam rooms beyond. Passers-by looked on, curious – union demonstrations are not very common in Kensington – but they were not the IWGB's intended audience. After half an hour, the protesters were still chanting without a pause, the sound was bouncing along the brick canyon between the college and the Albert Hall, and Moyer-Lee was chanting with them, his expression somewhere between a trance and utter implacability. As I write, the RCM has not met the IWGB's demands, but I wonder whether it will hold out.

It is possible that the threat of the trade union bill will create a fiercer, healthier trade union movement. On the first evening of the TUC Congress, after the gloominess and foreboding of the opening session, there was a fringe meeting titled 'Kill the Bill'. The seats quickly ran out in the fuggy back room: people stood under the chandeliers and listened to McCluskey make a cutting speech about the Conservatives wanting to reduce the unions to a mere 'advisory body on industrial law'. But, he concluded, righteous people down the ages had always 'stood up against bad laws'.

British trade unionists have done so before. When Edward Heath's Conservative government tried to micromanage the unions through its 1971 Industrial Relations Act, they organised huge and vibrant demonstrations (the slogan 'Kill the Bill' was first used on these demos) and then an effective non-co-operation campaign once the bill became law. The campaign drained Heath's authority and was one reason he was ejected from office in 1974.

The unions are weaker now, but they still have allies. Shortly after McCluskey had finished speaking, Corbyn's right-hand man, John McDonnell, slipped into the room. He had been delayed, he said, by his involvement in appointing the new shadow cabinet. 'I wouldn't be there,' he said with feeling, looking around the room, 'if it wasn't for you.' Then he switched to the first-person plural: 'We in the trade union movement ...' Minutes after the meeting ended, he was announced as shadow chancellor.

During the rest of the TUC Congress, the new reality of a Labour leadership that is not embarrassed by unions – definitely the first since Michael Foot's in the early 1980s, and arguably the first since Harold Wilson's in the early 1960s – gradually warmed up the Brighton Centre. At another fringe meeting, the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, Matt Wrack, talked excitedly about an 'alliance with the Corbyn campaign' to 'build a mass movement'. On the day that Corbyn himself came to speak, the lobby and conference hall and bars were chattier, more crowded, less world-weary. 'He's in the building,' one delegate whispered to a comrade in the main bar as the somewhat dazed-looking Labour leader extricated himself from a crowd at the VIP entrance. 'I am and always will be an active trade unionist,' Corbyn said early in his speech. In fringe meetings and in the conference hall from then on, it became a commonplace to call his leadership victory 'a historic turning point' for unions and the broader left.

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With their trade union bill, the Conservatives may have in mind a historic turning point of a different sort. On 15 July, the week after a typically disruptive strike on London Underground, the Conservative minister Nick Boles attempted to justify the bill on the *Today* programme:

All we're trying to do is strike a reasonable and fair balance between the interests of trade unions and the interests of people who are trying to get to work on time and only get to work through one means of transport, and the people who are trying to get their kids into school, and can't put their kids into another school if the school goes on strike. Those interests are not represented in that ballot.

Like David Cameron and most current government ministers, Boles works hard to present his arguments mildly, as if they were common sense, but the implications of his statement are pretty startling. Any strike that inconveniences people beyond the enterprise concerned – that is, virtually any effective strike – lacks full democratic legitimacy. But since that legitimacy could never realistically be secured – the public could hardly be balloted every time a strike affecting them were proposed – then why allow strikes at all? And without strikes as a weapon of last resort, how are unions

supposed to bargain credibly with employers? And without real bargaining powers, why have unions at all?

Whether enough voters are ready to go along with all this, as with Cameron's radical remaking of British society in general, can be doubted. Since 1975 the pollster Mori has been regularly asking whether 'trade unions have too much power in Britain today.' In 1978, on the eve of the 'winter of discontent', 82 per cent thought so. By 2014, it had dwindled to 29 per cent. Over the same period, the proportion of Britons who thought that 'trade unions are essential to protect workers' interests' hardly budged: from 78 per cent to 77 per cent.

In their union legislation, the Thatcher governments were always careful not to get too far ahead of public opinion. Tebbit made this clear to me in 2013: "The media – I wanted all the time to be urging me to go further, and for me to be saying, "Hold on, chaps." Because that gave me a better standing not only in Parliament but with the public. I was half-pleased when the *Daily Express* denounced me as "Timid Tebbit".' Cameron's government may not be capable of or interested in such delicate manoeuvring.



On the first day of the Conservative Party Conference in Manchester this month, there was a TUC march through the city centre protesting against the trade union bill. There had been some fringe talk at the TUC Congress two weeks before about 'shutting down the Tory conference' as the first big step in the 'Kill the Bill' campaign, which also includes a London rally and lobbying of Parliament on 2 November. Yet most of the route of the Manchester march impotently circled the conference compound, or 'secure zone' as it was officially described, which was thickly protected by temporary fences, cleared streets and policemen. The march felt cheerily defiant rather than confrontational, with balloons and music and children; many of the eighty thousand demonstrators were students, not trade unionists. I asked one recent graduate who had come along to protest against austerity what he thought of the trade union bill. 'I don't know much about unions,' he said, 'I know they were strong in ... the 1980s?'

Only for one brief stretch did the march head directly towards the conference centre. Here, a few demonstrators flicked Vs or shouted 'Tory scum!' and thousands more were prompted by the march organisers to boo and jeer, 'to send a message into the conference hall'. A hundred yards in the distance, standing on a raised piazza beyond the police, with the conference logo – 'Security. Stability. Opportunity' – in giant letters on a marquee behind them, two dozen Conservative delegates in smart suits watched the approaching river of marchers with interest, some of them filming with their phones. It was almost as if they were on safari.

In Brighton a fortnight earlier, after the Corbyn speech to the TUC Congress, I went out onto the seafront to get some air. The sun had finally come out, but the wind was still blasting, so I sat in one of the flaking Victorian shelters. There was an elderly man already there, a TUC delegate, whom I gradually recognised as a former union leader. He had always been on the right of the movement; since the 1960s, he said, he had been trying to do tolerable deals with employers and governments and, less successfully, trying to persuade unions to modernise their recruitment. Now he was worried about the trade union bill: the crudity of it, and the effect it would have on employment rights and on the frailer, less well-funded unions. But he wasn't that worried. 'I've travelled a lot,' he said, 'and there's not a country in the world, however repressive, that's been able to abolish trade unions.' He nodded at the churning sea. 'It's rough out there. But they keep doing it.'

9 October

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