

Reconstructing Resistance and Renewal in Public Service Unionism in the 21st Century: Lessons from a Century of War and Peace

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Abstract:

This special issue uses the occasion of the centenary of the Whitley Commission Reports to illuminate the contemporary crisis in public service industrial relations both in Britain, and globally, from an historical perspective. In all six countries studied – Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the US – public service employment is labour intensive and quantitatively significant in the overall economy. The large wage bill in the sector and the public services public servants deliver have been major targets of neoliberal reforms, starting in the UK and the US at the turn of the 1980s and in the other countries about a decade later, aimed at reducing the size and nature of the welfare state. In addition, the relatively high union density (even now) and the political dimension of public services and public union strategies have been major targets of New Public Management (NPM) and more latterly austerity. However, we found that the regressive period has had a differential impact in different countries. In the liberal market economies of the UK and the US, the neo-liberal turn has destabilised traditional patterns of public sector industrial relations to greatest effect. While in the more coordinated market economies, traditional arrangements and values have been more resistant to austerity and neoliberal reforms. We attempt to shed light on these differential impacts through a critical analysis and comparative overview of the historical evolution of public sector industrial relations institutions in each country studied.

Key words: public sector industrial relations; Whitleyism; public service union specificity; bargaining models and strategies; industrial democracy; new public management; austerity; double movement.

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Introduction

Across Europe and globally, public services have been under pressure to reform, restructure, downsize and marketise for four decades. These pressures have been

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further intensified by the austerity policies introduced as the neoliberal response to the financial meltdown of 2008-09. In the UK alone, the 2010 Coalition Government's budget cuts were the deepest in real terms since the Second World War. Because public services are labour intensive, cuts mean job cuts as well as service cuts. In UK local government alone, more than 700,000 jobs have been lost under austerity. Austerity impacts a number of related areas as budget cuts and job loss under a deepening recession mean increased demand for services. This combination of critical features means public services are in crisis.

Despite these recent and current trends, public service industrial relations (IR) is under-researched and this special issue uses the centenary of the Whitley Reports (1917) as an opportunity to fill a significant gap in scholarship. Aimed at institutionalising conflict in the private sector, the Whitley model of multi-employer multi-union bargaining had a far-reaching impact and influence from 1917 as the major model taken up by the early public service unions in the UK (Webb and Webb, 1919; Seifert, 1992, p. 9).

J.H. Whitley, chair of the wartime 'Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction on the Relations between Employers and Employed' was very conscious, with many at a time of war, of the need for industrial peace after the war. Industrial peace was only to be gained through some form of industrial democracy akin to political democracy. In R.H. Tawney's words, self-government and a 'Constitution for Industry' was discussed with as much keenness as a 'Constitution for the State' (Tawney 1920, p.vii-viii). The struggle for self-government in work by trade unions in industry and latterly in public services had been raging over for 50 years in the UK. The movement

accelerated during the war for, as Tawney goes on to note, reorganisation for increased production could not occur without worker consent. J.H. Whitley echoed this sentiment as part of the contemporary belief that the country should be a more equal place for soldiers returning from the horrors of war,

“The cause for which the war has been fought, and the tragic sacrifices it has involved, give a supreme importance to the human relationships in industry.”

(Whitley, 1918, p. ix)

He wanted these relationships to be ‘permanently’ improved as the First Whitley Report shows. The special issue sheds light on how far this was the case in the UK public sector and compares the paths that other countries took during the last 100 years. As such, this issue fills a gap in the literature during this period that marks the centenary of WWI by shedding light on the importance to contemporaries of a fair and equal society for returning soldiers through mechanisms for industrial democracy. More particularly, it uses the occasion of the centenary of the Whitley Commission Reports to illuminate the contemporary crisis in public service IR both in Britain, and globally, from an historical perspective. A major concern of the contributions is thus with current issues: how can the current crisis in the sector be addressed? How far are the traditional patterns of public sector industrial relations a resource or a constraint on the successful defence of public service? To address such questions, an historical perspective is employed.

Key Themes, Methods and Arguments

In recent decades, New Right thinking and New Public Management (NPM) have attempted to un-differentiate public service industrial relations from the private sector model. In light of this trend, a central question today is: how can we understand and assess the traditional social and political status of public service unions and to what extent have their identity, ideology and strategies changed in response to this reform agenda. This inquiry entails the following related questions: How can we do justice to the specificity of public service IR? And how can we theorise contemporary public service unions? These considerations, as the contributions below show, demand conceptual, historical and comparative analysis.

NPM reforms create a new institutional order where the borderline between politics and public service management has been displaced. They attempt to engineer a shift from the traditional model of local government accountability through the ballot box to a 'managerial accountability' (Stoker, 1996, p. 19). In other words, NPM marks a shift away from the view that the complexity of public service delivery necessitates professional and political judgements about the definition of individual and community needs (Lewis and Neiman, 2009). This 'managerialist model' stands as an example of the kind of instrumental rationality in which political questions of priorities are transposed into apparently scientific or technical issues' (Mattei, 2007, p. 614).

NPM reforms thus aim to erode the historical and political specificity of public service and public service labour relations which have evolved in line with the professional bureaucratic model of public administration. This is particularly clear when one looks at the NPM preference for decentralised and performance-related pay

in place of centralised pay determination systems aimed at achieving standardised careers and pay progression. These traditional systems made up part of the specificity of public service unions and were hard-won through political struggles from the late 19th century. They were seen as essential to the creation and efficiency of a universal public service – a desired political and economic goal for public service unions. NPM reforms aim to dismantle this democratic ideal of a universal public service premised on social stability and political decision-making and to replace it with a fragmented and uneven system founded on market-driven notions of efficiency and consumer demand.

The issue examines the pace at which these reforms have been introduced across the countries studied – Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the US - and their impact on public sector industrial relations. We find variations and similarities and we look therefore at some of the reasons for these. We ask finally: how far have NPM reforms in fact eroded public service unions' specificity? Even in countries like the UK and the US where the impact and pace has been deepest, can one still point to an underlying specificity? If so, how can we explain this?

This comparative overview is based on countries with largely common roots in the political/historical conjuncture delineated above. These nations however, dealt with the resulting underlying problems and contradictions through similar but distinct historical trajectories. A key rationale and purpose of this Special Issue is to produce a nuanced understanding of the core questions raised above, through relevant, focused contrasts and comparisons around a number of key themes including the evolution and rise of state intervention in the form of public services; the evolution of public

service labour organisations and the nature of public sector IR. We recognise that comparative study, especially in the realm of public services (which are the result of complex and interrelated legal and political histories) is a difficult undertaking. In light of this we see this special issue as a first step in a longer-term study which will seek to clarify the epistemological issues involved in comparative methodology (for an insightful illustration of some of these see Samuel, 2001).

Finally, the underlying rationale of this historical perspective has been to examine/trace the relationship between past and present developments. For example, what, if any, links are there between the attempts of NPM to write out the political dimension of the problem and failure to adequately deal with this historically?

Origins, key features and distinctiveness of public service labour and unions

The establishment of public services in the UK from the late 19th century was the capitalist state's response to rising working class discontent at the appalling social conditions thrown up in rapidly industrialising nations. These state interventions were aimed at resolving the worst social excesses of the free market as part of what Polanyi (1944) calls the 'double movement': periods of laissez-faire succeeded by periods of counter-protective movements. These periods of state intervention included increases in basic public services and extensions of the franchise to placate workers. Both world wars were characterised by such patterns as social revolution was preferable to political revolution.

In the UK, these 'residual' interventions meant that the status of the resulting public service labour was inadequately recognised/formalised (Gill-McLure, 2013). Under

these circumstances public sector unions, as their adoption of Whitleyism illustrates, used private sector union methods and strategies to protect their members' interests. However, public service IR in the UK is nevertheless distinctive for a number of reasons: Terry (2000) notes that public service unions are engaged in a political process; they are structured as single-industry unions; further, the distinctiveness of the employment relationship in the public sector is often encapsulated in the 'ill-defined notion' of *public service ethos*. Ferner and Colling (1991, p. 393) argue that this distinctiveness is due to the fact of public ownership and that this 'political contingency' has profoundly influenced the 'logic' and conduct of industrial relations in public services. Rouban (2014) makes a similar point in the context of the French civil service arguing with the politics of bureaucracy school, that public service is imbued with politics as public servants act as mediators between the state and the citizen (Peters and Pierre 2014). Most of the contributions in this special issue bear out these points in varying degrees.

The German contribution for example foregrounds the fact that collective bargaining in the public sector rather than being a purely economic process is a process bearing on the political and societal role of public services. Rouban's contribution shows the same to be the case in France. What these contributions show is that these considerations lead to differential and distinct public sector union strategies. To take one example, public sector unions in France when faced with public service cuts under austerity argue that these are against the public interest. This is a political argument as well as an economic one.

These overall distinctive features have been translated at a legal and structural level in differing ways across Europe. Thus, Germany, Sweden and Italy, are all characterised by strong formal IR systems and collective bargaining traditions. In Germany, the public sector is divided into a two-part system of employment relations, distinguishing between civil servants (*Beamte*) and employees (non-civil servants). The latter group has about the same rights and obligations as private sector employees. Civil servants, on the other hand, are subject to the so-called public service law; they must be ‘loyal’ to their employer – i.e. the state – and they have no right to strike. Yet, civil servants enjoy a range of privileges, two of which are quite significant. First, after completion of training, civil service trainees usually receive the status of a civil servant – that is, after being *verbeamtet* they enjoy a dismissal protection that is usually lifelong and can be suspended only in the case of serious misconduct. Second, civil servants receive significantly higher pensions than employees of both the public and the private sector. Corresponding with the two-part system of employment are thus two types of industrial relations in the German public sector: a formal, largely unilateral one in the case of civil servants, in which salaries, working hours and other working conditions are set by law, and a bargaining type where pay and working conditions are negotiated and without any overall ban on industrial action. In the words of Keller (1981, p. 345) Germany had both a *legislation model* and a *bargaining model* of employment relations in tandem.

There are several points of similarity between the German and the Swedish cases, but also some considerable discrepancies; most notably, there is no real *legislation model* in the Swedish public sector, just a *bargaining model*. In its original form, the ‘Swedish model’ included a wage bargaining system that was coordinated through

peak-level agreements. Labour relations in Sweden are historically regarded as highly centralised with strong, nation-wide, high-density associations for both employers and employees, covering all sectors of the economy, private and public sectors alike.

Therefore the trade unions in the public sector were parts of the industrial relations system ever since it began to take shape at approximately the same time as

Whitleyism emerged in the UK – with a few exceptions for example, amongst civil servants.

If Swedish public sector industrial relations has most certainly been a bargaining model, industrial relations in the Italian public sector has been rather close to a legislation model, if we stick to Keller's (1981) terminology. Ever since World War II, union presence has been important in the Italian public sector; yet the role of collective bargaining has grown more slowly to assert itself fully only in the 1990s. In the early post-war decades the law was the main regulatory source, and labour market dynamics depended strongly on politics and the dynamics of the political arena. The trade unions played a role by influencing the political actors and the legislative process, which formed the basis for ensuring status and wages for civil servants. Due to these political circumstances, the key union in all administrations was the CISL (*Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori*), the confederation of Catholic origin. The CISL had privileged relations with the Christian Democrats, the dominant political party from 1946 until 1992. The CISL guaranteed most employees a 'quiet' protection (without resort to industrial action) and kept them safe from layoffs. On the contrary, the CGIL (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*), closer to parties of the left, organised dissent through periodical strikes amongst some sections of the membership.

In contrast to most of the European countries above, Whitleyism reflected the *voluntarist* approach to British labour relations dating back to the 19th century. Voluntarism, according to Flanders (1974), though difficult to define, was historically ‘an established tradition’ with a strong influence on British trade unions (1974, p.352). For Kahn-Freund, voluntarism denoted the British unions’ preference for ‘immunities’ (from legal action) as the basis of trade union freedoms (to organise, to strike) as opposed to ‘positive rights’ (found for example in France, Italy, Germany). There is not the space here to discuss the evolution of voluntarism in Britain throughout the 20th century (though this is an important issue). For our purposes, we have located the roots of this tradition in *laissez-faire* economics and use it to denote employer *and* trade union antipathy to legal regulation of the employment relationship. This approach underlay the recommendations of the Whitley Commission Reports (taken up by public sector unions) which rather than making the new joint decision-making structures and processes legally binding, preferred to leave the parties to the employment relationship to adopt/adapt them to their needs.

However, voluntarism pre-1979 is better understood as a system of ‘relative legal abstention, with primacy to – and support for - regulation through collective bargaining... a system of ‘collective *laissez-faire*’, resting on autonomous self-regulation...’ (Dickens, 2008, p. 4). It is arguable that this voluntarist legacy of ‘social regulation’ (ibid.) had a number of unintended consequences for UK public sector IR in the decades that followed the adoption of Whitleyism; and partly explains why public servants have no distinct legal status as in other parts of Europe.

This legacy meant that UK public service unions struggled in the interwar years to establish nationally binding pay and conditions. It took state intervention and trade union use of compulsory arbitration during WWII to achieve binding national pay bargaining. Public service unions have, with their private sector counterparts, employed a self-regulating bargaining model with minimal legal supports. This, despite their use of political lobbying and militant tactics (from the 1970s) has left them vulnerable to shifts in government policy (from progressive/regressive periods of public administration). A similar point is made by Wedderburn (1986) who argues that the tradition of legal abstention in British industrial relations made it easier for the Thatcher governments of the 1980s to introduce regressive employment legislation. On the other hand, Wedderburn also felt that positive rights would not have 'greatly deterred' the determination of the Government of 1980 (1986, pp. 846-847).

In the US, although the public sector lagged behind the private sector in establishing collective bargaining rights historically, public sector unionism grew dramatically from the 1960s and 1970s. Historically, two systems have evolved for regulating public sector industrial relations: a legislative and a bargaining model. However, this dual system differs from those in the European countries noted here. In the US, the legal framework is less overarching with lesser protections and limited room; while collective bargaining grew unevenly amongst different states in the federal system. In contrast to the voluntarist approach in the UK, public service collective bargaining grew out of legislation by states. And unlike the other five countries, with their traditional centralised bargaining arrangements, in the US, the multitude of bargaining structures across states led to highly decentralised bargaining. This further weakened

the power of public sector unions in the US to act as ‘social partners’ at the national level on a par with European trade unions in coordinated market economies.

The creation of Whitley Councils in the British civil service had been noted in France (Puget, 1943). However, in France, in contrast to the British voluntarist tradition, the French jurist Duguit developed a legal theory to legitimise state intervention in a market-oriented economy. Thus the ‘public service doctrine’ within French public law is embedded in a legislative framework grounded in a political and philosophical debate around *le service public*. This legislative framework was used to redefine the modern state’s tasks as the satisfaction of collective needs and social integration. Together with the accompanying ‘powerful conceptual machinery’, this legislative framework acted as ‘a major driver of social and political change’ in the twentieth century (Chevallier, 1987, p. 9). Such legal and constitutional supports have helped to slow down (as the contribution on France below argues) the infiltration and impact of NPM on the traditions of public service industrial relations in France.

Impact of Neo-liberal Reforms and Austerity

The post-1979 regressive period has had a differential impact in the different countries studied. In the liberal market economies of the UK and the US, the neo-liberal turn has destabilised traditional patterns of public sector industrial relations to greatest effect. While in the more coordinated market economies, traditional arrangements and values have been more resistant to austerity and neoliberal reforms.

In Italy, the development of collective bargaining in the private sector led to its evolution in the public sector too from the 1970s onwards. Yet the transition to a *de*

facto contractual system, similar and equivalent to the private sector, was slow and thwarted, partly because the unions themselves were divided on the matter. The employees mostly preferred the security of jobs that was offered to them by Christian Democrats rather than taking collective action to improve their wages or commit to increase their productivity. A compromise that provided a cautious innovation in contractual matters was reached in 1983 through the so-called General Framework Law (*legge-quadro*): this, while maintaining the supremacy of the law, gradually introduced national public sector bargaining. Still, however, the trade unions depended on political power, as bargaining was essentially linked to the electoral needs of the governing parties.

In Sweden, a right-wing coalition government in office 1991-94 pursued a deregulation and retrenchment policy, including unbundling, outsourcing and privatising of formerly central public functions, such as the communication system, postal services and electricity supply. At the same time, NPM influenced ways of governing and organising the public sector on a broader basis in order to increase ‘efficiency’ and save public costs. When the Social Democratic Party got in office in 1994, they continued to pursue a retrenchment policy in order to decrease the budget deficit (Koch, 2006, pp. 70-71). In the wake of the fundamental structural changes, there was a general trend towards individualization and decentralization of industrial relations. The public sector trade unions and collective bargaining continued to be important, but now the unions had to also face private sector employers’ associations due to outsourcing and marketisation (Thörnqvist, 2007).

In Germany, both public sector employers and trade unions, though partly with different objectives, strove for a comprehensive administrative reform as well as a

reform of public sector industrial relations around the turn of the millennium (Bogumil et al., 2007). A first step was the settlement of a separate Collective Agreement on Public Utilities in 2000, and in 2003, public employers and trade unions agreed on a procedure to renegotiate the main collective agreements until January 2005. Among other things, a departure from the principle of a decent livelihood in favour of a strengthened performance orientation was introduced. The latter was aimed at a parallel ‘modernisation’ of both public service law and collective bargaining along the ideas of new public management. Need for change also arose directly from the collective agreement system itself. The Collective Agreement for the Public Service in 2005 (covering the federal level and local authorities) and the Collective Agreement for the Public Service of the States in 2006 replaced the Federal Agreement for Non-manual Employees and two agreements for manual workers that had been valid for about 40 years. These old collective agreements no longer represented qualification structures and labour market requirements in an adequate way. Moreover, over time partial improvements had led to a patchwork of unsystematic and discriminatory provisions.

In the UK, a national-level pay determination system modelled on Whitley Joint Industrial Councils permitting joint negotiation and consultation between employers and workers was taken up in the civil service and local government in 1919. However, national decisions did not become binding or gel into a ‘Whitley system’ until after WWII and came under immense pressure from the post-1979 reforms. A slow process of privatisation, marketisation and outsourcing has left public service bargaining restructured and hollowed-out. This overall direction continued, despite some additional funding under New Labour. Local government remains the last sector

still with national-level bargaining but even here, years of reform and austerity have put immense pressures on the traditional Whitley model. At a local level, the lack of a strong national framework, as envisaged by Whitley, has left local union branches at the mercy of authoritarian penny-pinching senior managers with little understanding of anything resembling a public service ethos. This is a return to the interwar years and the kind of social regression that has lost complete sight of the importance of industrial democracy to a political democracy. This lesson was already learnt at the time of WWI and underlay the philosophy behind the Whitley recommendations. It has somehow got un-learnt during 40 years of neoliberal reform.

In all six countries, public service employment is labour intensive and quantitatively significant in the overall economy. In the UK and the US, the labour force also has a higher than average percentage of women and black and ethnic minority staff. All have been subject to austerity measures since 2008, though these have been less severe in Sweden and to some extent Germany. Additionally, union strategies have altered due to wage freezes, restructuring of services and bargaining arrangements with increasingly less to bargain over in money terms under budget crises. Unions have thus focused increasingly on defensive strategies looking to protect staff on fixed-term contracts and casual employment by demanding permanent employment contracts.

In all six countries, regardless of the overall traditional strength of the IR system and collective bargaining traditions, the challenges posed by NPM have had seriously damaging consequences for public services and public service unions. Austerity has come on top of years of NPM-type neoliberal reforms aimed at eroding the

distinctiveness of public services, unions and terms and conditions. And although in France, NPM tools have been introduced in a public service that remains largely distanced from the neoliberal philosophy, reduced budgets and cutback management have nevertheless exacerbated the competition between services to obtain scarce resources.

In the US, state legislative power to end collective bargaining in many states and the removal of union rights to strike, for example, has increased the rate of outsourcing. And without European Union Law to protect employees terms and conditions under transfer conditions (Transfers of undertakings Directive 2001/23/EC; for the UK, the position regarding this protection post-Brexit may be weakened), the outsourced employees have become private employees on transfer. In the US school sector, local state legislatures have prohibited bargaining over school restructuring and teacher dismissal procedures with a move away from participative decision-making between teachers and school administrators to unilateral managerial control. Economic pressures under austerity in the US, as elsewhere, have generally been accompanied by social pressures as welfare regimes have been generally restructured due to high levels of unemployment. The result is pushing public services to crisis point with demand from low and no-income users increasing as budgets are reduced.

Resistance and Renewal?

The legacy of centralised bargaining (particularly in the UK, France and Sweden) in public services has meant that the government push for decentralisation leaves local unions and managers ill-prepared in terms of time, skills and resources for resisting the fallout of reform, austerity and top-down command-and-control driven

performance management systems. As in Italy, there were pressures for more local bargaining and a move to shop steward systems in the UK under incomes policies in the 1970s. However, in the UK, this trend came under strain from the reforms of the post-1979 period although some evidence has been reported of ‘union renewal’ locally in the 1980s in the civil service (Fairbrother, 1996) and in local government (Gill-McLure, 2014). The latter, longitudinal study however found that this renewal petered out under the years of New Labour and has been further eroded by austerity and the devolution agenda.

The long years of reform have been accompanied by highly publicised public service ‘chaos’ and ‘failure’ in the UK, as dubiously-designed, top-down league tables and hospital waiting-time targets are increasingly difficult to meet with depleted and overworked workforces. These trends create tensions between public servants and service user citizens eroding another distinctive feature of public service – the close link between citizens and public servants. On a political economy level, this latter link derives from the absence of the profit motive or a market mechanism and because public services are traditionally supplied through political mechanisms on the basis of need rather than consumer demand. Marketisation policies attempt to destroy this link by replacing it with the producer-consumer dichotomy postulated by classical economics for the profit-making private sector. This policy has been resisted by public sector unions generally and in Germany, they have resisted it by interpreting modernisation in terms of citizen-friendliness. Elsewhere too, progress with these policies has been slow as continuing strong public support for the UK’s National Health Service shows. As Rouban notes for France, public support here is due in part to the fact that the importance of public service continues as one of the ‘central values

rooted in the country's political memory'. In Sweden, the support for public-owned welfare is much stronger among 'ordinary people' than among the political parties, according to the annual polls made by the SOM institute³ at the Gothenburg University.

A related distinctive feature of public sector union strategy has traditionally been its practice of linking pay and conditions issues to political and social equity arguments around public service. Public servants hence have seen themselves as the defenders of the 'public interest'. Thus in UK local government, in the interwar period, NALGO (National Association of Local Government Officers) , the union organising municipal clerks and officers, argued that professional autonomy through standardised pay and conditions was essential to protect the public interest against the vested interests of local politicians. Or, teachers and university lecturers have traditionally defended their autonomy as the best means of protecting the long-term public interest in having a broadly educated public. In France, civil service unions have used the 'public service defence' argument to highlight the consequences of teacher reductions on the quality of education; or the consequences of public hospitals closures for equal access to high quality health care. Similar protests have been seen in Germany, Italy and Sweden too. For instance, in Sweden many trained nurses have left for better paid – and less stressful – jobs in Norway.

These features demonstrate that public services and the labour and unions that deliver them are the historical product of a political economic process that evolved as a response to the failure of pure markets and laissez-faire economics. They also

³ SOM = Samhälle, opinion, medier (*Society, Opinion, Media*)

demonstrate that public service workers and their unions' strategies are the dialectical product of their efforts to resist, shape and to influence an essentially political process (Terry, 2001). As the German contribution below argues:

'bargaining in the public sector is less an economic procedure than a dispute over the political, societal, and statutory recognition of public services.'

Conclusion: Reconstructing Resistance and Renewal – the Next 100 years?

Understanding the distinctiveness of public sector unions is, it is argued, essential to defending them from extinction. For despite their relatively high density, some argue that unions in many UK public sector workplaces have been 'hollowed out' (Carter and Klein, 2016). The same goes for the US and Canada. One source of this hollowing out is a disconnect between some union strategies and the professional concerns of public service workers. This disconnect has, it is argued, eroded member engagement (Carter and Klein, 2016). The issues and causal connections here are complex however and rooted in the immense difficulties around building local resistance under a reform process which, over four decades of job cuts, marketisation, work intensification and the importation of NPM, has transformed the culture of public service along the lines of private business.

Against the kind of disconnect noted above, many examples can be found amongst public service unions organising nurses, school teachers, fire fighters and railway workers (to mention a few) in the UK who continue to foreground - with unions in France and Germany - the politics of public service cuts. This crucial strategy needs to be strengthened and supported. This can be done partly by highlighting the

complexity and the political dimension of public sector unions. Indeed, any meaningful strategy for public sector union renewal needs to highlight the distinctive and positive role that public unions traditionally played (and continue to play) in society. It needs to show how they have defended the public interest and to explore ways in which this distinctiveness can be both defended and reinvented as part of a new ‘social movement unionism’ as seen recently in Canada and Germany (Ross and Savage, 2013; see below for Germany). The relationship between public sector unions and the communities they serve has historically formed a natural source of successful campaigns and alliances (Johnstone, 1994; Gill-McLure, 2007).

In recent years, there has been much talk of empowering local communities. This welcome trend needs to be firmly embedded in an historical understanding of why and how local communities became disempowered in the first place. A key source of community strength is the public service infra-structure that communities depend on as an essential support. That infra-structure is provided by a labour intensive, highly unionised and mostly public sector workforce under attack from years of neoliberal reform. Public service union and community renewal are thus intrinsically connected; understanding and highlighting this historical connection should be essential in any public service resistance and renewal strategy.

The history of public service unionism is characterised by a struggle to defend the importance of the public sphere, supported by state intervention, against the worst excesses of a laissez-faire economic orthodoxy. This struggle has come under great strain from the neoliberal turn which has shrunk the welfare state to breaking point. The tragedy of the Grenfell fire in London this month has revealed the abject failure

of the politics of austerity and marketisation. This tragedy looks set to be the turning point for a new protective counter-movement. A renewed public service unionism, galvanised by a strategy for demonstrating the importance of a public service ethos and good employment to 21st century democracy, will be essential to sustaining this new movement. This special issue hopes to make a contribution to the historical understanding demanded by such renewal.

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