

Brave New World?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- British trade unionism was not undermined by Margaret Thatcher, but by the dawn of a new, brutally competitive age that weakened it dramatically in the private sector, a major new analysis claims.

The book, entitled *The Evolution Of The Modern Workplace*, compiles data from 25 years of employment relations surveys to reveal how workers in the 21st century face a harsher, more competitive environment than their parents' generation.

The study charts the decline of manufacturing, the trade union collapse, and the rising importance of the law in governing industrial relations. It also examines topics such as the growing diversity of British employment and rising pressure in the workplace, which has pushed job stress to record levels.

By comparing unique data gathered across the 25 year-period, however, it also offers new explanations about how and why these changes have occurred.

The authors argue, for example, that the trade unions, widely believed to have been vanquished by the Conservative governments of the 1980s, were in fact damaged by a process of globalisation which undermined their bargaining power and from which they will probably never recover.

Even given the current recession, they suggest, unions belong to a different, less competitive and altogether "cosier" chapter in economic

history.

"Unions are not just having an off-moment following the 1980s," William Brown, Professor of Industrial Relations at the University of Cambridge and the book's co-editor, said. "To some extent, they were institutions for a completely different, more monopolistic world. If we want to protect the weak in the 21st century, we are going to have to think of new ways of doing it."

The study, published by Cambridge University Press, was based on a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Researchers drew heavily on the national Workplace Employment Relations Surveys (WERS), which have been published regularly since 1980 and aim to provide statistically reliable evidence about British industrial relations and employment practices.

Professor Keith Whitfield, from Cardiff Business School and co-editor, said: "Since 1980 the scale of change in the UK workplace has been tremendous, not just compared to that of other eras, but also compared to that in other countries. It is difficult to explain to current job market entrants how different things were for their parents when they were embarking on their working lives. Hopefully, this book will go some way to closing that gap."

One of the most dramatic patterns revealed by the study is the demise of collective bargaining - the negotiation of pay, hours, and other rights and conditions between workers and employees.

In the mid-20th century, such agreements were often negotiated with trade unions on a national scale. Between 1984 and 2004, however, the proportion of workplaces in the private sector with any collective bargaining fell from 47% to 16% as unions struggled to maintain even a minority presence.

Although this is often seen as a reflection of the tough, anti-union line taken by the Thatcher and Major governments, coupled with the decline of the heavily unionised manufacturing sector, the figures tell a different tale.

They suggest that as international competition increased over the course of the 20th century, British firms which had dominated the national market began to struggle to do so. Employers could not afford to strike deals with the unions in this tougher environment. As their bargaining power declined, the unions' ability to appeal to their members also collapsed.

In their place, the study charts the rise of individual labour law, increased communication between employers and workers that does not involve trade unions, and the development of management practices that are directed at improving organisational performance.

"While there was a cosy market, a rather civilised arrangement could exist between employers and employees," Professor Brown explained. "Sadly the world has become a much harsher place. Competition has risen and that has compromised the employers' position. Many feel that they cannot afford to support these arrangements any longer."

Provided by University of Cambridge ([news](#) : [web](#))

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