



US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient name: Maya Adereth

Project title: Trade Unions in Context: Organisational form and Universal Welfare Provision in the US and UK at the Turn of the 20th Century

Summary of project:

Across the literature on welfare state development, organized labour is widely held to form a key constituent and active advocate for the expansion of public benefits. As trade union scholars and labor historians have argued, however, the reality tends to be more complex. Like other organisations, trade unions position themselves politically based on the interests of their membership and the sort of opportunities and constraints they face—they might rely on mass mobilization in pursuit of broad social goals, or offer exclusive benefits to their select members. With declining unionisation rates and the breakdown of class driven politics, this latter strategy has come to the fore across diverse organizing environments.

My PhD thesis asks: when do trade unions come to support universal welfare policies? It pursues the question through a comparison of the British and American labour movements at the turn of the 20th century. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the two movements shared a common tradition of “bread and butter” unionism which emphasized the integrity of the high-grade white male worker, rejecting socialist politics in favor of Victorian ideals like self-help, independence, and thrift. Integral to this model was a range of health, pension, and death benefits paid into by members on a recurrent basis. By end of the century, however, the official orientation of the two movements had radically diverged: while the British Trades Union Congress came to support universal state health and pension schemes, the American Federation of Labor made common cause with insurance providers to resist social insurance proposals advanced by reformers in the American Association for Labor Legislation.

The key contribution of my work is to introduce the importance of organizational environment and identity in guiding trade union orientation towards public benefits. I argue that benefit provision for British and American trade unions served far more than a practical purpose—in a hostile legal environment, benefits enabled early trade unions to mimic the far more legitimate friendly and fraternal mutual benefit societies. Though prior research has pointed to the importance of the friendly and fraternal society form in shaping trade union development in each case, my dissertation is unique in exposing the importance of these societies for trade union reasoning—looking at records from the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, the Cigarmakers International Union, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in addition to those by the American Federation of Labor and the Trades Union Congress. In the first chapter of my dissertation, I

demonstrate how the language and culture of benefit societies infused trade union identity and objectives in each context. Drawing on records from the Independent Order of Oddfellows and the National Fraternal Congress, I suggest that a crisis in the friendly society movement during the late nineteenth century, and a resulting decline in the popularity of the societies, significantly reduced the appeal of benefits as an organizing tool for British trade unions. By contrast, the explosion of fraternal societies in the late nineteenth century United States, widely referred to as the “Golden Age of Fraternalism,” rendered benefits a persistently useful organizational tool for trade unions in the US.

Research funded:

In September of 2023, I travelled to New York City to access archival material at the legal libraries of Columbia University and New York University, as well as the archives of the New York Public Library. At the archives, I was able to take a look at pamphlets, government reports, and fraternal society records regarding the benefit features of trade unions, the trajectory of fraternal society benefit provision, and legislation regarding friendly society and trade union benefit provision and incorporation. I also read state level regulations on friendly societies and trade unions between 1870 and 1915.

The documents enabled me to deepen my understanding of the structural developments behind the trends I have thus far identified. In particular, they opened my eyes to the importance of law in shaping the sort of opportunities and constraints that were available to trade unions in each country at the turn of the 20th century. This is a thesis that I had already been developing on the UK side over the summer, but the funding has enabled me to compile sufficient evidence on the US case.

Findings:

An expansive body of literature has demonstrated how the uniquely repressive trajectory of American labor law has constrained the organisational avenues of US trade unions. With the documents I've collected on this archival trip, I can now say that my own research builds on this literature through a consideration of organizational opportunities. Placing legislation on trade unions in dialogue with that on friendly and fraternal societies reveals how governing elites defined and redefined the boundaries of legitimate working-class organization throughout the nineteenth century. Though trade unions were nominally legalised in the US in 1842 with the *Commonwealth vs. Hunts* case, while they were held to be illegal in the UK until the 1871 Trades Union Act, in practice trade unions in both countries were legitimate so long as they confined their efforts to mutual benefit provision. At the turn of the century, this consensus changed: while British trade unions were granted the legal right to strike, American trade unions faced incessant injunctions under the Sherman Anti-trust bill. At the same time, avenues for benefit provision for British trade unions were narrowed with the legalisation of employer benefit schemes and increased regulation of benefit societies. By contrast, in both the arbitration system initiated with the Erdman Act of 1898 and rights outlined in the Clayton Bill of 1914, the position of American trade unions as benefit providers was protected and secured.

The documents I surveyed also suggested that the evolution of corporate law is a vital and grossly understudied force in shaping the political trajectory of trade unions. Between the Bubble Act of 1720 and the Limited Liability Act of 1855, the UK government was selective in the granting of corporate charters and promoted the formation of voluntary associations. In an effort to encourage “benign” working class organization, the government designed a “quasi-corporate” status for friendly societies which promised them the protection of corporations without the government interference which came with it. Trade unions in the UK were thus presented with three possible legal identities: corporation, quasi-corporation, and voluntary association. The leadership of the TUC, alongside liberal reformers, campaigned for the expansion of the quasi-corporate status granted friendly societies to trade unions—giving them the right to act as a single entity without the legal responsibilities of one. In the US, incorporation was granted widely and freely as a means of stretching state power without

enlarging the bureaucratic body of the state. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, fraternal benefit societies incorporated at the national level while trade unions were denied this possibility. Like their counterparts in the UK, reformers in the US campaigned for trade unions to be given equal status as fraternal benefit societies. But American trade union leaders were not willing to surrender to the regulation and legal liability of a corporate charter—positioning them against reformist groups. The question of incorporation thus crucially shaped the architecture of political debate around the identity and function of trade unions in this period, and the sort of alliances the two trade unions movements were able to form.

List of Expenses:

£1380—Room rented through Airbnb

£650—Flights to and from NYC

£100—Metro fares in NYC

Remainder: Food and other daily expenses,