Introduction

Despite Sir Alan Sugar’s recent adaptation, Apprenticeship as a system of technical training for skilled work has long been associated with the development of trade unions and their predecessors: the journeymen trade clubs and craft guilds. In a variety of urban industries, such as construction and printing, entry to skilled employment and recognition of the right to ply such trades was governed by elaborate systems of long, time-served apprenticeship. This was at the insistence of the existing skilled workers (and their ‘masters’ originally), to protect the consumer of their products and services as well as their own terms and conditions. The system developed also to ensure that the next generation of skilled workers were trained properly and continued the traditions of ‘the craft’.

Even through the industrial revolution and the emergence of new metal-based machine skills in the engineering, shipbuilding and manufacturing industries generally, this system continued at the insistence of the new trade unions, though significantly modified to suit the requirements of the new capitalist employers. Nonetheless, the nature and standard of training provided, and the ratios of apprenticeships to skilled workers, remained largely in the control of the ‘craft’ unions, well into the twentieth century. With the decline of manufacturing and heavy industry generally in Britain since the 1970s, and with it the unions concerned, the old system of apprenticeship also shrivelled and the numbers being trained in this way shrank.
To consider how that union apprenticeship system operated, the Forum invited one of its members, **Professor Paul Ryan** of King’s College, Cambridge, who has specialised in the study of apprenticeships, to address it. His paper was delivered under the title, **Apprentice training, youth organisation and trade unionism** and focused on the engineering industry from the 1930s to 1970.

In keeping with the approach which the Forum has adopted of keeping the focus on the policy implications of history, the Forum also had a presentation from another of its members, the government minister responsible for Skills and Apprenticeship, **Lord Tony Young** (a former union general secretary and one-time engineering apprentice at BT). The aim of the seminar was to see how the modern, government-sponsored, system of apprenticeship has attempted to fill the vacuum of vocational training left by the union-based system.

**Paul Ryan presentation**

Paul Ryan summarised his findings as follows:

Trade Unions have often faced difficulties concerning work-based learning for young people. Under some circumstances trainees receive little training and low pay, and their role in the workplace may then conflict with the interests of adult employees. Such conditions have been seen in public training programmes in recent decades. They were previously widespread in engineering apprenticeship. One response was a series of strike movements that apprentice organisations conducted between 1912 and 1964. Those strikes were organised to some extent independently of trade unions but their outcome depended crucially on union assistance. The timing, location and scale of the disputes sheds light on the economic, political and cultural factors that caused them. Further evidence on the incidence of trainee discontent and organisation is taken from public-training programmes in recent decades, and from other countries that have apprenticeship-type training systems. The implications for trade union policy towards work-based youth training concern educational content, training standards, contractual status, and the meaning of ‘apprenticeship’ itself.

Paul’s context was the craft training system in engineering and shipbuilding from the 1930s, where collective bargaining was well established. The apprentices’ terms and conditions were then set very low as a proportion of adult rates (pay was as low as 20% in the case of 16 year olds, rising only to 50% by the age of 20 in 1935). There was also discontent about career prospects generally, as the traditional union expectation of a job at the end of the apprenticeship increasingly failed to materialise. This led to a major apprentice strike movement of male youths in 1937, in which 32,500 apprentices took part resulting in 406,000 days lost. This discontent continued throughout the Second World War. Despite the legal ban on all strikes, in 1941, 25,100 apprentices walked out in lengthy stoppages (220,000 days lost). Again in 1944, 17,000 apprentices were involved in prolonged strikes (150,000 days lost). Their main demands were for
recognition of their concerns in the collective bargains being struck by the Engineering Employers Federation (EEF) and the joint union negotiating body, the Confederation of Shipbuilding & Engineering Unions (CSEU), especially for better pay increases. Although the apprentices were members of the major engineering and shipbuilding unions (AEU especially), these strikes were mainly unofficial and unconstitutional as they did not have official union support. Nonetheless, Paul concluded that they clearly had sympathy and some support from workers and officials at local level. The likely involvement of extreme left-wing political activists in leading the strikes was also noticed, particularly ‘trotskyists’, as the Communist Party were against such disruption of the war-effort after the Soviet Union was invaded in 1941. The apprentices also needed their union officials to clinch deals arising from their action. Youthful ‘high-jinks’ were also seen to have played a part and the motives for militancy were mixed amongst those young workers.

This tradition of apprentice militancy continued for some time after the war. In 1952, a further strike movement involved 16,400 apprentices causing 194,000 days’ lost production. In 1960, a high point was reached with 36,900 apprentices involved and 347,000 days lost. Paul calculated the mean strike statistics for the period 1912-64 as 17,500 apprentices and a loss of 187,000 days’ production (see slide 4 of Paul Ryan's presentation). So, the youth share of disputes in the engineering and shipbuilding industries generally over this period, was quite high (see slide 8 of Paul Ryan's presentation). He attributes the increases in age-wage scale rates for apprentices of EEF employers from 1935 to 1971, in large part, to this militancy. The percentage of the adult rate paid to apprentices increased to up to 95% in the case of 20 year olds by 1970, and proportionately for the 16-19 year olds, (see slide 9 of Paul Ryan's presentation).

Examining the engineering and shipbuilding employers’ motives for work-based apprenticeship training, Paul discerned two philosophies. Firstly, investment-oriented training, by which employers sought to ensure future skill supply. This training was expensive and so employers sought to ensure high retention of apprentices in skilled jobs after training. The other, more common, philosophy was production oriented, aiming to reduce production costs by employing young apprentices as cheap labour, so increasing profits, and low retention after training. Some employers adopted a mixture of these approaches. It was the production-oriented approach which was the main source of collective strike actions, involving low pay, poor quality of training and poor career prospects with the firm. This scenario also lost many individual youngsters, who simply left the trades.

Paul went on to compare this experience with trainee discontent and activism in modern Britain, as well as by reference to US and other European approaches (Germany & Switzerland). He was especially critical of the various UK government training schemes introduced since the 1980s – both Youth Training Scheme (YTS) trainees and Modern Apprentices – seeing them as providing sources of discontent similar to the engineering industry's production-oriented apprentice system.
In the case of the YTS schemes, most unions had seen through them and either boycotted or opposed them (though some unions saw them as better than nothing, at least conferring employee status to young workers). However, such discontent did not become a widespread source of collective action, as in the 1930s-60s.

With the Modern Apprentices scheme of the 1990s, Paul felt that unions had changed ‘from critics to cheerleaders’ as training quality and terms and conditions did improve somewhat. However, he felt that the training provided was still of mediocre quality, with employers (such as Tesco) being subsidised to provide what they should be providing themselves. He felt that unions had settled for terms well below their own previous high standards and traditions.

**Discussion**

There was little disagreement with the thrust of Paul’s paper. The problem was seen as being due to the loss of union power from the 1930s onwards, a power which the craft unions had exerted previously in industries like engineering and shipbuilding.

It was noted that some unions had continued to press for investment-oriented apprenticeship in their areas. The achievements of union leaders such as Hugh Scanlon on the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions in shortening apprenticeship terms, was referred to.

The role of governments, e.g. the Atlee government, in getting employers to adopt training schedules in the late 1940’s was quite effective. By the 1950s, 50% of apprentices were getting day release.

Paul responded by emphasising the key role that employers should play as training providers, but unfortunately British governments and unions (unlike many other European countries), had let them ‘off the hook’. There are some employers, e.g. Rolls Royce, who pride themselves on quality apprentice training (many go on to University). He said the government should not certify poor quality training. Yes, government spending is up, but for example in retailing, are they getting value for money?

**Lord Young's response**

Unsurprisingly, **Lord Tony Young** did not entirely accept Professor Ryan’s strictures on his government’s Modern Apprentices scheme. He reminded Forum members that when they took office in 1997, only about 60,000 youngsters were availing themselves of the modern apprenticeship scheme and of those, only 25% were completing their training. He referred to the dire literacy and numeracy situation then, highlighted in the Moser Report, whereby about 500,000 (1 in 5) youths leaving school fell below elementary standards. It was this deplorable situation his government had to tackle. One should not judge the quality of training offered to a much wider section of the working population by the much tinier numbers benefiting from the old craft apprenticeship standards. It was helping to create a modern class of technicians and
provided a vocational route to a job and earning power for young people. He agreed it was being affected by the recession, especially in industries like construction, where apprentices also were losing their jobs, but efforts had been made to enable apprentices to complete their apprenticeships.

The Education Act 2008 raised the participation age for which people could undertake training, which increased take up by 30-40,000. It also provided independent advice and guidance for school pupils about the advantages of apprenticeship. Further legislation in 2009 gave workers the right to request time-off to train. There are now over 250,000 apprentices and the completion rate is high (71%). Modern Apprentices is an entirely different approach to that of the ‘Biblical’ craft schemes. For instance, there are 212 apprenticeship frameworks, including hairdressing and McDonalds, which have to comply with clear standards and are Ofsted inspected. All have to be paid at statutory minimum wage levels (£80-95 per week) and all public procurement contracts must included provision for apprenticeship training.

Lord Young argued that the Labour government had made a huge investment in training and encouraged many more employers to invest in it, and that this was why the unions were more supportive of current policy.

Further discussion points

1. It was argued that the vocational side of the government’s policy was struggling to catch up with its ‘50% into University’ target. This target had distracted from the vocational problem of the serious collapse in the young labour market. The privatisation of the previous training infrastructure (i.e. the Training Boards) had let employers ‘off the hook’ of funding their training requirements.

2. The worrying situation of pockets of adults with very poor literacy and numeracy standards was creating special needs of a serious nature.

3. Non-governmental mechanisms for pressurising employers, such as collective pressure by unions, should be encouraged.

4. Britain was still bedevilled by its neo-Platonic academic/vocational cultural bias, which could be traced to the domination of classical Greece and its attitude to ‘labour’.

5. The difficulty of generalising about training requirements and achievements emerges from the presentations, as the range of experience varies from the Rolls Royce case to that of the ‘bucket-shop’ employer poaching those trained by others.

6. **Lord Young** responded to criticisms of the government scheme, which he felt were a bit elitist and academic! He asked how do you measure what is regarded as ‘poor’ training, if standards of literacy and numeracy are so poor for so many? He felt that the criticisms of
the Modern Apprentices scheme were of the ‘glass-half-empty’ variety and reiterated its positive achievements, as a result of Labour Government policies.

Jim Moher, co-convenor, June 2010