

‘Do your duty; get together, work together and take action together, with confidence and pride’: Campaigns from the National Union of the Deaf, 1976-2005

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Abstract

Drawing on sources from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) collection at the Modern Records Centre (MRC), this critical reflection draws on some of the seminal works from the National Union of the Deaf. In addition, MRC sources showed the dialogue between the NUD and TUC, including private correspondence, draft notes and sent letters amongst Deaf members of the NUD and TUC Executive members. Furthermore, these discussions and foundation works provide insight into Deaf people’s political organising in Britain throughout the mid-1970s, as well as the labour movement and broader political landscape of twentieth-century Britain. Deaf histories are integral to better understanding conceptualisations of trade unions, work conditions and political pressure groups.

Keywords: deaf; trade union

Introduction

Drawing on sources from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) collection at the Modern Records Centre (MRC), this work reflects on some of the seminal works from the National Union of the Deaf (f.1976, NUD). In addition, MRC sources showed the dialogue between the NUD and TUC, including private correspondence, draft notes and sent letters amongst Deaf members of the NUD and TUC Executive members. Furthermore, these discussions and foundation works provide insight into Deaf people's political organising in Britain throughout the mid-1970s, as well as the labour movement and broader political landscape of twentieth-century Britain. Deaf histories are integral to better understanding conceptualisations of trade unions, work conditions and political pressure groups.

Before commencing my analysis, it is also important to define some of the key terms that I will use; I have used the exact terms and retained their authentic format throughout to maintain originality. The capitalisation of Deaf indicates different political self-definitions within the community, the struggle for equality within hearing society, the use of a common language, the recognition of British Sign Language, and celebration of Deaf culture. Rather than identifying as disabled, some 'capital D' Deaf people in this period and today may associate with being a minority linguistic and cultural group.¹

Reflections from this paper come from my master's research, supervised at the University of Warwick and generously funded by a Wellcome Trust scholarship through the Centre for the History of Medicine. This dissertation examined the development and impact of the National Union of the Deaf in Britain. This Deaf-led group, which was founded in 1976, challenged paternalistic approaches from longstanding deaf charities such as the British Deaf Association and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (**National Union of the Deaf, 1976**).

Through regular newsletters and social events, the NUD fostered a grassroots structure for deaf people from across the United Kingdom. In April 1978, for example, the NUD had 329 members, 64 associate members (from hearing people) and 3 subscribers (**British Deaf History Society, 1978**). The demographics of NUD support was broad in most regions of England and extended further afield to Canada and the United States of America (**Ibid**). While the NUD never formally was disbanded, the group have been less active since around 2005.

The NUD deployed a strong rhetoric of 'unions and unity'. Perhaps the central focus on unions and collective action might have been indicative of leftist politics, which many NUD members took inspiration from. Some

commentaries have also pointed to the radical or maverick nature of the NUD (Jackson, 2001: 197; BSL Zone, nd). The MRC's collections show a selection of writings from NUD co-founder Paddy Ladd, who wrote about the importance of brotherhood, grassroots socialism and engagement with trade unions who demanded stronger rights for their membership, usually of male workers (**Letter from the NUD to the Trade Unions, 1977**). However, it is important to note the significant changes to trade union demographics in this period, especially amongst women and people of colour, as well as disabled trade unionists who were beginning to organise independently in the 1980s through groups such as the Trade Union Disability Alliance (TUDA) (Parker, 2003).ⁱⁱ This framing opens up an interesting avenue to explore Deaf people's engagement with trade union structures and involvement through the NUD with the broader labour movement.

One of the ways in which the NUD pursued this relationship with the labour movement was through developing a formal relationship between the Deaf group and the TUC. In the mid-1970s, the NUD saw this route as the best option to find solutions in the field of employment to advocate for the rights of Deaf members in the same way as earlier blind folk with the National League of the Blind and Disabled (NLBD) had done previously (Lee, 1992: 68). Letters from NUD members show that the group took inspiration from the NLBD, who received TUC affiliation in 1899.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1976, the NUD applied for TUC affiliation, but they were declined on two accounts: first, that their objectives did not fit with the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974; second, the TUC did not perceive them as a trade union (**Letter from the Trades Union Congress, 1976**). The MRC's archive helps researchers to understand the external perceptions of the NUD, with the TUC situating the organisation as a pressure group who sought to influence governments and deaf organisations about deaf people's needs (**Ibid**).

However, a unique feature of the MRC's TUC archives is that it provides further insight and alternative reasoning for this refusal. Private internal correspondence between Ken Graham and Peter Jacques (active in the TUC Executive at the time) implied that the rejection was indicative of a political decision as they had little desire to partner with the NUD but had to offer a meeting for upholding positive public image and relations.^{iv}

Herein lies an interesting example of the TUC demonstrating definitions of a 'trade union', how interpretations were seemingly interrelated to and complied with broader legislation as well as conceptions of pressure groups, even if this discourse around pressure groups appeared to be dismissive of NUD's work and association with the labour movement. Indeed, whilst the rejected affiliation contributed to the NUD's claims to

marginalization, the NUD continued to work with local trade union members to raise issues with the larger TUC infrastructure. Even though the NUD did not receive official affiliation, they nonetheless worked with different groups and individuals, for example social workers and teachers, to amplify their aims and improve conditions for Deaf people in Britain (**National Union of the Deaf, 1977**). Specific issues were prevalent in the archives, offering a helpful lens to understand how the NUD lobbied around particular areas (for example access to further education, use of interpreters, acceptance of sign language and promotion opportunities for Deaf people) as well as drawing on their expansive network to enhance political impact within local communities and the national landscape (**National Union of the Deaf, 1976**).

Through the attempted TUC affiliation, we see a complicated political dynamic between the NUD and the TUC, providing a prism into decision-making with a high-level formal body and points of tension with active grassroots groups. By exploring the NUD's archived letters in the MRC's archive, we can learn more about how the NUD steering group perceived their membership, projected ideas of socialism, and tackled prevalent forms of exclusion. Overall, the NUD is a dynamic case study to question ideas of trade unions and collective action. Whilst employment was not the sole remit of their work, alongside other important areas such as education and television, the NUD's campaigns displayed both individual and collective attempts of campaigning, organizing, and lobbying. In this domain, the MRC's TUC collection allows historians to better understand conceptualisations of trade unions, work conditions and political pressure groups. This question opens up an important direction for historians to explore Deaf people's engagement with trade union structures and involvement with the British and international labour movements.

Kirstie Stage (she/her) is a PhD student between Christ's College, University of Cambridge and the British Library. Her current doctoral project examines 'The Labour and Livelihoods of Deaf and Disabled People in Britain, 1970-2010'. Previously, she explored Deaf-led activism and Disabled-led campaigns in late twentieth-century Britain. In 2022, she co-founded the UK Disability History and Heritage Hub.



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Endnotes

ⁱ For further discussion on the d/Deaf distinction, see Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Multilingual Matters, 2003); 'Innovations in Deaf Studies: Critically Mapping the Field' in Annelies Kusters, Maartje De Meulder and Dai O'Brien (eds), *Innovations in Deaf Studies: The Role of Deaf Scholars* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

ⁱⁱ Especially see p.6 and p.29.

ⁱⁱⁱ See attachment to letter from Paddy Ladd to Mr Murray, 4/1/77 from Trades Union Congress Archives, Modern Records Centre, 1970-1983, MSS.292D/841.46.

^{iv} For more, see undetailed written correspondence between Ken Graham and Peter Jacques, from Trades Union Congress Archives, Modern Records Centre, 1970-1983, MSS.292D/841.46.