

Prospects Beyond “Partnership”: The Labour Process and Politics of the UK Military Industry, 1970-2025

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines shifts in the labour process and politics of the UK military industry from the 1970s to the present, moving beyond depictions of the decline of labour militancy as simply an effect of deindustrialisation. While the sector’s employment base has contracted sharply since 1980, military spending in real terms has increased, and the industry has remained unusually protected through state subsidy, procurement and research and development funding. The weakening of arms workers’ power is therefore explained less by macro-trends alone than by a management and state offensive that reorganised production and targeted union organising. This helped to install a class-collaborationist “partnership” model, corroding associational power and displacing traditions of militant workplace democracy.

Drawing on 21 semi-structured interviews, alongside published and archival accounts, the paper traces: rank-and-file conversion struggles in the 1970s; the “long 1990s” of restructuring, privatisation and political decomposition; and the current conjuncture in which capital-intensive, supply-chain-dependent militarism creates new vulnerabilities and openings. It argues that the politicisation of arms exports, alongside the sector’s expansion into technology and higher education, presents conditions for renewed rank-and-file power.

KEYWORDS

military industry, labour process, industrial relations, rank-and-file

Introduction

The UK is a global military power and one of the world’s largest arms exporters, ranking seventh in 2025 (SIPRI, 2025). It also has a history of labour militancy and radicalism, particularly in the military industry. However, since the late 1980s, trade unions in the sector have adopted a strategy of “partnership” (Wills and Simms, 2004) with military companies, in which they collaborate with employers across perceived common interests. The result has been a decline in the power and militancy of arms workers. It is tempting to attribute this turn towards partnership as an inevitable response to structural trends affecting the British economy, including the arms sector, such as deindustrialisation, labour repression and declining trade union power (Tippet et al, 2024). However, the turn to partnership was not an inevitable or “realistic” response to these structural trends, but

a product of a contingent, cumulative historical process the outcome of which might have been, and might still be, different (cf. Davis, 1980).

The absolute level of British military spending has *increased* since 1980 when adjusted for inflation; yet over this period, employment in the military industry has fallen by more than half (Rogaly, 2024). The military industry also remains one of the few recipients in the manufacturing sector of sustained state support in the form of subsidy, preferential contracting and research and development (R&D) funding (Perlo-Freeman, 2016; Rogaly, 2023). Given the relatively protected status of the sector, the observed decline in the power and militancy of arms workers was not a foregone conclusion. Instead, it required a concerted effort by management in collusion with the state so that capital could wrest a greater share of revenue and power from labour.

Through an empirical study of the labour politics of the British warfare state since the 1970s, we analyse the shifts in labour mobilisation in the UK's military industry. We argue that contemporary militarism continues to provide opportunities for arms workers to exercise *structural* power, especially where it depends on brittle and time-sensitive supply chains producing and servicing arms for immediate use. Alongside this, we emphasise that the decline in *associational* power, brought about by the class warfare of the neoliberal turn and a subsequent embrace of the partnership model, has been particularly corrosive for the organisation of labour, transforming the culture and practice of labour politics. However, we suggest that even this damaging process shows prospects for reversal. Key here is the continued politicisation of arms exports through the West's collaboration with Israel in its genocidal military campaign in Gaza, and through Western collaboration in war crimes committed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen and Sudan. Since October 2023, the scale of mobilisation in solidarity with Palestine has begun to increase the associational power of military-industrial workers, due to the politicisation of their experiences at work. Additionally, the sectoral expansion of the military industry, especially in technology and higher education, has created spaces inside the trade union movement which can help to rebuild associational power, even where it has been corroded through partnership.

To make our argument, we draw on a set of 21 semi-structured interviews conducted by one of the authors with leaders of postwar trade union struggles in the military industry and contemporary workers in the sector.¹ We also draw on published and unpublished accounts of trade unions and trade unionists within the military industry since 1980 (Danford, 2020; Transport and General Workers Union [TGWU], 1983).

We begin by looking at the literature on workers' power in the arms and related sectors, pointing out the mutual imbrication of structural and associational power before proceeding historically. We look first at rank-and-file movements in the context of the transformation of Britain's post-World War II "warfare state", a moment in which the labour movement built on its structural power with innovative organising tactics. We then examine the decline in the power of labour in the "long 1990s", during which shrinking state subsidies combined with a concerted management assault on union organisation. This produced a more conciliatory union strategy oriented towards "partnership". We then turn to our conjuncture, noting that recent geopolitical changes present opportunities to rebuild workers' power in military industries, focussing on the potential role of the Palestine solidarity movement.

¹ For full details on the methodology used to compile this sample of interviews, see Rogaly, 2024, p.48. All names have been changed.

1. The Sources of Arms Worker Power

Existing scholarship typically draws a distinction between workers' structural and associational power (Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003; Womack, 2023). Whereas associational power refers to the capacity of workers to form unified coalitions both among themselves and with other groups, structural power refers to the potential for workers to apply economic and industrial leverage by virtue of their position in the relations of production.

Drawing on these concepts, Silver observes a decline in worker mobilisations in Western war industries when compared to the first half of the twentieth century (2003: 172–177). She attributes this to a shift from “labour-intensive” to “capital-intensive” warfare, i.e. the growing role of warfare at a distance after the Vietnam War. Silver argues that this undermined the structural power of production workers in the waging of war and undercut their associational power by reducing the exposure of their potential allies in wider society to the ravages of war. Refining this analysis, Corey Payne (2020) shows that shifts in the *use* of arms still matter significantly for determining the structural power of arms workers, even under contemporary capital-intensive warfare. He argues that where the industry is mostly relied upon to retain a defence industrial base, the hand of labour is weaker. However, where the state has an urgent requirement for domestically-produced military materiel (or, we might add, for export to its chosen proxies), the bargaining power of labour rises. State dependency on brittle and urgent military supply chains therefore continues to provide arms workers with opportunities to exercise structural power (cf. Moody, 2017). Building on Payne's analysis, we argue that UK arms workers' structural power remains relatively strong, especially when considering Britain's important role in arming regional allies such as Israel and the Gulf States.

In our view, however, it is also important to appreciate the importance of arms workers' associational power as a precondition for exercising structural power. As Chua and Bosworth (2023) show in their analysis of blockades, it is easy to overstate the material and spatial significance of “chokepoints” in production and circulation. Blockades also need to be understood as constitutive sites of social struggle where workers and their allies gather to exercise power. We draw particularly on recent analyses of port labour struggles in making this argument. Fox-Hodess and Santibanez Rebolledo (2020) stress that associational power is critical for allowing workers to realise and exercise their potential structural power, especially where it might involve disrupting production of particular importance to wider society and the state, such as transportation. Broader social and political coalitions, they argue, are essential for preventing the state from intervening against workers in these sectors, which holds true in arms production. Likewise, in their recent study of the “Block the Boat” campaign in US ports, Fox-Hodess and Ziadah (2025) emphasise the importance of building bridges between community organisers and labour unions to leverage workers' structural power over port infrastructure. Moreover, they show the importance of developing anti-imperialist political cultures within unions if this power is to be exercised. As we argue below, it has been the attack on UK arms workers' associational culture and power that has corroded their leverage over military supply chains. However, this weakness also indicates a potential source of renewal in the form of engagement in solidarity campaigns with Palestine.

2. Labour Politics and the Warfare State

Between 1945 and 1980, the British government oversaw a sprawling military-industrial complex, which married contractor industries to a large state bureaucracy (Edgerton, 2005). At various points

in the postwar period, this bureaucracy intervened to consolidate firms and take parts of the industry into state ownership. Due to its relative size within the national economy, and the fact it was directed by government money, the sector was central to debates over the composition of public investment (McLoughlin, 2022). The level of government intervention in the military industry gave labour organisations structural power that they built on through a range of militant tactics. Labour organising in the postwar military industry was most active in the 1970s, with several attempts made by workers to influence what the sector produced and for whom.

The era of the warfare state

Despite the decline of its formal empire through the postwar period, the UK remained one of the world's largest military-industrial powers. Until 1980, the UK never spent less than five per cent of national income on its military (Edgerton, 2008). As late as 1983, the UK devoted the second-highest share of income to its military of any country, excluding the USSR due to a lack of data (Transport and General Workers Union [TGWU], 1983). The UK's military sector accounted for more than half of all public research and development funding, compared to just over a third in France and a tenth in West Germany (ibid). Through this massive state investment, the UK remained one of the world's top five arms exporters until 1980 (SIPRI, 2025).

State ownership of sections of the military industry was retained across the postwar era. From its foundation during the Second World War until 1980, munitions production by Royal Ordnance remained under state ownership, as did the government's nuclear weapons programme. In the 1970s, the government expanded its role in shaping the industry, nationalising Rolls-Royce and Ferranti before consolidating the shipbuilding and aerospace sectors into national firms (Edgerton, 2008). The state defined the firms that operated in the sector and stepped in to oversee production when it deemed necessary.

The size and political salience of the warfare state led to ferocious political debates that set the backdrop for labour organising (McLoughlin, 2022). These were reignited internationally by US politicians, labour leaders and economists who organised against military production during the American war in Vietnam, arguing that high military spending was an economic burden (Feldman, 2022). Culminating in a 1971 United Nations report that argued for military-industrial conversion, they concluded that "there would be no insuperable technical difficulties in ensuring the redeployment of released resources to peaceful uses" (United Nations, 1971). It was in this context that trade unionists in the UK proposed the conversion of military production towards civilian sectors.

Labour politics and conversion

Although UK trade union reps later drew inspiration from international movements and their structural position within a state-directed industry, their proposals for military industrial conversion originated in defending jobs. The Lucas Aerospace shop stewards, the most famous such campaign, did not have a background in anti-war movements. As Phil Asquith, a former Lucas steward described, his workplace and union branch were populated in large part by former military personnel (Asquith, 2024). Ultimately, it was the fusion of the political and government-directed nature of production in the arms industry, alongside rank- and- file worker organisation, that led to visionary proposals for conversion.

In 1968, the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards combine was founded to coordinate between the nine unions and seventeen sites within the company. As Lucas steward Brian Salisbury later recounted, this structure relied on the density of the labour movement across British industry:

“everyone was in the union, from the shop floor to senior designers” (Salisbury, 2024). Many of the leading Lucas stewards were design engineers, having been inspired to unionise by the militancy of their blue-collar counterparts. Initially, they fought to equalise conditions between sites and between workers. In 1970, the combine supported a successful strike for parity between Lucas plants in Birmingham and Burnley and attempted to equalise the pension schemes between occupations (Asquith, 2024).

The combine’s organising became more confrontational in the early 1970s amid mass redundancies, plus rising inflation and interest rates. Between 1970 and 1975, Lucas Aerospace cut 5000 jobs out of a workforce of 18000 (Wainwright and Elliot, 1982). This was a process of industrial consolidation that the Lucas stewards organised to resist: Salisbury described their focus as opposing “reorganisation, rationalisation and redundancy” (Salisbury, 2024). With a new Labour government in 1974, elected on a platform of cutting defence spending while nationalising the aerospace industry, the Lucas stewards developed a more ambitious strategy. The resulting conversion plan was to transition their workplaces to the production of socially useful goods, from wind turbines and heat pumps to forms of electrified transport. While this became a statement about the futility of high military spending and the benefits of conversion, it was fundamentally the product of an era of militant organising.

As well as their own battles against redundancies at Lucas Aerospace, the stewards followed in the footsteps of the 1971 occupation of the Clyde shipyards. Here, shop steward Jimmy Reid had successfully defended thousands of jobs and forced the government-led restructuring of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders. Three years later, workers at the nationalised aerospace firm Rolls Royce in nearby East Kilbride drew on their strong organisation (a shop stewards committee of 100 in a plant of 3000 workers) to refuse to repair jet engines for the Pinochet government (Jones, 2014). Once again, the depth of labour organisation gave workers the space to exercise their structural power.

The impact of the stoppage in East Kilbride signalled the leading role trade unions had in dominating workplace culture in the postwar military industry. The stoppage was barely opposed by management, hardly a surprise given the control exercised by the union. Through the 1970s, there was a bazaar run by workers on the shop floor that sold everything from chocolates to fresh fish and electrical products (Gibbs et al., 2014). The cultural power of workers had long roots in East Kilbride: on one famous Hogmanay in 1953, the night shift unilaterally decided to get drunk and celebrate, forcing their managers and foremen to join (ibid). Interviewees who worked in the 1980s military industry concurred on their experiences of the era. In at least two shipyards, interviewees recounted having bars onsite.

Rick, a trade union rep at a shipyard, described working life under nationalisation:

I think life was easier with the [Ministry of Defence]. You had security, you were never pushed. It was far more relaxed. In the private sector, there isn’t the same time. You’re asked to get the work done.

Given that production practices in shipbuilding have been more insulated from transformation than other parts of the military industry in the years since, this indicates that the diminishing associational power of the trade union fused with the decline of structural power amid privatisation. Rick described how the culture has changed: “If we’ve got a good managing director we try to work with them in partnership”. This experience was shared by Mike, an interviewee at an aerospace site that had worked on the same aircraft since the 1980s. They described how the union no longer set

workplace culture, its weakness compounded over time as it no longer represented white-collar workers.

The warfare state era was partly defined by the expansionary nature of government's role in industry and the space it created for political contestation. But ultimately it was the dense and militant labour movement, which culturally dominated workplaces, that was able to build on this structural power to organise proposals to reshape or divert production, occupying the political space state involvement created.

The Long 1990s

The Lucas Aerospace workers' plan was rejected by management, and with redundancies over the years that followed, the shopfloor organisation of the combine was defeated. This marked a pivotal shift in the political horizons of trade union struggles in the military industry. At the end of the 1980s, a temporary decline in arms expenditure spread across Western Europe. Problems of overcapacity created during the arms race were responded to first and foremost by industrialists concerned with shoring up profits. As Walther Stüzle noted at the time: "industrialists have been quicker to react to events than either academics or politicians" (Anthony et al., 1990: v). The effects of this shift would be felt throughout the 1980s and 1990s as companies raced to protect profits by cutting labour costs. While the Lucas Plan offered inspiration for unions fighting job cuts, conversion campaigns emerging from defensive battles were always fighting on two fronts: first, building offensive struggles to diversify production towards civilian projects; and, second, defensive struggles to save jobs and negotiate improved severance packages. This era of restructuring mirrors the wider global shifts in production, moving towards "neoliberal war-making [...] characterized by greater flexibility, outsourcing, and capital-intensity" (Payne, 2023: 3).

However, the sector remained an arena of struggle during this period. Understanding the changing class composition (Notes from Below, 2018) in the industry is important for accounting for the dominance of partnership in the British military industry today. Revisiting conversion campaigns, such as at British Aerospace in Filton documented in Danford's (2020) memoir, the concrete processes of political decomposition undertaken in the interests of capital in the industry emerge more clearly. These trends developed particularly through the reorganisation of the labour process and the technical composition of work, both through state-led deindustrialisation and attacks on terms and conditions, with the rapid loosening of the labour market. Bruising redundancy campaigns, mass layoffs, outsourcing, and a centralisation of production also left their mark on the social relations between workers, significantly altering workers' social composition. Despite the struggle that defined this era of decomposition, it was in the long 1990s that unions turned towards the partnership model that led to the diminished power of organised labour.

The end of cost-plus

Amid wider deindustrialisation, labour market contraction in military manufacturing had its own particularities. In 1988, Britain held the highest concentration of the top 100 arms companies in Western Europe (Anthony et al., 1990). A relatively short-term reduction in military spending was coupled with global labour arbitrage, with heavy industry and manufacturing increasingly outsourced and offshored.

The 1985 deal to export fighter jets to Saudi Arabia, worth an estimated £40 billion over several decades, exemplified and accelerated this consolidation process, securing British Aerospace's dominance. The scale and duration of the contracts enabled the company to weather short term spending cuts and shift toward an export-led model of accumulation, with state backing

effectively underwriting its international expansion (Dunne, 1995; Hartley, 2007). This entrenchment of state-industry interdependence oriented the military industry towards new export markets, particularly in the Gulf, but also blurred the boundary between industrial and foreign policy, embedding arms exports within the broader political economy of British militarism (Stavrianakis, 2010).

In the UK, one factor driving changes in production was the turn away from profit guarantees offered by the state. Prior to privatisation, government defence contracts for companies like British Aerospace were issued on a “cost-plus” basis (Danford 2020). This meant the government would pay the cost of the product plus an agreed amount for profit, so gains were guaranteed. If production and development costs rose, the profit share was unaffected and secured for the company. As Weber (2001: 50) notes, cost-plus was “a way of shifting the risks involved in technological uncertainty from the contractor to the state”.

The use of cost-plus contracts has fluctuated over time, reflecting changes in government priorities. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, they were favoured due to the Cold War imperative for rapid technological advancement. However, following billing scandals in the 1980s, fixed-price contracts became a more politically acceptable alternative (McNaughton 1989). As a result, management increasingly began to focus on cutting costs through axing jobs, outsourcing, and chasing productivity gains by exerting greater control over the labour process. In turn, this increased disputes and shop floor conflicts in the mid-1980s (Danford, 2022).

Breaking the union

A simplified account of mass job losses in the industry can be offered through the lens of a reduction in state spending at the end of the Cold War. However, this ignores the restoration of real terms spending during the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, now eclipsing its 1980 level (see Figure 1). Despite increased military spending, jobs in the sector have fallen by more than half (Rogaly, 2024). Concentrating on the confrontation between the state and capital obscures the more fundamental confrontation between capital and labour. As Moody (2020: 11) argues, mass manufacturing lay-offs in the late twentieth century can be primarily attributed to “the contradictory course of capital accumulation, on the one hand, and management-led class struggle, on the other, drastically reduc[ing] employment in manufacturing despite significant growth in output”. Employees and local governments bore the brunt of these corporate restructuring decisions while shareholders and senior managers profited (Weber, 2001), as shareholder value in the military industry remained consistent throughout the long 1990s.

Understanding the industrial relations landscape is then required to read the compulsion of capital towards restructuring. According to Mark, an interviewee who has worked in the military industry for decades, job losses in the 1990s were targeted:

It was mostly political decisions made by the management, who were very aggressive, anti-union, and anti-manufacturing. They wanted to focus on where they really thought the money was being created, which is in the specialist professional skills: design, development, that kind of stuff. And the more manual side of it, they thought, “Well, anybody can do that, right? So, we’ll just take that out, we’ll sell it off, outsource it.”

These attacks on manufacturing diminished the power that workers previously held over production, particularly during the ramping up of production in wartime, which, as Payne (2023) argues, is critical for the exercise of structural power in the sector.

Such diminishment of workers' structural power over production was mirrored and exacerbated by a weakening of associational power. This can be attributed to employment terms and skill differentials, and also the weakening of social bonds. The restructuring of production dissolves the social relations that workers share through limiting co-operation in the labour process and undermining the "solidarity not yet activated" that is produced through cooperation (Atzeni, 2010). Outsourcing separated the terms and conditions of workers legally and physically, distancing manufacturing from technical labour spatially, straining bonds of solidarity that might develop in a shared workspace. Defeat also took a great emotional toll on workers, both economic stresses and in the deletion of the social status afforded to skilled labour. Danford recounts an emotionally charged moment when the defeat of the conversion campaign at Filton became clear and management pushed to slash the terms of their severance package. He recalls announcing it at a mass members' meeting: "I looked up at the front row as I was speaking and found a man with tears streaming down his face. This was a very uncomfortable moment" (ibid, 2020: 117).

Demoralising workers into quiescence, even at the cost of losing those most skilled and experienced, is a gamble managers took to fulfil their aims. Deskilling and making redundant the skilled workers and labour processes has the benefit of giving pretext for removing union reps too, as many come from this experienced layer. Those reps left behind had to deal with the disaggregation of the workforce, with the formation of labour aristocracies sectioning off specialist skills. Given the military industry's composition ranging between blue-collar manufacture and assembly and white-collar engineering, collectivity was essential to the powerful organisation of the Lucas combine in the 1970s. After the Cold War, new conditions of disorganisation meant that a different form of management relations began to emerge, one not of antagonism, but of shared business ethics. As Danford (2022: 110) notes: "it became clear to us that the old style of confrontational management was being replaced by something softer but more pernicious in many respects. These days, people call this 'partnership'".

From militancy to partnership

Out of the defeats of the 1980s and 1990s, a class collaborationist trade unionism came to dominate the British labour movement, with unions agreeing partnership agreements with employers. The partnership model attempts "to find mutual ground with employers to meld business success with employee satisfaction" (Wills and Simms, 2004: 59). It avoids conflict wherever possible, favouring top level negotiated settlements over deals leveraged from workers' organisational strength in withdrawing labour. In function, it transforms industrial relations into a technical and legal process in harmony with human resource management. Its preference towards legal recourse and dispute resolution deprioritises density and the organisation of workers' structural leverage.

The failure of the partnership approach is most evident in its inability to retain or gain members. The experience of workers at Filton illustrates this dynamic clearly. As management embraced privatisation and competitive tendering, union structures became increasingly absorbed into formal consultation frameworks. Danford (2022) describes how partnership arrangements provided an institutional veneer for restructuring, as managerial control over the labour process intensified and traditional forms of shopfloor representation weakened. Strong, confident rank-and-file union cultures based on plant-level bargaining and dense networks of stewards became steadily displaced by managerialist notions of "participation" and "modernisation". In practice, this left workers more atomised and less capable of collective resistance (ibid, 2022).

The partnership approach not only failed to stem decline but actively displaced traditions of militant workplace democracy. As an interviewee argues of this period: "the partnership reps didn't

care about the membership. I mean, it was just slowly declining, members retiring and young people not joining”. This echoes accounts from the aerospace sector, where representatives once rooted in strong branch structures became detached from everyday shopfloor life as their roles were professionalised and bureaucratised (Danford, 2022).

The partnership model borne of political decomposition in the long 1990s can be contrasted with earlier traditions of militant rank- and- file trade unionism in the war industries. As argued most clearly in the historic Clyde Workers’ Committee pamphlet, a rank-and-file campaign against the 1915 Munitions of War Act (Gallacher and Messer, 1915), this approach critiques professional union staffers and their propensity to control and manipulate campaigns, seeing themselves, and not workers, as the central agents of industrial relations. It also organises lay-members’ potential to act independently of the bureaucracy when needed, opening political space for the rank-and-file to determine its own interests, potentially broader than the narrow economism of partnership. The rank-and-file approach represents a strategic tendency rather than an inherently political one, however. For the potential of rank-and-file activity to bear fruit, political vision and leadership are needed to move workers from a place of atomisation and disorganisation to one of alignment and collective strength. An assessment of the political defeats of the labour movement in the military industry since the 1980s reveals how the destruction of associational power also dissolved political leadership. This in turn led to passivity and corporate partnership, erecting barriers to workers taking action and intentionally diminishing their capacity to intervene in production.

This decomposition of associational power is in many ways more telling than any change in the ability to exercise structural power. Yet this process is also potentially reversible. Eddie Campbell, a rep in the sector, offers an example of a rank-and-file action from this period which illustrates this point. He recalls how, during the Gulf War in 1990, arguments against the war first mobilised a “solid core” of workers who were prepared to take more militant action. When the company announced redundancies, this nucleus then formed the basis for a much wider unofficial mobilisation in which workers refused overtime, capitalising on their capacity to disrupt urgent wartime production. This suggests that structural power remained present in the sector, especially at times of war, but that revived associational power through rank-and-file mobilisation was needed to activate it.

This structural power can still be witnessed today, such as in Unite’s recent successful strike ballot at Leonardo (Unite, 2025). That the resulting strikes were short-lived also demonstrates how the actualisation of structural power is dependent on the emergence of political leadership that can rebuild the associational power of rank-and-file workers, linking across the new expanding military industry fault lines.

3. New Fault Lines

A Palestine guerrilla with a revolver costing perhaps \$40 can hijack a plane costing several million dollars and destroy it at some safe airfield. High capital equipment, although it appears all powerful and invincible, always has a point of vulnerability [...] A quite small force can destroy or immobilize plant equipment or weapons costing literally millions. The capitalization of industry also produces an analogous situation. In the past, when a clerical worker went on strike it had precious little effect. Now if the wages of a factory are calculated by a computer a strike by clerical workers can disrupt the whole plant. (Cooley, 1980: 77).

Mike Cooley was a shop steward at Lucas Aerospace and a member of the Combine that produced the Lucas Plan. His insights above help to guide our argument about the possibilities for

the rebuilding of worker power in the arms sector. Recent trends in Western militarism have produced new fault lines in the labour politics of the UK's military industry. First, the capital-intensive nature of warfare has changed the profile of workers in the sector. 36.4 per cent of arms workers are now in manufacturing roles whereas customer services, training, support and R&D account for 43.5 per cent of jobs (Rogaly, 2024). The growing role of technology in the arms industry has also drawn in and implicated new layers of the workforce in adjacent sectors with renewed potential for militancy, particularly technology and education workers.

Second, alongside a shift to capital-intensive warfare, Western militarism has increasingly relied on the violence meted out by regional allies. In Britain's case this has included Gulf monarchies with a history of brutal military repression, especially in Yemen (Wearing, 2018). It has also included Israel's settler colonial and militarist regime, which has aided Western powers by wielding violence against states and movements seen as a threat to the continued flow of oil from the Middle East (Hanieh, 2024). A preference for airpower has long been central to Israel's military doctrine, and aerospace engineering has been a longstanding focus of the British military-industrial complex (Edgerton, 2018). These trends have further cemented the role of capital-intensive warfare at a distance in British militarism, whose protected aerospace industry produces more than 15 per cent of the F-35 fighter used by Israel (CAAT, 2024).

The F-35 programme has features which might imply a decline in workers' power. F-35 components are made largely for export, and British involvement is primarily intended to preserve defence industrial capacity in a strategic manufacturing sector and to cement the UK's role as a junior partner to the US, which coordinates and leads the programme. Furthermore, the manufacturing base of the programme in the UK is concentrated in rural and suburban locations (Lancashire, Kent, East Yorkshire, Buckinghamshire, Bristol, Edinburgh, Birmingham and Wrexham), where increasingly specialist defence jobs are construed as final bastions of well-remunerated work within arenas of "regional-industrial hubs of economic unemployment" (Kidron, 1967; Workers in Palestine, 2023).

While trade unions, especially Unite, are recognised in these companies, most bargaining takes place through the partnership model and is defensive in orientation. These production sites are also often distant from the urban centres in which the Palestine solidarity movement has most purchase, removing a potential spur to radical action.

However, the F-35 programme is also highly vulnerable to disruption. Its dispersed and global supply-chains depend upon a multitude of seemingly minor labour processes. The production of each part is thus of great consequence to the final operability of the F-35. Moreover, F-35s require a constant stream of timely replacement parts to remain in use. Even an isolated labour action targeted at the programme could have outsized effects (cf. Ziadah, 2025; El-Shewy, Griffiths, & Jones, 2024).

Beyond providing opportunities for the exercise of structural power, this support for Israel also brings with it the potential for a revived associational power through renewed politicisation of the changing workforce. Whereas labour struggles over "bread and butter" issues in the arms sector may rely on bargaining for a greater share of profits at times of war and high military spending, other more politically salient identities and causes such as Palestine can offer more promising openings to rebuild worker power and leadership (Hanieh et al., 2025). As McCarthy and Desan (2023: 13) argue in their critique of class abstractionism, "scaling up class struggle beyond a segment of the working class in a single workplace to the level of politics, may require the mobilization of people on the basis of nonclass subjectivities if those subjectivities are most salient conjuncturally." In our conjuncture, Palestine is achieving such a salience. The workplace has been a key site at

which both protest and repression occur, with pro-Palestinian sentiment being met with disciplinary meetings, suspensions, and terminations (CAGE International, 2023). More broadly, the British state has continued to aggressively ratchet up its response to direct action and protest, utilising increased arrests and terrorism legislation. This atmosphere has created an environment in which the workplace can be more readily politicised, and in which antagonistic class relations are reconstituted and made visible for participants.

Interestingly, the signs of this are most evident in those emerging aspects of the military industries, especially in the technology and education sectors, where workers are most insulated from the effects of war (see also Ziadah et al, 2025: 474-479). We argue that the enmeshment between arms and these sectors in fact offers new openings for organising workers against the war-machine. The increasing technologisation of warfare has been actively encouraged by the state. The British government recently launched the UK Defence Innovation (UKDI) organisation to “simplify and streamline” the relationship between the tech companies and the defence industry (Ministry of Defence, 2025). However, as this encroachment proceeds, technology workers have already been organising against various services and technologies their employers provide the Israeli military. Since 2024, technology workers employed by Amazon and Google have organised “No Tech for Apartheid”, a movement seeking to end their employers’ provision of AI and cloud services for the Israeli military. The Communications Workers Union in the UK underwent a rapid increase in members over the issue: “They’re not joining the trade union for pay negotiations,” one union organiser reported. “They’ve joined because they’ve seen the benefit of collectivising to hold Google to account for their stated ethics” (Gross and Heikkilä, 2025).

To excel as a technologically innovative military force, the British government has also sought to develop and retain more skilled workers in the defence industry and military-related R&D. There is an acknowledged skills shortage in the defence industry, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) fields (Skills England, 2025). To address this, the British government and arms companies have made increased efforts to intervene in education. Industry leading companies such as Leonardo, Thales, and BAE Systems invest millions in promoting their brands in schools and colleges (Doward, 2018). At the university level, the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL) provides funding from research councils for military-related R&D in universities in collaboration with arms companies, including those involved in F-35 production. This has strengthened the “military-industrial-academic complex” where university workers have become essential to the R&D goals of major arms companies (Ajonye, 2024). Said companies have also co-designed courses, offered studentships, and provided industrial experience for students (Murphy, 2021: 288-289).

These processes are not realised without contestation from students, many of whom feel very favourably towards Palestine (IPSOS, 2024). In one instance, students at Luton Sixth Form College staged walkouts and wrote letters to protest their school’s existence as a ‘feeder’ to Leonardo, an Italian arms company that supplies parts for the F-35 programme. Defence Secretary John Healey wrote to British universities following reported incidents in which arms companies had faced “harassment and intimidation” when attending careers fairs, which had forced several defence groups to withdraw from such events (Pfeifer, 2025). While these actions are not being taken by arms workers, they have the indirect effect of increasing their bargaining power through further tightening the labour market.

The US offers a model for delinking academia from arms production. Researchers Against War, formed by United Auto Workers, has organised to disrupt R&D work for the US military (Kain and Sharif, 2024). In May 2024, UAW-unionised graduate teachers went on strike to protest

the continued repression of students engaged in Palestine activism on campus (Zats, 2024). In the UK education sector, the University and College Union (UCU) spearheaded a motion passed at the Trades Union Congress (TUC), demanding opposition to increased defence spending and a re-orientation of public funds to building public services (UCU, 2025). Workers also organised under the umbrella of Disarm Education through the National Education Union (NEU) to target the presence of military contractors in secondary and further education.

We can observe the potential for a spillover effect of mobilisations over Palestine in wider society and adjacent sectors to reach the arms sector itself. Campbell, a trade union rep in the sector, has argued that Palestine solidarity has the capacity to revive rank-and-file trade union cultures in the sector precisely because it exposes and politicises the relations of domination operating in the workplace:

Being prepared to fight over Palestine solidarity means having guts. It means a lesser likelihood of being browbeaten by management when it comes to fighting over “bread and butter” issues. If you maintain a political approach to building shop stewards’ organisation, it means being less likely to get sucked into the embrace of the kind of union-management partnership that has plagued the manufacturing sector for 30 years. (2025)

The fruits of this politicisation have already been seen in the arms sector in nascent forms. Community pickets of arms factories have been a feature of solidarity mobilisations since the outbreak of the genocide. While these pickets witnessed tensions between protestors from outside and workers on the site, they have given rise to cooperation. Campbell describes a recent protest at a shipyard, where welders provided information to activists about which of several gates to the site would be opened next to allow them to get there before the police:

What was interesting about all this was that most of these workers were migrants, temporary workers who were not necessarily in the union. Because management cannot get enough welders in the UK, they have begun recruiting workers from overseas. These workers are treated quite badly in the shipyard. They work under hazardous conditions and live in poor accommodations. They have no allegiance to the company at all, and thus they were a great source of information for the blockaders, helping to shut the shipyard down that day.

The salience of Palestine in Britain could thus become a means through which broader and deeper class organising becomes possible, fomenting a movement which poses serious challenges to militarism.

Furthermore, workers without direct strategic links to militarism have been able to help develop challenges to it within the arms sector through the TUC, as well as the 2025 Unite Policy Conference. It was at the latter that military aerospace and hospitality workers organised together to pass an extensive motion on Palestine, pushing a previously hostile leadership into pledging support to Unite members that refused to “build, handle or transport weapons destined for Israel”, among many other things (Morell, 2025). While such shifts at the executive level do not themselves halt the military and capital flows between Britain and Israel, they afford the rank-and-file growing political space to do so.

Conclusion

New frontiers of struggle across varied sectors are promising, albeit nascent. The model which we have suggested can be understood as a rank-and-file strategy, theoretically outlined by Moody (2000) and articulated practically for workers in the arms industry by Campbell (2025). However, there remain important caveats to organising workers on this basis, especially regarding solidarity with Palestine.

The possibility of action within Lucas Aerospace and Rolls Royce in the 1970s was partially informed by the militant organisation of trade unions in the postwar era. Communist members performed crucial leadership roles within the apex of both moments, which in turn inflected the internationalist sensibilities of these struggles. Without the internationalist political structures of the twentieth century, *how* to organise for Palestine among a rank-and-file less embedded in these ideological traditions remains important.

As we have discussed, the restructuring of the industry towards “neoliberal warmaking” (Payne, 2023) broke the rank-and-file power of trade unions. The defeats of union resistance to redundancy programmes led to a reorganisation of production that separates workers materially and spatially. This can be partly understood as a political project undertaken by capital in the sector to dissipate the structural power of workers which has been facilitated by a partnership union strategy (Moody, 2022; Campbell, 2025).

Nonetheless, politics reemerges through the contradictions of production, and as Campbell states: ‘a lot of the younger people... work in the military industry because there’s nothing else, they aren’t necessarily aligned with the dominant culture inside it’ (2025: 87). Contesting the arms industry from within and below will not be an “ideal” or pure political project, but a *real* movement that emerges “from the premises now in existence” (Marx and Engels, 1845: 26). This is a contingent process of placing a political wager ‘within and against the existing force relations’ (Roggero, 2020: 11). We argue that the rank-and-file strategy put forward by Campbell (2025) has the potential to grow due to the politicisation of the sector while offering our own additions.

Firstly, a rank-and-file strategy on Palestine must contend with the current disorganisation of workers. Developing workers’ struggles, whether over “bread-and-butter” issues or internationalist demands, begins to contest the terms of production, providing “forward momentum” and leadership that builds confidence for larger political fights (ibid, 2025). Secondly, we suggest that official union structures can be instrumentalised. For instance, the new position of Unite on an arms embargo to Israel was established through rank-and-file organisation, committing the union to support workers’ direct actions. This remains a useful tool for developing the confidence and ability of the broader lay-membership of Unite to act independently (Morell, 2025).

While there is no certainty that this rank-and-file tendency will grow within the military industry, it has the potential to re-politicise the workplace and reenergise labour politics. Likewise, the politics of anti-militarism can find a practical grounding and provide an important leadership function within the labour movement, but this must come alongside a strategic commitment to rebuilding the structural and associational power of the rank-and-file.

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