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Haj Youssef, M, Nolan, S and Hussein, H

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The transition behaviour of self-employed in the UK and the role of unionisation during 2008 economic downturn

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the transitions of workers between paid employment and self-employment before and after the 2008 financial crisis, focusing on the drivers behind increased self-employment in the UK and the role of trade union membership in these transitions.

Design/methodology/approach: Using a long-running panel dataset, the labour market is divided into three groups: sustained self-employed, always employed, and those who transition between the two. The framework assesses the influence of union membership on these transitions.

Findings: Long-term paid employees, rather than those transitioning between employment types, are driving increased self-employment. Union membership appears more attractive post-crisis to paid employees, but disengagement from unions may be linked to transitions towards self-employment.

Originality/value: This research highlights the nuanced role of trade unions in employment transitions and contributes to understanding labour market dynamics post-financial crisis in the UK.

Keywords: Transition Behaviour, Labor relations, Unionisation, Employees, Self-employed, UK, Labour Market.

Introduction

The rise of self-employment in the United Kingdom, particularly before and after the 2008 financial crisis, represents an important episode in the historical evolution of labour relations. This transition underscores the declining role of collective labour protections, such as those provided by trade unions, and the increasing prevalence of individualised labour market strategies. These shifts are not merely a response to economic crises but are embedded in broader historical trends that have shaped the organisation of work and the structure of labour markets. This study situates these workforce transitions within management history, examining how unions have historically influenced employment dynamics and how their decline has contributed to the structural rise of self-employment.

At its core, management history explores how institutions, economic conditions, and organisational structures evolve over time, shaping the interplay between labour and capital. Trade unions, historically significant in labour-management relations, have been central to this evolution, providing a collective voice for workers and influencing transitions between employment types. Union membership in the UK peaked at over 13 million in the late 1970s (Newson, 2023). Since then, union density has been in steady decline. This fall coincides with significant shifts in the labour market, including the rise of self-employment. It is important to note that self-employment encompasses two distinct forms: (1) genuinely self-employed individuals who operate independent businesses at their own volition (e.g., farmers, sole proprietors), and (2) independent contractors who provide services under the direction of clients or platforms (e.g., gig economy workers, contract harvesters). These two groups represent fundamentally different employment phenomena, reflecting varying degrees of autonomy, economic vulnerability, and institutional support. While this study analyses self-employment as a broader category, recognising this heterogeneity is essential for understanding its structural implications.

The 2008 financial crisis provides a critical context for understanding these dynamics. Historically, economic crises have acted as inflection points in the relationship between labour institutions and workforce transitions. During such periods, unions have often served as a "layer of protection," shielding workers from the full brunt of economic instability and preserving job security. However, the financial crisis exposed the limits of union influence, particularly in liberal market economies like the UK, where declining union power has been linked to the growth of alternative labour arrangements such as self-employment. This study interrogates whether the historical decline in union influence, particularly during this period, accelerated transitions into self-employment, reflecting broader shifts in labour-management relations over time.

This paper employs the framework of Hussein and Haj Youssef (2023), which categorises workers into three groups: sustained self-employed, dabblers (who transition between paid and self-employment), and always employed. Using longitudinal data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS), the analysis tracks these groups across two decades, examining how their transitions were influenced by union membership, economic conditions, and labour market structures. By situating these findings within the historical trajectory of labour relations, the paper contributes to debates in management history on the interplay between labour institutions, workforce transitions, and structural economic change. Two key questions guide this inquiry: (1) How have trade unions historically shaped transitions between paid employment and self-employment during periods of economic crisis? (2) How has the broader decline in union density contributed to the structural rise of self-employment in the UK? These questions place unions at the centre of a historical analysis of labour relations, linking workforce transitions to the long-term decline of collective protections and the rise of individualised labour strategies.

Through this lens, the paper situates the rise of self-employment within broader historical debates about the evolution of labour institutions and their role in shaping workforce dynamics. By contributing to management history, the study advances our understanding of how institutional decline, economic crises, and structural shifts in the labour market intersect to influence employment transitions, offering insights into the historical forces that continue to shape contemporary labour markets. Also, by drawing lessons from historical labour relations, this study also offers valuable insights for policymakers seeking to address the challenges of labour market transitions in modern economies.

The change in UK self-employment.

For two decades, from the mid-1990s onwards, the rate of people entering self-employment in the UK remained steady between 36 and 38 percent, while the rate of exit from self-employment varied between 32 and 37 percent. This stability shifted sharply in the early 2010s, when the entry rate fell by 14 percent (ONS, 2014). Between 2001 and 2007, the Small Business Service (SBS) Household Survey of Entrepreneurs (2007) estimated that self-employment accounted for 11 to 12 percent of the labour market, a figure that lagged behind other developed countries (Bosma and Levie, 2009).

The financial crisis of 2008 created significant upheaval across various sectors around the world (Kleindienst et al., 2024) but also within the UK labour market, resulting in a notable rise in self-employment. Between 2008 and 2015, the number of self-employed individuals grew from 3.8 million to 4.6 million, with 1.7 million starting businesses in 2009 alone. Whilst self-employment had been steadily growing since the 1970s, this marked a notable step change in that trend. This growth can be attributed to several factors. Policy initiatives such as the extension of the 10 percent entrepreneurial tax relief rate, the introduction of the Enterprise Finance Guarantee Scheme, and the New Enterprise Allowance were designed to support self-employment, making it more appealing to workers and policymakers alike (Hatfield, 2015, p.

11). On the supply side, workers increasingly opted to contract out their labour, while on the demand side, firms embraced more fragmented production strategies, relying less on sole suppliers and more on a flexible workforce of smaller contractors (Blissett, 2023; Mickaitis et al., 2009). These shifts facilitated an increase in outsourcing among large firms, which benefited freelancers and the self-employed without employees (Urwin and Buscha, 2012).

Table 1 draws on two surveys to demonstrate the changes in the main groups: self-employed, paid employment, unemployed, and inactive. The data cover 1991 up to 2014, offering a comprehensive view of workforce transitions over time. We consider the figures from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS) and compare them with statistics from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), derived from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS). These comparisons reveal important variations in employment trends across data sets and help contextualise the broader structural changes within the UK labour market¹.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

There are notable differences in the average levels of self-employment between the two samples with the estimates from the BHPS and UKHLS tending to be lower in all but one measure. This difference may derive from the different make-up of the two samples with the LFS covering a wider range of the UK population. Further, the specification of workers is not directly aligned. The BHPS and UKHLS do not follow the ILO employment definitions and only rely on self-reporting that can result in subjective responses on labour market status (Long, 2009 p49). Despite this the data shows similar patterns of growth across all indicators. Total paid employment levels in both samples decreased after the economic downturn in 2010 but

¹ Both datasets have their limitations. We explore the limitations of the BHPS and UKHLS in the data section. The Quarterly Labour Force data estimates on market flow – the transitions between the states of employment – are experimental and our prone to bias. Because of they are not recognised as indicators of national statistical status and are not suitable for labour market analysis if used in isolation.

recovered relatively quickly. Unemployment followed the opposite path with levels rising significantly in the wake of the crisis before falling back to a level below that witnessed in 1991. In the case of inactivity, the percentage rates in BHPS and UKHLS are markedly higher than those in the LFS. We believe this is explained by the different age profiles in the two samples. To ensure we follow our respondents over the full time span available in the data we do not limit respondents upper working age to 64 as the LFS sample does. This may lead to a larger proportion of inactivity due to a larger percentage of workers who are inactive due to retirement. This difference may also account for the divergence in trends between the BHPS and UKHLS and the LFS after the crisis. In both samples, we find that inactivity rates increase after the economic downturn; whilst this upward trend continues in the BHPS and UKHLS sample we see a reversal in the ONS after 2010.

Turning to self-employment we see a similar trend in both samples that aligns with that found in the existing literature. There is stable growth in the early 1990s followed by a noticeable drop in the middle of the decade. Upwards growth then returns in the early years of the 2000s. We then witness the post-crisis increase in self-employment outlined above. This is more marked in the ONS database going from 9.8% in 2008 to 11.2% in 2014. The more modest increase of 0.3% over the same period in the BHPS and UKHLS comes from the different make up of our sample. Despite this difference in our analysis we maintain the sample with the older age cohort to try and understand the transitions between self-employment, paid employment and inactivity that may be driving the widely recognised uptick in UK self-employment seen following the financial crisis. The digital era further transformed Britain's labour market by reshaping employment relationships and giving rise to new organisational forms that connect customers directly with service providers. These changes have been described as the "on-demand economy" or "sharing economy" (Todoli'-Signes, 2017, p. 194). Other factors, such as changes to contract types, employment conditions, labour market needs,

and workforce demographics, have also influenced transition behaviours among various employment groups (Hussein and Haj Youssef, 2023).

Despite these trends, contrasting evidence from other contexts raises important questions. David Peetz (2019), using data from an OECD survey, found that self-employment levels decreased in 26 of 37 countries between 2000 and 2014. Across the OECD, only 15.8 percent of the labour force was self-employed in 2014, marking a significant decline. The UK's increase in self-employment, therefore, stands out as an anomaly, raising two critical questions: Why did self-employment rise in the UK while declining elsewhere? And why did UK self-employment levels remain lower than the OECD average despite the apparent growth? While Peetz's findings highlight a general decline in self-employment, the UK's unique trajectory underscores the importance of studying its structural and institutional drivers. Understanding these deviations provides valuable insights into the interplay between labour market policies, union influence, and self-employment trends.

Additionally, Bradley Bowden (2020a, 2020b) has shown that much of the rise in self-employment is concentrated within a few industries, such as construction, professional services, healthcare, and real estate. Bowden also suggests that gig work, despite receiving significant public and scholarly attention, remains statistically insignificant. This perspective challenges broader narratives that depict gig work as central to the rise in self-employment, instead framing the growth as a continuation of industry-specific dynamics. By focusing on transitions into self-employment across industries, this study aims to unpack these nuanced patterns and address the broader structural changes that underpin them. Whilst the post-crisis rise in self-employment represented a shift in the UK labour market, it also extended a longer-term trend that began at the turn of the century. Its persistence, even amid economic turmoil, contributed to the UK's relatively quick recovery from the financial crisis. However, the nuanced insights from Bowden highlight that self-employment's drivers are often industry-

specific and tied to structural changes in the economy, including the expansion of the gig economy and the increasing flexibility of labour markets.

Identifying the drivers of these trends requires an understanding of the flows into and out of self-employment. In this study, we define the inflow rate as the number of workers entering self-employment as a share of the total in self-employment, while the outflow rate represents the number leaving as a share of the total. If the inflow rate exceeds the outflow rate, self-employment levels rise, and vice versa.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1 tracks both rates over the period of our sample. In our data the early 1990s growth in self-employment was driven by a greater inflow rate relative to the outflow rate. This trend stopped mid-1990s due to a sudden decline in the inflow rate before all but reversing in the final years of the decade. In the years before the financial crisis there is a severe drop in the inflow rate of 4 percentage points. However, on average these are balanced out by outflow rates leaving the overall level of self-employment mostly stable conforming with what we saw in Table 1. During the economic downturn of 2008 to 2012 we see an increase in the inflow rate (from 17 to 22 percent) and decline in outflow rates (from 20 to 18 percent). This provides us with a little more clarity: It appears that during the height of the economic downturn self-employment was attractive to both sides of the labour market.

One potential explanation for the post-crisis rise in self-employment is the recession-led hypothesis, specifically the "refugee effect" or the push model. During the financial crisis, widespread business closures created redundancies, increasing unemployment and driving workers toward self-employment as a means of economic survival (Thurik et al., 2008). The Bank of England (2014) identified several recession-driven factors contributing to the rise in self-employment, including weak demand for labour and a decrease in real household income. These conditions incentivised workers to pursue self-employment when paid employment

opportunities were scarce. This appears to be the story playing out in the United States during the crisis where business creation increased steadily as unemployment rates continued to rise over 10 percent. This compares with the period of strong economic growth - “the roaring 90s” - when business creation was lower (Fairlie, 2013). This chimes both with the story presented above as well as existing work by Bell and Blanchflower (2011) who identify a similar pattern in the UK. However, previous empirical research on the relationship between unemployment and entrepreneurship has failed to identify any stylised facts. Positive (countercyclical), negative (pro-cyclical) and zero relationships have all been found in studies of the same period (Parker, 2009). Accordingly, the changes we have outlined above may not only be attributed to the effect of the crisis nor to the government policies that incentivise self-employment outlined above. There are long term changes in the nature and forms of the work: the trend towards freelancing instead of owning a business; the possibility of combining both self-employment and employment together. Such potential changes should be understood in the wider shifting context of the UK labour market.

The broader structural shifts in the UK labour market also play a role. The ageing workforce, the rising retirement age, and longer life expectancy have increased self-employment activity, as many older workers opt for flexible arrangements rather than exiting the labour force entirely. Additionally, the growing prevalence of freelancing, the loosening of boundaries between paid and self-employment, and the expansion of the gig economy are reshaping labour market dynamics (D’Archy and Gardiner, 2014). Hussein and Haj Youssef (2023) argue that these trends align with a framework that divides workers into three categories: (1) Always employees, who never enter self-employment; (2) Dabblers, who move between paid employment and self-employment; and (3) Sustainers, who remain consistently self-employed. This framework offers a lens for understanding post-crisis transitions in the UK labour market.

By examining these structural changes, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities of the workforce during periods of economic instability. Taken together, the perspectives from Peetz, Bowden, and this study highlight the complexity of self-employment as a phenomenon. The findings also offer insights into the role of unions in shaping labour market transitions, particularly through the lens of social embeddedness theory (Williamson, 1985). This theory underscores the interconnectedness of economic activities with social and cultural contexts, suggesting that unions continue to play a critical role in governing economic behaviours, even amid broader institutional decline.

Role of union membership

Union membership and unionisation have historically played a pivotal role in shaping labour market dynamics, serving as a collective mechanism for worker protection, wage negotiation, and improved working conditions. Proponents argue that unions have been instrumental in advancing workers' rights, securing benefits such as minimum wages and bans on exploitative practices like child labour (Hagedorn et al., 2016). They have also provided a layer of protection during economic crises, enabling collective bargaining and offering stability to workers facing uncertain labour market conditions. The rise of non-standard employment arrangements, such as gig work and platform-based labour, has presented new challenges for unions. Scholars argue that traditional union models are increasingly incompatible with the needs of the self-employed and gig workers, whose labour arrangements lack the formal employer-employee relationship that unions traditionally serve (Healy et al., 2017). This raises critical questions about unions' ability to adapt their strategies to represent diverse labour groups, particularly as the gig economy grows.

However, Bradley Bowden (2020a, 2020b) offers a counterpoint to the prevailing narratives about the role of gig work in self-employment growth. His findings suggest that gig work is statistically insignificant in driving overall self-employment levels, with much of the

growth concentrated in traditional sectors like construction, healthcare, professional services, and real estate. This industry-specific view challenges broader discussions about unions' capacity to address the needs of gig workers and instead emphasises the continued importance of understanding union decline in traditional sectors. In construction, for example, the replacement of employees with self-employed contractors has been closely tied to outsourcing trends, where individuals performing similar roles to employees increasingly operate as self-employed freelancers (Blissett, 2023). These shifts highlight the need for unions to reconsider their focus and strategies in the context of evolving labour market structures.

The UK has seen a steady decline in union membership over recent decades, falling from a peak of 13.2 million in 1979. There was a rapid decline in the 1980s followed by a more steady secular decline in the following two decades with union density falling from over 30% in 1995 to just over 22% in 2022 (ONS, 2023). This trend has been linked to several factors, including changes in employment types, shifts in industrial composition, and broader labour market flexibility. Increased flexibility has allowed firms to adapt their workforces to economic demands, but it has also reduced the prevalence of traditional unionised roles (Murthy et al., 2022). Bowden (2020b) argues that this decline is not inherently detrimental, as industry-specific dynamics often explain transitions to self-employment and other labour arrangements. However, these structural changes have significantly impacted the power of unions to collectively bargain and protect workers.

David Peetz's (2019) findings provide an important international context for understanding the UK's unique labour market dynamics. Across the OECD, self-employment levels fell in 26 of 37 countries between 2000 and 2014, with only 15.8% of the labour force self-employed in 2014. This trend contrasts sharply with the UK, where self-employment rose during the same period. This divergence raises two critical questions: Why has the UK experienced a rise in self-employment when most OECD countries have seen declines? And

why do UK self-employment levels remain below the OECD average, despite their upward trajectory? These questions are particularly relevant when considering the role of unions in shaping self-employment transitions. Peetz's observations suggest that the UK's rise in self-employment may be a response to specific structural and policy-driven shifts, including the decline of union power. Blissett (2023) reinforces this perspective, arguing that outsourcing and the fragmentation of labour markets have replaced traditional unionised employment with self-employment arrangements, particularly in sectors like construction. In many cases, the individuals transitioning to self-employment are former employees, underscoring the connection between union decline and these labour market changes.

The debate about unionisation's role in supporting self-employed workers is complex. Advocates of unionisation argue that unions can still play a vital role in representing the interests of self-employed individuals by providing collective bargaining, negotiating fair pay and benefits, and addressing issues like healthcare and retirement plans (Greenhouse, 2016). This perspective is particularly relevant for self-employed workers who provide outsourcing services within traditional labour markets. However, Bornstein (2015) highlights the challenges unions face in representing the self-employed, given their diverse occupations, autonomous work arrangements, and lack of traditional employment relationships.

Labour market flexibility, a hallmark of liberal market economies like the UK, has further complicated the relationship between unions and self-employment. While flexibility reduces labour costs and fosters entrepreneurship, it can also increase the risks and costs associated with transitioning to self-employment (Kanniainen and Leppamaki, 2009). This dynamic underscores the need for unions to adapt their strategies to support a workforce increasingly characterised by non-standard employment arrangements. Interestingly, Kanniainen and Vesala's (2005) theoretical model suggests that as union power increases, entrepreneurial activity may decline due to higher risks and costs associated with unionised

labour markets. This view is supported by empirical evidence from 19 OECD countries, though Bowden (2020b) cautions that such findings may not directly apply to the UK's unique labour market structure. Dilli (2021), drawing on the Varieties of Capitalism framework, also finds that increased regulation of labour markets in liberal market economies tends to correlate with declines in entrepreneurial activity. These findings highlight the complex interplay between union power, labour market flexibility, and self-employment transitions.

The protective role of unions becomes particularly salient during economic crises. Ivlevs and Veliziotis (2017) find that unionised workers in Central and Eastern Europe were less likely to lose their jobs during the financial crisis compared to their non-union counterparts. Similarly, Bachman and Felder (2021) show that higher union density mitigated the negative impacts of macroeconomic shocks in developed economies, including the UK. These findings align with the "layer of protection" narrative, suggesting that unions continue to offer stability during periods of economic turmoil. However, the UK's post-crisis rise in self-employment complicates this narrative. While union membership provided protection for many workers, the broader decline in union density may have pushed others toward self-employment as a survival strategy. This aligns with the "refugee effect" or push model, where economic crises force workers into self-employment due to limited opportunities in paid employment (Thurik et al., 2008). The Bank of England (2014) highlights several recession-driven factors contributing to this trend, including weak demand for labour and declining household incomes.

By exploring the relationship between union membership and self-employment transitions, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the UK labour market. The interplay between declining union power, structural labour market changes, and industry-specific dynamics offers critical insights into the rise of self-employment. By situating these findings within broader debates about labour market flexibility and unionisation, this study

underscores the importance of unions in navigating the challenges and opportunities of an evolving workforce.

Data

We rely on the division of the labour market proposed by Hussein and Haj Youssef (2023) to help explain the trends in self-employment witnessed in the UK following the 2008 financial crisis. We identify three types of worker – dabblers, sustainers, always employed - and study their movements over a sustained period to better understand how they contribute to the headline story about self-employment and role of union membership. Doing this requires access to a long-running panel dataset that tracks respondents across time. The UK household survey often known as “Understanding Society” meets these demands. It comprises two surveys: the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which ran from 1991 to 2008; the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) which succeeded and expanded on the BHPS in 2010. Both studies collect information from all members of each household interviewed (over 5,500 households and 10,000 individuals each year) and are considered to be representative of the UK population. These datasets provide publicly available data, adhering to ethical guidelines for secondary data analysis. Data collection for Understanding Society, including data linkages, was approved by the University of Essex Ethics Committee, while health record linkage and biosocial data collection received approval from the relevant NRES committees (References: 08/H0604/124, 08/H0720/60, 11/SC/0274, 10/H0604/2). The studies are widely used to explore trends and issues within the UK labour market (i.e., Hussein et al., 2024; Haj Youssef et al., 2024). The panel nature of our data allows us to identify self-employed workers and identify the patterns in their engagement with self-employment over a long period of time that covers the periods before and after the 2008 financial crisis. It is important to note that our analysis includes both genuinely self-employed individuals, such as independent business operators, and independent contractors, such as gig economy workers.

While these groups differ in their employment dynamics, our data does not distinguish between them explicitly, and our analysis treats self-employment as a comprehensive category to examine overall trends and transitions. The survey is not specifically focused on self-employment or entrepreneurship and so cannot explore some of the more qualitative questions about why workers who engage with self-employment makes the choices they do. However, the large representative sample allows for a robust narrative exploration of the trends associated with the different type of workers that we are interested in.

Our criteria for the division in the labour market follows the framework set out by Hussein and Haj Youssef (2023) but differs slightly to allow us to consider the period before and after the financial crisis. We focus solely on full-time workers and consider only those above the working age of 16. We depart from the standard working-age criteria of excluding any observations above the age of 65. This not only accounts for the expansion of the ageing population in the UK labour market but also allows us to track older respondents in our sample for a longer period. To identify the different types of workers we look at respondents' employment status between the years 1991 and 2002. To obtain a clear pattern of behaviour we impose the rule that all workers must be observed for more than one third of this period ensuring that each worker is observed at least four times. The rule of the division are as follows:

- Dabblers are workers who have at least one instance of self-employment, but self-employment makes up less than 55% of the years spent in either type of employment.
- Sustainers spend more than 55% of their observed employment time in self-employment.
- “Always employees” are only ever observed in paid employment.

Based on our criteria we obtain a sample of 1,404 sustained self-employed, 792 dabblers and 11,184 always employees. With this sample we then observe behaviour before the start of the financial crisis between 2003 and 2007 (using the BHPS) and post-crisis between 2010 and

2014². In observing the trends in these two periods we wish to identify what labour market transitions look like when the labour market is booming and compare these with the post-crisis picture. Our data which observes the behaviour for a consistent set of people in each group in both periods allows for precisely this.

We are also interested in the role trade union membership plays in transition into and out of self-employment. To investigate this, we consider how the distribution of job status changes before and after the financial crisis. Our measure for union membership comes from a response to the question “Which organisation are you a member of?” This question is asked every two years: the last pre-crisis wave of the BHPS to capture the response was in 2007; the first post-crisis wave of the UKHLS was in 2011. We explore how union density differs for our three types of workers and consider the underlying movement following the financial crisis using a transition matrix to compare how the job status of each individual worker in our sample

Discussion of findings

We begin by considering how our three categories differ in socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Table 2 outlines these differences and demonstrates most of them are highly statistically significant. Of the three types, the sustainers on average earn the most in terms of hourly pay although this is not statistically different from the pay of the dabblers³. They also tend to be older, more experienced, more likely to work full-time, work more hours per week, and are more likely to employ workers. They are more likely to be male, to be married, to come from non-UK background and to be from an ethnic minority. They are also the group who are most likely to have had parents who were self-employed and are most likely to report that they wish to start a business. These overall differences continue when comparing the dabblers to the

² The move from BHPS to UKHLS led to a gap in tracking respondent in 2009 so data for that year is missing from our sample.

³ This is one of only two categories (the other being the wish to start a business) where the ordering of the summary statistic differs from Hussein and Haj Youssef (2023). There it is dabblers who have the highest hourly pay and the greatest wish to start a business.

always employed suggesting there are some key socio-economic and demographic differences between paid employees and those that engage with self-employment. The always employees are much more representative of the national gender split at 50%/50%. They also have a higher representation amongst people with a disability, and are more likely to be responsible for children below the age of 16. Dabblers report the highest proportion of respondents with English as their first language, are the group most likely to have partners working, and to have children. Interestingly, they also report the highest number of accumulated years of education, followed by the always employees and then sustainers. On average 5% more of them work in second jobs, and report slightly higher household income than either the sustained self-employed or always employees.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

We now move to consider how the overall proportions of the three types of worker change both before and after the financial crisis of 2008. Figure 2 shows how the distribution of employment type (self-employed, paid employee, unemployed, inactive) differs for each of our categories over time. The y-axis indicates the percentage rates for each employment type as a proportion of the labour. The dashed area represents the excluded period in the analysis (year 2008 and 2009), which our data does not cover.

Starting with sustainers, the most notable trend is the steep decline in the proportion of this group that consist of the self-employed which drops from 80% in 2003 to 60% in 2007. This change is countered by an attendant rise in the sustainers now in paid employment (increasing by 10 percentages points) or economic inactivity (increasing by 7 percentage points). It appears the pre-crisis period for this group involves considerable compositional change with paid employment attracting a not insignificant portion of sustained self-employees. The notable drift into inactivity is most likely driven by an increase in retirement. Part of this is a function of how we have defined our division of the labour market based on labour market activity between 1992 and 2002. As we track these workers beyond this point, a portion of them will pass retirement age and so are more likely to move into economic inactivity. This is reflected by a similar upward trend in inactivity for dabblers and the always employed. This trend appears consistent across the groups which is perhaps surprising given that sustainers are on average nearly five years older than workers in the other categories. We might expect this difference to manifest in a greater likelihood of sustainers to move into economic inactivity. That we do not see this is notable and suggests that sustainers may have a stronger link with employment than the other groups despite being older on average. Post-crisis, the decline in the proportion of sustainers in self-employment continues but the majority of this appears to be explained by increased inactivity. The proportion of sustainers in paid

employment is on average stable post-crisis at around 20%. Throughout both periods the proportion of unemployed sustainers is close to negligible.

Dabblers also saw a decline in the proportion of self-employment in the pre-crisis period but at a slower rate than sustainers with a 5-percentage point drop between 2003 and 2007 compared to 20 percentage points. At the same time the proportion in paid employment also fell by a similar amount. Both falls were matched by the previously outlined rise in economic inactivity. One potential explanation for this increase is that similar proportions of sustainers and dabblers reached the age of retirement and so moved into economic inactivity. This suggests that there was a lack of churn between self- and paid employment during the pre-crisis period. Dabblers for the most part appeared not to dabble.

Post-crisis we witness a fall in the proportion of self-employed dabblers of 4 percentage points between 2010 and 2014. There is a noticeably sharp drop in the proportion of paid dabblers in the immediate wake of the financial crisis from 55% to 49.6% which suggests dabblers faced a difficult labour market during the financial crisis. This decline continues but at a less rapid pace falling another 4 percentage points between 2010 and 2014. In comparison self-employment proportions held up well in the immediate crisis, only falling 1 percentage point between 2007 and 2010. Arguably, self-employment proportions continue the same trend as witnessed pre-crisis which compares with the discontinuous jump seen for paid employment. It appears part of this jump comes from dabblers moving from paid employment into unemployment. While some will have moved to economic activity the lack of a similar break in the trend for self-employment suggests there may have been some inflow from paid to self-employment.

For those denoted as always employed by the pre-2003 sample there is a 4-percentage point increase into self-employment. Given the decline we see in this period for dabblers and sustainers this suggests that the rise in self-employment that was witnessed in the early years

of the 21st century was driven by those moving from long-term paid employment into self-employment. As the always employed make up most of our sample, an increase of 4% from 2003 to 2007 would lead to an increase in the overall levels even if the proportion of self-employed amongst the dabblers and sustainers fell. Post-crisis, we again see a jump from 4% in 2007 to 5.2% in 2010. As the 2010s progress this proportion remains the same suggesting that the rise in overall self-employment that follows the financial crisis is again coming from first time self-employees.

These two trends together appear to suggest that the financial crisis did not necessarily cause the shift towards self-employment amongst long-term paid employees. It appears such a move was already under way supporting the suggestion there were changes to the labour market in place making self-employment more viable or necessary. Indeed, one could argue from the evidence in figure 2 that the financial crisis dampened this trend slightly.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Of course, the nature of self employment can differ according to the type of job and type of industry that employment takes place within. As Figure 3 demonstrates construction is the largest single sector with the largest representation in our data, followed by Distribution, hotels and catering (repairs) and then Banking, finance, insurance, business services and leasing. Each of these industries would face the challenges of the financial crisis in different ways and it is instructive to examine the trends amongst our three types. Figure 4 breaks down the changes in the proportions of employment over the period of our data.

We can see that construction is notable in attracting a steady proportion of sustainers – the level of representation rarely falls below 20% in the pre-crisis period. We do see a slight decline amongst this group in the wake of the crisis although the decline is steeper amongst the dabblers. There is also a fall amongst the always employed but it is comparatively marginal.

Overall, it is hard to discern that the rises in self-employment in the 2010s is driven by any differential shifts in our three types in this industry.

In distribution all three types make up between 15 and 20% of total self-employment. There is a steady decline in self-employment in this industry over time although there does appear to be a sharp decline amongst sustainers in the immediate wake of the financial crisis. By contrast the engagement of dabblers appears to have a slight recovery in the early 2010s reverse some of the decline seen since the 2000s. Engagement in banking and related industries is quite variable for both sustainers and dabblers over the period of our data with a notable leap in dabblers engagement in the mid 1990s. This volatility is seen again following the financial crisis where there is a sharp jump for both sustainers and dabblers. In comparison representation amongst the self-employed remains stable over the whole period.

It appears that the biggest driver in the self-employment increases in the grouping of “other industries”. This includes a number of fine-grained industries that do not fall into the main categories. Due to the many categories it is not possible to follow any trends with any statistical reliability. However, we see a steady rise across the period of our data for dabblers from 20% to 30%. For sustainers, there also seems to a steady uptick in the wake of the financial crisis. Whilst we are unable to follow to track these trends by industry over time in Table 3 we show the top five industry for sustainers and dabblers in our post-crisis data. For both groups education and human health services are the biggest industries. It may be that the rise in self-employment is in part driven by increased demands for workers in these industries which suggests a different composition of self-employment than witnessed in the past. Whilst we are unable to explore this supposition at this time it is an area ripe for further research.⁴

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

⁴ We are grateful for this suggestion from an anonymous reviewer.

What then are the institutional factors that may be behind such a secular change in self-employment in the United Kingdom? As noted above we consider the roles of trade unions to be revealing here. Whilst the role of unions for workers is multifaceted, given our concern in this paper with employment transitions we focus here on how union density and membership can affect employment status.

[TABLE 4 HERE]

Table 4 looks at the composition of our sample by job status both before (2007) and after the crisis (2011). Reading horizontally each row of the matrix outlines the distribution in 2011 of workers who had a particular status in 2007. The diagonal of each matrix shows the proportion of workers who have remained in the same job status. Given the proposition that union membership should protect paid employees during a financial crisis we begin our analysis there. For non-union paid workers who make up most of our sample we see that, from 2007 to 2011, 21.5% of paid workers leave that type of employment. Most of these are moves into retirement but nearly 6 percent of them have started working for themselves by 2011. The story is markedly different for unionised paid employees. Over 95% of these workers remain in post following the crisis. Those that do leave tend to move to retirement or inactivity with a very small percentage moving into self-employment. That said, there is evidence here that being unionised can provide some protection for workers during a financial crisis.

There are interesting differences between the union and non-union self-employed. Whilst a third of non-union 2007 self-employed leave this status, only 21% of their union counterparts do, with all of them transitioning to paid employment. Conversely, over 10% of non-union self-employed opt for retirement. The move to this status is more prevalent amongst every non-union job status particularly for those in paid employment. It may be that age is partly driving this difference; the age distribution of non-union respondents tends to skew rightward compared to union members with a greater mass of workers in the age group near to

retirement. Also, because the gig work is characterised by non-standard employment arrangements, fragmented work relationships, and limited collective identity among workers. The transient and autonomous nature of gig work poses difficulties for unions in building collective solidarity and mobilising gig workers for collective action.

[FIGURE 5 HERE]

In figure 5 we track the proportion of each of our worker types – dabblers, sustainers, always employees – who are unionised in each year. The interest comes in the marked difference in post-crisis levels for the dabblers and always employed compared to the sustainers. There is a sharp increase in the proportion of union membership amongst those workers more likely to be attached to paid employees. This compares with a much shallower incline for sustainers who are more likely on average to be self-employed. Recall that in the wake of the financial crisis the proportion of dabblers in paid employment fell quite sharply whilst the level of self-employed dabblers held steady. Given this, the increase in the proportion of unionised dabblers is notable. This jump appears to be driven almost entirely by those in paid employment: union membership increases from 14.5% to 33% for employees between 2007 and 2011. This compares with a much smaller increase from 1.5% to 6.3% for self-employed dabblers. It is a similar tale for the always employed. These statistics remain broadly the same when we consider those who remain in the same job status from one period to the next.

The story here appears to be that dabblers in paid employee view union membership as a protection against the economic risks brought on by the financial crisis. Self-employed dabblers do not appear to see the same incentives. This appears to align with the evidence from Dilli (2021) and Kannaianen and Vesala (2005): in times of turmoil there is a tendency to cling to union institutions within paid employment rather than attempt the riskier move into self-employment.

What then does this analysis tell us about transitions into self-employment and how they explain the rise seen in the 2010s? What, if any, link do the movements we outline here have to the story we explored above? Clearly, there is evidence that union membership plays a role in protecting paid employees. That is clear the analysis in Table 4 which focuses on the height of the financial crisis. This protective effect of unions can also be seen in our data during periods of economic prosperity. Further, the non-union workers who tend to move into self-employment do so at higher rates than union members.

As we argued above the transition from paid employee to self-employment seems to be behind a good deal of the upward trend in self-employment, we have seen in the UK over the last two decades. At the same time the proportion of UK employees who are trade union membership has been on a secular decline, falling from over 30% in 1995 to around 26% in 2011 and continuing down to just over 22% in 2022 (ONS, 2023). This increasing share of paid employees without the protection of union membership may help to explain the increasing prevalence of self-employment within the UK since the financial crisis.

As noted, the rise in self-employment preceeded the financial crisis and the period our data covers. The Xu and Giupponi (2020) estimate a steady rise of the share of the labour comprising the self-employed rising from 4% from 1980 to just under 14% in the mid-nineties. This is follow by a decline to below 12% at the turn of the century before the increase that we have discussed above. The sharp increase in self-employment in the 1980s went in tandem a sharp decline in union membership. The economy of 1980s Britain was marked by increased flexibility within the labour market and the weakening of labour power could well explains this correlation. If Dilli's (2021) argument that greater regulation suppresses entrepreneurial activity holds, then the decline in union membership could be a spur to greater self-employment. It is worthwhile re-iterating Blisset's (2023) counter argument that suggests that such institutional and regulatory factors are not the sole - or even the main - influence in the

relationship between union activity and transitions to self-employment. He highlights the growing trend particularly in sectors such as construction where employees were replaced by self-employees, with these replacements often being the same person. Few of the workers that followed this route maintained or took up union membership. He argues that such effects derive from the underlying economic conditions and that the decline in union power within the United Kingdom followed from such movements rather being a cause.

The evidence from Table 4 suggests a different mechanism at play following the financial crisis. The trends Blisset discussed in the construction do not appear to be present in the official data where the share of self-employment coming from the construction industry declines over the 2010s (ONS, 2024). During the same period there was a rise in the share of those in professional, scientific and technical activities. It may be that the fundamental weakening of union power in the preceding three decades combined with an even larger economic shock in the shape of the financial crisis helped to promote further engagements with self-employment. Whilst building on an existing trend, the post-crisis rise in the United Kingdom moved the rate close to that of the OECD average suggesting that the upheaval could be seen as facilitated some moves towards self-employment where previously the incentives had not been conducive. Arguably, this allowed the United Kingdom self-employed sector move towards the international norm. Our study reveals that this normalisation is in part driven by the previously “always employed” breaking out on their own.⁵

Conclusion

This study examines changes and transitions in the UK labour market before and after the 2008 financial crisis, with a specific focus on the role of union membership in shaping these dynamics. By categorising workers into sustained self-employed, dabblers (who transition between paid and self-employment), and always employed, the analysis sheds light on how

⁵ We are grateful for an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

union membership has influenced workforce transitions and the rise of self-employment within the broader context of declining union power.

Our findings highlight that the rise in self-employment in the UK is primarily driven by the always employed transitioning out of traditional paid employment. This trend began before the financial crisis, suggesting that self-employment's role in the economic recovery was part of a longer-term structural shift. While union membership has historically provided a "layer of protection" for workers during periods of economic instability, its influence has diminished in the face of declining union density, which has been steadily decreasing since its peak in the 1970s. Post-crisis, union membership increased among workers in paid employment, particularly dabblers and the always employed, reflecting unions' ongoing but limited role in stabilising certain groups during economic turmoil.

These findings have significant implications for policymakers tasked with fostering equitable and resilient labour markets. First, the decline of union density has left many workers vulnerable to labour market shocks, driving them toward self-employment, often without adequate safeguards. Policymakers must address this gap by developing policies that enhance protections for self-employed individuals. As Wasim et al. (2024) highlight, networks play a pivotal role in supporting self-employed individuals by providing access to resources, knowledge, and collaborative opportunities. Policies that strengthen these networks can further mitigate risks and enhance the sustainability of self-employment. For example, ensuring access to healthcare, pension schemes, and social security benefits for the self-employed would mitigate the risks associated with this form of work and promote long-term financial stability. Second, the study underscores the importance of rethinking labour market strategies to balance flexibility with worker protections. Policymakers should consider measures to strengthen collective bargaining frameworks or create alternative mechanisms for representing the interests of non-traditional workers, including those in self-employment. This could involve

incentivising the formation of professional associations or cooperatives that provide a collective voice for self-employed individuals, replicating some of the protections traditionally offered by unions.

Finally, the historical insights from this study highlight the need for policies that address the structural drivers of self-employment. The erosion of stable, long-term employment opportunities and the rise of precarious work arrangements underscore the importance of investing in job creation initiatives that offer security and sustainable career paths. Policymakers should prioritise training and upskilling programmes tailored to meet the demands of evolving labour markets, ensuring that workers are not compelled to enter self-employment purely as a response to economic vulnerability. By focusing on these areas, policymakers can bridge the gap between the flexibility required by contemporary labour markets and the protections needed to safeguard workers. This study's findings, situated within the broader historical context of labour relations, offer a valuable framework for designing policies that not only address current challenges but also draw lessons from the past to build a more equitable and resilient labour market for the future.

In conclusion, this study advances understanding of workforce transitions by connecting them to the historical decline of union power and the rise of self-employment. The implications for public policy are clear: addressing the vulnerabilities associated with self-employment and ensuring adequate protections for all workers are critical to fostering a labour market that supports economic growth while safeguarding social equity.

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