



A striking future?

We seem to be going through a period of enhanced industrial unrest. Strikes seem to be in the news every day - Southern Rail, BA cabin crew and London Underground. Not to mention the junior doctors militating and taking action.

Some commentators have talked about “echoes of the winter of discontent” in 1979. Whilst levels of industrial action are nowhere near what they were then, it is still true that strikes are having a significant impact on us.

Is this just opportunism or a sign of a more significant malaise? Is it connected with the tumultuous events of last year which led to election of Donald Trump and, of course, Brexit?

The London Underground strikes are clearly connected with technology, automation and the impact that this is having on the number of jobs available. This is also true for Southern Rail. The growth of Artificial Intelligence and the rapid increase in the ability of machines means that this issue is only going to become more and more significant. As at the time of the industrial revolution, we are undergoing a significant period of change and this spate of strikes may be the first pangs of society coming to terms with a significant upheaval.

While technology is undoubtedly improving lives and may bring huge potential benefits to all of us, it will clearly and dramatically replace a very significant number of jobs over the next decade. A report by Oxford University and Deloitte predicted that 49% of current jobs in the US will be replaced by automation within the next twenty years. Although technology will also create new jobs, they will not be the same jobs and will not be in the same areas and the job creation will not be on the same scale. That is a gargantuan change

Likewise, a report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research at the end of last year with the title “Britain in the 2020s” forecast that the country is set to age sharply and become increasingly diverse: the age group of people above 65 is projected to increase by 33% by 2030, while the working-age population will rise by just 3%. It also predicts a rapid population expansion despite the Brexit vote. All of this is likely to cause tension, stress and unrest.

Additionally, while this has been a trend in the US for some time, there also appears to be a new appetite for group actions by employees and workers against companies in the UK.

All of these things suggest society is likely to be going through a significant period of upheaval in terms of social changes before we even start to factor in the current unstable and uncertain political situation throughout the world. This is sadly likely to augur more industrial unrest.

The government is currently legislating to try to limit industrial action by requiring minimum thresholds before strike action can take place and limiting the sectors which can go on strike. However, this may be a case of King Canute trying to hold back the tide. History tells us that we should probably brace ourselves for a further lengthy period of industrial unrest.