

THE FUTURE OF UNIONS

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For some twenty years now, it has been common to refer to a crisis of trade unionism. What the future holds for labour movements – or indeed, whether they even have a future – seems increasingly uncertain. For many trade unionists as well as academics, unions in most countries appear as victims of external forces outside their control, and often also of their own conservative inertia. But unions hold the capacity to shape their own future. In all countries, they possess powerful traditions and inherited structures; these all too frequently constitute a straitjacket, but can also provide a resource for creative initiative.

Envisaging the future is, in large measure, a matter of interpreting and projecting the path from past to present. Fascination with history can be dangerous: it is all too easy to contrast a largely mythical golden age of commitment and solidarity with the troubles of the present. But learning from history can open up new options; and times of crisis can encourage us to abandon once comfortable routines and search for new directions. It is for this reason that I start by considering trade unionism in the past.

UNIONS IN THE PAST

The history of trade unionism around

the world, dating back more than two centuries, is striking for its diversity. Yet some common themes can be identified, and below I consider five, which are relevant to the understanding of current predicaments and future possibilities.

First, unions in the past were built in the main on pre-existing solidarities. For example, craft unionism was based on principles of collective identity pre-dating capitalist employment relationships. Much more extensively, collective experience at work was complemented by domestic life in a nearby community with shared recreational, cultural and sometimes religious pursuits; the union was an institution embedded in an encompassing social landscape. In some circumstances, the union was an extension of the company community.

Second, trade unions in their evolution from outlaw status to respectability displayed a persistent tension between acting as a 'sword of justice' and as a 'vested interest' (Flanders, 1970): between fighting for all those oppressed and underprivileged and defending the narrow interests of relatively advantaged sections of the working class who often found it easiest to unionize.

Third, most unions were traditionally founded, at least in industrialized countries, on what is commonly termed

the 'normal' employment relationship. Those employed full-time on more or less permanent contracts were seen as most obvious candidates for collective organization and representation. The stereotypical trade unionist was a male with 'industrial muscle'.

Fourth, this core constituency was regarded in most countries where unions first emerged as a popular majority. Even if the industrial working class was rarely numerically dominant, it was the most visible face of modern society. While union membership often largely excluded women, and insecure and transitory workers, unions' claims to represent the working class as a whole were rarely questioned.

Fifth, even unions which professed internationalism were embedded in national societies. Their world-views were coloured by national biases; and crucially, their effectiveness was conditioned by employers and political authorities whose actions were likewise a primarily national in scope. The industrial relations systems of which unions became components and ultimately defenders were by the same token nationally bounded and nationally distinctive.

UNIONS IN THE PRESENT

The changes since the 'heroic' years of union expansion are by now all too familiar, and require only brief recapitulation. The stability of national industrial relations systems founded on the triangular relationship of unions, employers and governments has been undermined by a series of external challenges, usually identified under the

label of 'globalization'. This involves in part the intensification of cross-national competition and the internationalization of production chains within multinational companies (MNCs). No longer bound by the regulatory frameworks of national industrial relations systems, MNCs are increasingly assertive in redefining the industrial relations agenda, through policies of union exclusion or through forcing organized labour to surrender many of the gains won in earlier decades.

The last three decades have also seen a radical transformation of global capitalism with the liberalisation of currency markets; the acceleration of transactions through advances in information and telecommunications technologies; and the breakdown of the American-dominated post-war system of international monetary stabilisation. Deprived of much of their previous room for manoeuvre in shaping macroeconomic policy, governments too (even those supposedly of the left) have typically embraced policies of 'deregulation' to increase flexibility in labour markets. While the extent of such challenges varies substantially cross-nationally, universally the foundations of the post-war industrial relations compromise are significantly weakened, and hence the status of unions as its beneficiaries.

What may be termed the internal challenges to trade unionism stem from transformations in the traditional membership base. The male, manual industrial worker whose nine-to-five job was central to his existence is a declining species. The world of work

now manifestly has two genders, is occupationally and often ethnically diverse, and involves highly differentiated patterns of activity over the day, the week and the lifetime.

To the extent that trade unions still represent primarily their old core constituencies, they suffer declining membership and lose effectiveness. To the extent that they succeed in extending their boundaries of organisation (usually very partially at best), the consequence is often internal division and the loss of capacity to constitute an integrated movement. Either way, they easily become perceived as tired, archaic bureaucracies, largely irrelevant to the major issues of the contemporary world: a view particularly common among those in their twenties and younger, who virtually everywhere are far less unionized than their parents.

Almost universally, the consequence of these trends has been a serious decline in union membership and in power and influence. But the severity of this decline has varied substantially across countries. This is partly explained by qualitative differences in unions' own strategic reactions (or indeed, their capacity to act strategically at all).

One response has involved the proliferation of individual services (for example, cut-price banking, insurance, travel) as selective incentives to membership. However, this can easily negate the whole *collective* purpose of union organisation. Another has been a wave of union mergers (Chaison, 1996; Streeck and Visser, 1997). While at times rationalized as a proactive strategy to facilitate recruitment in new growth

sectors, typically these have been defensive reactions to membership loss and the shrinkage of traditional recruitment bases. If mergers have at times brought advantages from economies of scale (or at least counteracted the diseconomies resulting from membership decline), often they have produced complex conglomerates with barely concealed internal tensions.

A very different organisational response is the rediscovery (or reinvention) of the principles of active recruitment and representation. This 'organising culture' involves a focus in particular on groups of workers traditionally underrepresented by trade unions, building a critical mass of recruiters (both paid and volunteer) with whom the target groups can identify, and giving their specific concerns a higher priority on the union agenda. But active organising is expensive, both in simple balance-sheet terms and in its demands on the time and energies of those involved. Inevitably, choices must be made between an emphasis on recruitment, and effective representation of existing members (including new recruits). In theory, the dilemma may be resolved by 'empowering' members to become the front line of their own self-representation; but in reality, constructing and sustaining a structure of workplace activism can be a thankless effort. The vicious circle of membership loss, declining ability to win results, and demoralisation is not readily transformed into a virtuous circle of recruitment, representation and empowerment.

One response that has recently become very popular is the pursuit of 'partnership'. In Britain (there are analogies here to the idea of 'mutual gains' in North America) an important focus has been the company. Here, the emphasis is on a joint interest of employer and employees in workplace competitiveness and survival. Unions agree to changes in the production regime (reduced numbers of employees, more flexible working-time arrangements, interchangeability of jobs) in return for management commitment to (more or less bounded) guarantees of continued operation. Such deals have become quite widespread: for example, in the German notion of 'agreements to safeguard the production location'. The problem here is the implication of a *de facto* variant of company unionism in a context where intensified competition implies that not all companies will compete successfully, however much their respective workforces agree to abandon once sacrosanct conditions of employment. The role of unions as organizations fighting for minimum standards across a whole industry is put in question.

'Partnership' is also pursued at broader national level. In much of Europe, we have seen 'social pacts' involving trade union cooperation extend beyond the wage constraints of previous decades to concessions relaxing labour law regimes and cutting state welfare provision, in return for (typically imprecise) commitments to employment-creating policies on the part of governments and employers (Fajertag and Pochet, 1997). But while unions (and to a large extent also

governments) address the problem of intensified competitiveness at the national level, MNCs are happy to accept the concessions but as a precedent for more ambitious demands in other countries. This process has notoriously been described as 'social dumping'.

A final response has been to turn (or return) to a conception of unions as organizations campaigning for rights. Unions raise their profile by more actively challenging oppression, inequality and discrimination. This means cooperating, often uneasily, with social movements which have never acquired the respectability gained by trade unions in most countries.

Are these five responses complementary or contradictory? To a greater or lesser degree there are surely choices to be made if unions are to discover a clear strategic direction.

UNIONS IN THE FUTURE: WHO, WHAT AND HOW

Trade unions in the twenty-first century confront old dilemmas, but in new forms. Most fundamentally, these can be described as the who, the what and the how of trade union representation.

Whose interests do trade unions represent? In simple terms one may define four categories: the qualified elite, the core workforce, peripheral employees and those outside employment. Historically, unions in many countries emerged on the foundations of a segment of the labour force with scarce skills, relatively high pay, and often considerable job security. The 'mass' trade unions of the twentieth

century tended to find their strongholds among the 'core' workforce of large-scale industrialism. Unions, which embraced socialist or communist (and sometimes also Christian) ideologies, often claimed to extend their concerns to the peripheral workforce or to those outside employment altogether. Such claims in many countries have been more rhetorical than real; union priorities have usually been biased in favour of core group interests to the detriment of others.

The second issue is *which* interests of those represented are of primary relevance for trade unions. Simplifying again, we may identify four main issues. The first constitutes the traditional core agenda of 'bread-and-butter' collective bargaining over wages and benefits. The second relates more to rights limiting employers' arbitrary authority and underwriting employment protection, with 'fair' mechanisms for promotion, discipline and dismissal, and the allocation of work. The third addresses the role of the state: the constitution of the social wage, the legislative framework of trade union organization and action, the macroeconomic policies which shape the circumstances of the labour market. Finally there is an agenda not directly linked to the worker's status as employee but addressing other facets of social life such as the environment, consumer protection, and the local community.

How are interests represented? Again, a fourfold classification may be presented, involving a set of organizational choices to which unions and union movements have historically given different (and often contradictory)

responses. These are the issues of structure, capacity, democracy and activism. Structure relates to the diverse lines of demarcation which form unions' membership constituencies, and concerns the organizational form of interest aggregation. Unions unite and divide at one and the same time.

Occupational unions integrate workers according to labour market status (for example craft, white-collar, professional); such a structure reduces the risks that members will identify too closely with 'their' employers, but also tends to privileged a narrow and elitist conception of interests. With industrial unions, the strengths and weaknesses in terms of solidarity are the reverse. General unions combine workers of diverse sectors and occupations, but may have difficulties in sustaining effective internal cohesion. Despite the existence of few pure models, most national labour movements have tended to reflect one or other form of integration (and separation) of workers. A key factor in the pursuit of broad-based solidarity is the degree of articulation *between* unions (for example, through an authoritative central confederation) which may help transcend sectional divisions and integrate diverse membership interests.

The question of organizational capacity involves the complex ability to anticipate, rather than merely react to, changing circumstances and to frame and implement coherent policies. It is not easy to specify the components of this capacity, but it is obvious that some trade union movements possess this quality to a far greater degree than others. Perhaps we may define the key

elements as *intelligence, strategy* and *efficacy*. Intelligence is in part the extent to which unions and confederations possess specialist expertise in research, education and information-gathering, and the means to disseminate knowledge throughout the organization (which is partly a question of resources); but it is also a matter of the degree to which, at all levels within union movements, knowledge is seen as an essential component of union power. Strategy depends on organizational structures and traditions which link knowledge to action through analysis of circumstances, evaluation of alternative options and planning of objectives and forms of intervention. It links closely to that much abused concept, leadership. Finally, efficacy involves the relationship between unions' policies and their achievements. The economic and political context shapes what is possible. How far unions make the most of their opportunities is linked to the overall coherence of aims, between and within unions, which is more easily achieved where a reasonable degree of centralized authority exists and where union members (and non-union workers) 'own' the strategic priorities and are willing to take action in their pursuit, which calls for scope for decentralized initiative.

This links to the third issue, the complex dialectic between leadership and democracy – which should certainly not be regarded as simple opposites. How much scope do members have in shaping the priorities and programmes of their unions, and do some groups have greater scope than others? In part, democracy clearly requires significant

structures for participation and self-activity at rank-and-file level. Yet localized autonomy alone is a recipe for fragmentation of policy and action and is unlikely to lead spontaneously to inter-group solidarity. To be effective, rank-and-file democracy requires centralized co-ordination and articulation: in other words, leadership.

Finally, how do unions balance two contradictory modes of action: mobilization and struggle on the one hand, compromise on the other? Unions have been eloquently described as 'managers of discontent' (Mills, 1948): to win workers' allegiance they must identify and articulate unresolved grievances, unmet needs and unrealized aspirations. Yet if they are accepted as interlocutors of employers and governments, and wish to justify and maintain this intermediary role, they are constrained to select and prioritize workers' discontents in forms which admit (at least temporary) compromise. To some extent, unions' conceptions of capitalist society and their own role within it have encouraged either opposition or conciliation. This connects in turn to the familiar distinction between 'business' and 'social movement' unionism. As suggested earlier, a narrow conception of trade union functions (which certainly facilitates the status of 'social partner' pursuing compromise with employers and governments) makes a broad achievement of worker solidarity less possible and probably less necessary for short-term survival.

In some cases, the line of least resistance may be to consolidate organization around traditional core

constituencies, or to compensate for the decline in former strongholds by appealing to the distinctive interests of the new elite sections. The alternative is to reassert trade unions' role as a *popular* movement, which means developing the capacity to represent the *losers* as well as the beneficiaries from economic restructuring. The peripheral workforce has in most countries proved painfully difficult to unionize, if indeed unions have even made the attempt; but there have been sufficient success stories to show that the task is not impossible. To persuade the stronger sections of the labour force to lend their resources to such an effort is indeed an enormous challenge, and certainly one which cannot be addressed on the basis of narrow business unionism.

If trade unionism in the future is to appeal to a broader constituency, its agenda must reflect the far more differentiated ways in which work connects to life – or in which workers would *wish* it to relate. Here, a crucial question is that of individual choice. This is a concept which has usually proved difficult for trade unionists. The principles of unity and solidarity have traditionally been interpreted as requiring that individual preferences be subsumed within a collective interest. But it is false to assume that individualism and collectivism are mutually antagonistic principles.

It is doubtful if real solidarity was ever possible on the basis of the suppression of individuality; and it is certain that in today's societies, with their diversities of cultures and life-styles, this is altogether impossible. One reason for unions' declining popularity

is that they have often given their enemies grounds for the claim that trade union regulation typically involves the bureaucratic imposition of standardized work rules. Choice and opportunity have become key slogans of the anti-union right; yet should they be reclaimed by the labour movement? For most of the twentieth century, the core workforce achieved their employment status through the dull compulsion of circumstance; but self-directed career advancement is increasingly the aspiration of actual and potential trade unionists today. The weakening of the ties to one's existing occupation and employer is however emancipating only when real and preferable alternatives are open. The choice among alternative options is an individual project, but one which is illusory unless a genuine and favourable *structure of opportunities* exists, one which challenges both employers' discretion and the anarchy of market forces. In many ways a redefinition of the traditional function of trade unionism, this is but one key dimension of a union agenda, which can appeal to diverse constituencies in solidaristic fashion.

Another instance is flexibility, which is of course a familiar slogan of those who wish to weaken workers' protections by making them more disposable and more adaptable to the changing requirements of the employer. Yet flexibility can have alternative meanings. The 1970s demand for 'humanization of work' was in essence a claim for flexibility in the interests of workers through worker-centred technologies, the adaptation of task cycles and work speeds to fit workers'

own rhythms, the introduction of new types of individual and collective autonomy in the control of the labour process. This agenda was in large measure hi-jacked as part of the new managerialism of the 1980s and 1990s, with its mendacious rhetoric of 'empowerment', 'teamwork' and 'human resource development'. Can unions recapture the initiative? A key issue in the contemporary world of work, is time-sovereignty: the temporal linkages between employment, leisure and domestic life; the ability to influence the patterns of the working day, week, year and lifetime. There is a worker-oriented meaning of flexible working time which can directly confront that of the employers, and which offers new potential for integrating very different types of employee interest. So too with other dimensions of flexibility. Rigidity and standardization were impositions of a particular model of capitalist work organization; to the extent that some of the features of Taylorist-Fordist systems have lost their attractions to employers, space exists for unions to mobilize support for radical alternatives which transcend some of the divisions within the working class.

This leads to the *how* of trade union organization and action. In most countries the classic organizational form was centred around the *national* union. This centrality has been eroded from below, with the increasing shift towards company-specific employment regimes; and from above, as economic internationalization constrains the scope for effective regulation on a purely national basis. Twenty-first century trade unionism has to be local, national

and international at one and the same time. This in turn imposes immense challenges if unions are to sustain adequate organizational capacity: requiring both effective decentralized activism and new levels of strategic leadership.

Compounding such dilemmas, old questions of modes of action assume new characteristics. Unions in the past have often assumed a demarcation of arenas of engagement, between 'industrial relations' and 'politics'. If this distinction was ever plausible it is no longer so. Trade unionism is today inescapably political, not least because those who shape the political agenda have defined trade unionism and industrial relations as key political 'problems'. But traditional modes of political engagement have lost much of their relevance; in the conventional sphere of party politics, unions can no longer hope to find reliable allies. In part this is because for so long trade unions in most countries have responded to political attack by reasserting ancient rhetoric and ideologies which no longer resonate with any but a dwindling committed minority. Here indeed there is a sharp contrast to be drawn between long-established union movements and those (in such countries as South Africa, Brazil, Korea) which are less weighed down by historical baggage. Such instances suggest that unionism can still stake a claim to constitute a popular movement, by imaginative engagement in a *battle of ideas*. Trade unions have to discover a language which can express aspirations, projects, even utopias which are consistent with the principles which

inspired the movement in the past but which address the very different world in which we live today. And as part of this process they have to recognize – as many unions indeed have done, often painfully – that there are other social movements which have captured the enthusiasm, particularly among the young, that unions have largely lost; and that it is necessary to seek common ground with these.

If I can end with a note of relative optimism, there are two points which I would emphasize. The first is that the crisis, which I invoked at the outset, has shaken the complacency of many sclerotic trade union movements. Even if the ‘modernization’ of trade unionism for which many have called has rarely advanced very far, unions are increasingly asking the right questions; and this is the necessary precondition of finding adequate answers. The second is that current information technology offers dramatic possibilities if seized imaginatively. Traditional multi-layered hierarchies can give way to more open, interactive and democratic communication, opening the scope for rapid and participative decision-making in a manner unimaginable just a few years ago. Solidarities can be built in ways transcending organizational, national and linguistic barriers (as the Australian dockers recently demonstrated, for example). Public campaigning can take new forms, potentially far more effective than in the past. Can trade unionism in the twenty-first century succeed by re-inventing itself as a virtual social movement?

Note:

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