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# Trade unions, politics and parties: is a new configuration possible?

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### Summary

Trade unions are not merely economic (or ‘industrial relations’) actors: they are necessarily protagonists in the political arena. Regulating the labour market is a question of power resources. Yet if unions are inescapably both economic and political actors, the relationship between the two roles is complex and contradictory, and the priority assigned to each varies across countries and over time. Four factors seem of particular importance in explaining these distinctive patterns: ideology, opportunity structures, organizational capacity and contextual challenges. We explore these issues with reference to ten west European countries, and end by pointing to some of the ideational and practical reasons why unions must explicitly redefine their political identities.

### Résumé

Les syndicats ne sont pas uniquement des acteurs économiques (ou « des relations professionnelles »). Ils sont nécessairement des protagonistes de l'arène politique. La réglementation du marché du travail est une question de ressources de pouvoir. Pourtant, si les syndicats sont inévitablement à la fois des acteurs économiques et politiques, la relation entre ces deux rôles est complexe et contradictoire et la priorité accordée à chacun varie d'un pays à l'autre et avec le temps. Quatre facteurs semblent être particulièrement importants pour expliquer ces différences: l'idéologie, les structures d'opportunités, la capacité organisationnelle et les défis contextuels. Les auteurs examinent ces questions en faisant référence à dix pays d'Europe de l'Ouest et concluent en soulignant certaines raisons conceptuelles et pratiques pour lesquelles les syndicats devraient redéfinir de manière explicite leur identité politique.

### Zusammenfassung

Gewerkschaften sind nicht nur wirtschaftliche Akteure (oder Akteure der Arbeitsbeziehungen), sondern spielen zwangsläufig auch in der politischen Arena eine wichtige Rolle. Die Regulierung des

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Arbeitsmarktes ist eine Frage der Machtressourcen. Gewerkschaften sind zwar unweigerlich sowohl wirtschaftliche als auch politische Akteure, aber die Beziehung zwischen diesen beiden Rollen ist komplex und widersprüchlich, und die Priorität, die ihnen eingeräumt wird, ist je nach Land unterschiedlich und verändert sich im Lauf der Zeit. Für diese unterschiedlichen Muster scheinen vier Faktoren ausschlaggebend zu sein: ideologische Faktoren, Möglichkeitsstrukturen (*opportunity structures*), die Fähigkeit zur Mitgliedergewinnung und kontextbezogene Herausforderungen. Der Beitrag untersucht diese Aspekte in zehn westeuropäischen Ländern und verweist abschließend auf einige ideelle und praktische Gründe, weshalb Gewerkschaften ihre politische Identität unbedingt neu definieren müssen.

### Keywords

Trade unions, politics, government, parties, social democracy, communism, christian democracy, Europe

### Introduction

In this article we focus on trade unions' role in the political arena, and their relationships with governments and political parties. In much of Europe, unions have suffered a parallel deterioration in membership numbers, collective bargaining outcomes and political influence. What are the causal linkages between these different indices of decline?

### Why politics?

In most of Europe it is taken for granted that trade unions are political actors. This is not universally accepted, however: famously (or notoriously), Perlman (1928) insisted that trade unions adopted political programmes only under the malign influence of (mainly socialist) intellectuals. For a variety of American writers on trade unionism in the 1950s and 1960s, strong political engagement was an index of 'immaturity' which would become marginalized with the consolidation of collective bargaining as a central activity. And within many European trade unions today there are substantial numbers of members who criticize their organizations' political attachments, and of other workers who cite this as a reason for non-membership.

What then is the rationale for engagement in the political arena? In broad theoretical terms, Burawoy (1985: 11) has argued that 'the state remains the decisive nucleus of power in capitalist societies in that it guarantees the constellations of power outside the state, in the family, the factory, the community'. He continues (1985: 254): 'production politics are struggles waged within the arena of production over relations in and of production [in short: the focus of 'bread and butter' trade unionism] and regulated by production apparatuses'. But these 'apparatuses' – the institutions and prerogatives of employers and managements – are themselves underwritten, and often established in the first place, by the apparatus of the state.

More concretely, Taylor (1989: xiv) insists succinctly 'that unions are inevitably *political*, whether they or politicians like it; that within capitalist industrial states they are relatively *powerless*; and that unions are primarily *reactive* and *defensive* in their political behaviour'. As one of us has written (Hyman, 2001: 13–15): 'regulating the labour market involves political issues ... The state is not only the ultimate guarantor of contracts, including employment contracts; whether by active intervention or by default, it underwrites a particular (im)balance between different participants in market relations. At a very minimum, unions have to influence the ways in which the state shapes the rules of the game in the labour market, including their own right to exist, to bargain

collectively and to mobilize collective action.' Following the Keynesian transformation of economic theory and economic policy, unions universally recognize that the parameters of supply and demand, and hence the whole terrain of collective bargaining, are subject to the influence of government intervention. Workers, moreover, are not simply concerned with their nominal wages or salaries: their interest extends to the real wage, taking account of price movements, the net wage after taxation, and the 'social wage' constituted by the welfare state. In countries with institutions and traditions of peak-level tripartite bargaining, all of these elements are part of a composite agenda involving complex trade-offs; even in the absence of these institutional arrangements, unions everywhere attempt to influence welfare and taxation policies. Finally, unions which represent public sector employees – who today, almost universally, comprise the majority of trade union members – must inevitably address the policies of the state.

### **Unions between the industrial relations and political arenas**

Hence in most European countries, 'political action is used in varying degrees and forms, partly as a substitute but more generally as a complement ... to economic bargaining' (Cella and Treu, 2001: 456). Unions which define their function primarily in terms of negotiation with employers are still 'compelled to seek ways of influencing public policy' (Sturmthal, 1972: 45). Yet if unions are inescapably both economic and political actors, the relationship between the two roles is complex and contradictory, and the priority assigned to each varies across countries and over time. Four factors seem of particular importance in explaining these distinctive patterns: ideology, opportunity structures, organizational capacity and contextual challenges.

As is well known, in many European countries trade unionism was an offshoot of an emergent working-class movement in which political insurgency oriented to systemic transformation shaped unions' identity and action. Unions were 'schools of war', as Engels put it: their task was to challenge capitalism, not to seek modest reforms within it. Where more moderate, social-democratic or christian-democratic trade unionism existed (or displaced earlier, more radical forms), the focus was still on societal change and improvement, alongside the more prosaic functions of collective bargaining. Ideologies inherited from the formative period of trade unions have proved persistent, shaping identities which cannot easily be altered. This has been most evident in the re-orientation of (former) communist unions in southern Europe: the increased priority assigned to collective bargaining in the *Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro* (CGIL) from the 1970s, the *Comisiones Obreros* (CC.OO.) a decade later, and most recently the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) has in each case provoked substantial resistance from 'traditionalists' (who have often accused the leadership of betraying the principles on which their unions were founded).

The persistence of political self-definitions has a material basis. In part this reflects opportunity structures. In most countries, early trade unions were subject to systematic governmental repression, and the state was inevitably a target for collective action. Only when the legal status of union activity was secured could 'free collective bargaining' become a priority. And where employers remained resolutely opposed to union recognition, trade unions in turn might still see pressure on the state as the most effective option to resolve their grievances. This was the classic argument of Shorter and Tilly (1974) in explaining the highly politicized character of French industrial relations: a pattern which seems more generally applicable across southern Europe. Conversely, 'business unionism' can also be seen as an outcome of distinctive opportunity structures. In countries (which include most of those in western Europe) where the state was from the outset an overt protagonist in the shaping of a market economy (Crouch, 1993), the political dimension of labour market intervention was self-evident for most unions. Conversely, in countries where the

emergence of capitalism was less dependent on active state initiative, and where the political system made the imposition of alternative forms of regulation difficult to achieve, unions might conclude that there was no practicable option but to play the market as it currently existed. This was certainly Perlman's argument in regard to the USA (1928: 196–197) 'American governments are inherently inadequate as instruments of economic reform [and] it is to this situation, more than to anything else, that the stubborn "economism" of the American Federation of Labor must be traced'.

Another relevant consideration is organizational capacity. Unions which give priority to collective bargaining – at least if their membership is in the private sector – typically require relatively high membership density and the financial resources to sustain prolonged disputes where necessary. If organizational resources are modest, mobilization on the streets may be easier to conduct than sustained strike action – which is certainly an important component of bargaining power, even if not its only source. As an extreme example, the fragmented French trade unions with a density rate of only 8 percent have virtually lost the capacity to organize strikes in the private sector; while a higher frequency of public sector strikes has been facilitated by the tendency (now diminishing) of the public employers to agree settlements which entail that strikers do not lose pay for lost time. Clearly there can be a self-sustaining elective affinity between trade unions' ideological orientations and their organizational capacities, again constituting an obstacle to change.

Historical contingency shapes the objective challenges which confront trade unions and shape the appropriateness of different strategies. For example, Daley (1992) described how American steel workers, confronted by restructuring and the threat of plant closure, responded by attempting to mobilize their traditional industrial strength. But strike action is ineffectual in preventing closures, since the employer no longer requires the workers' labour power. By contrast French unions, because of their organizational weakness, pursued political pressure and struggle, achieving greater success in saving jobs. In the past two decades of drastic structural changes in employment, and reduced industrial strength through membership losses and the pressures of intensified product market competition, unions which traditionally relied substantially on economic strength have sought alternative forms of action. One notable example is the conversion of most German trade unions to the goal of a statutory minimum wage, traditionally regarded as incompatible with the principle of *Tarifautonomie* or free collective bargaining. The opening up of the German labour market through EU enlargement, and the rapid growth of a sector covered neither by collective bargaining nor by works councils, demonstrated that unions' purely economic strength had eroded and required political-institutional reinforcement. Thus the service sector union *ver.di*, faced with a growing low-wage workforce, adopted the demand for a minimum wage. This was then taken up by IG Metall, concerned at the threat from a rapidly increasing proportion of temporary agency workers in its core industrial strongholds, and the political campaign was then taken over by the central union confederation, the *Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* (DGB). In Europe as a whole, the economic crisis of 2008–09 has made the state a key interlocutor, even in countries in which trade unions have traditionally drawn a line between 'economic' and 'political' action: financial assistance to struggling employers, special subsidies to minimize pay reductions in cases of short-time working and extensions to active labour market policies, have been widespread trade union demands; all have necessarily required engagement in the political arena. Conversely, government attempts to tackle unprecedented budget deficits through attacks on public sector jobs, pay and pensions, and more general assaults on the welfare state, have provoked sharp political conflicts, including actual or threatened general strikes in countries such as Ireland with little tradition of such action.

## Political exchange and social dialogue

American analyses in the 1950s and 1960s (Kerr et al., 1960) predicted an increasing depoliticization among 'mature' trade unions. But three decades ago an influential thesis (Korpi, 1983; Korpi and Shalev, 1979) drew on Swedish experience to argue exactly the opposite: that strong trade unions would shift their priorities increasingly from conflict in the industrial arena to pressure and concertation in the political arena. The central proposition was that a combination of unions' strategic capacity – their ability to 'synthesize a unified class interest' (Higgins, 1985: 357) – and favourable political opportunity structures enabled them to utilize their power resources to achieve superior material benefits for their members at lower cost than through traditional industrial militancy (Boreham and Hall, 1994; Cameron, 1984). This was an explicit challenge to those theories of 'corporatism' which argued that union absorption into close relationships with government was a largely one-way bargain: unions accepted wage restraint, refraining from exploiting the labour market strength which they enjoyed in an era of full employment; governments for their part offered mainly symbolic and institutional concessions; the outcome was in many cases growing rank-and-file disaffection and revolt (Panitch, 1980).

Other less hostile assessments of close union-government relationships often stressed that union assent to wage restraint was compensated by agreement on expansionary macroeconomic policy, favourable labour market interventions and welfare improvements. This linked to the highly influential analysis of 'political exchange' (*scambio politico*) developed by Pizzorno (1978). His thesis was that the scope for collective bargaining with employers (buttressed by the threat of strike action) to yield results was bounded; in many contexts (for example, the risk of plant closure, noted above) the only effective response was political. What unions traded in the political arena, Pizzorno argued, was consent – or at least, abstention from concerted militant opposition – to government policy. This analysis was shaped by the distinctive Italian context of governments whose popular legitimacy was often weaker than that of the trade unions: union acquiescence could be crucial for regime survival. As other Italian commentators noted (Baglioni, 1987; Regini, 1984, 1995), this asymmetrical mutual dependence could prove unstable, as the decline of corporatist concertation across Europe in the 1980s clearly demonstrated.

The early literature assumed a particular opportunity structure: institutions of peak-level bipartite or tripartite concertation (Pekkarinen et al., 1992), together with an expansionary economic environment in which mutually advantageous trade-offs were possible. It also identified distinctive objective challenges: political exchange was particularly common in export-oriented smaller states (Katzenstein, 1985), or in larger countries facing economic or political crisis – or both, as in Italy in the 1970s.

Post-corporatist analysis has adapted to a fourfold transformation in the political economy of trade union action. The first was the end of the expansionary 'golden age' of post-war capitalism and the advent of hard times: 'globalization' made the pursuit of competitiveness a seemingly universal imperative. The second, clearly related, involved the growing pressure to contain public finances and scale back the welfare state – in some countries linked to taxpayer revolts; the apparent exhaustion of Keynesianism and the rise of monetarism as the new orthodoxy; and attacks on established employment rights in the interests of labour market flexibility. The third, more diffuse, was a reconfiguration of the state itself: the rise of what Majone (1994) has called the 'regulatory state' – rather misleadingly, since his thesis is that governments have increasingly abdicated regulation to semi-autonomous agencies, reducing the role of the state from systematic economic management to the piecemeal correction of discrete 'market failures'; and the shift to what Crouch terms 'post-democracy', where the formal institutions of democratic elections remain but

‘politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests’ (2004: 4). The fourth was identified in the introduction: unions’ own declining membership and representational legitimacy, to which one might add a growing uncertainty as to unions’ strategic purpose.

Two themes are central. The notion of *dialogue social* – invented in France in the 1980s and soon elevated to iconic status at EU level – suggests a process of consultation between government and ‘social partners’ without any necessary connotation of *negotiation* aimed at reaching explicit agreement. The concept of social pacts, which became popular in the 1990s, did imply a successful pursuit of agreement; but often such agreements were ad hoc and limited in coverage (Avdagic et al., 2005). The most notable counter-example was the series of ‘partnership’ agreements in Ireland. Most problematically for trade unions, the pacts of the past two decades have involved varieties of ‘competitive corporatism’ (Rhodes, 2001): peak-level agreements in which trade union priorities are to achieve a ‘least-worst’ outcome in terms of wage restraint and attacks on welfare provisions and employment protections, with national union movements seemingly forced into a downward spiral of concession bargaining. Nevertheless, union willingness to contest government plans can shift the balance: as Hamann and Kelly conclude (2004: 106), ‘even though unions have rarely secured all their demands, they have frequently obtained sufficient concessions to sign agreements, and have sometimes done so through the use of general strikes’. Yet such pact-making has for some years reinforced the trend to a declining wage share of GDP, particularly in the euro area (Keune, 2008), despite the formal commitment of European unions to a wage policy intended to reverse or at least halt this decline. ‘Competitive corporatism’ has imposed serious strains on unions’ relationships with governments, with traditionally allied political parties and also with their own members – a theme which we examine below.

## Trade unions and political parties

For Ebbinghaus (1995), trade unions and their allied parties are ‘Siamese twins’, mutually dependent organizations which, in the view of some observers, should be separated for their mutual good. There have been many attempts to classify the patterns of relationship between the two. For example, Hayward (1980: 5–6) identifies four types: first, a ‘Leninist model’ in which the party seeks to control the policies and actions of its associated union; second, more exceptionally, the British case in which the unions themselves created the Labour Party and saw their task initially as to dictate its policies; third, a more general social-democratic pattern involving ‘interdependence and symbiosis’; finally, a position in which unions, even if politically engaged, refuse any alliance with political parties. It should be added that while most writers have focused on union links with social-democratic or communist parties, in several countries the relationship between christian-democratic unions and parties has also been of great importance.

Ebbinghaus (1993, 1995) has drawn on the cleavage theory first developed by Rokkan (1968) to explain distinctive national patterns and to argue that their evolution is path-dependent. He identifies all four models described above as different outcomes of the fundamental cleavage between labour and capital, but stresses two other cleavages. In countries where there was historically a sharp confrontation between church and state, divisions between secular (commonly socialist) and religious identities resulted in an ideological segmentation of unions and parties competing for working-class allegiance. These divisions were in turn often fertile ground for a third cleavage, between reformist and revolutionary unions and parties. Notably in southern Europe, the resulting fragmentation of the labour movement was a source of organizational weakness and reinforced the predominant orientation towards political protest rather than bargaining.

Despite the path-dependent nature of orientations and relationships – which can often be traced back to the sequencing of industrialization and the struggle for democracy – they are not immutable, and below we explore how recent changes in opportunity structures and objective challenges have affected party-union relationships. It is notable that almost universally, relationships of intimate dependence – in either direction – have historically given way to looser attachments and a more flexible interdependence, and sometimes to a complete divorce. Historical examples are the detachment of the German unions from the hegemony of the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) in the first decade of the 20th century, symbolized by union rejection of the general strike for political objectives; later, the growing autonomy of christian trade unions from church or party control; finally, the detachment of communist-oriented unions from their parent parties, spearheaded in the early 1970s in Italy when the CGIL (seeking unity with the two rival confederations) agreed the principle of *incompatibilità* – that a union’s leaders could no longer participate simultaneously in the ruling bodies of the party. But formal differentiation may still permit close informal interlinkages, an issue we explore below.

Three key developments can be identified in the past few decades, affecting all countries though to differing degrees. The first is cultural and ideological: all trade unions have been subject to ‘ideological blurring’ (Pasture, 1996: 380). Secularization has undermined the identities of formerly christian-democratic unionism (Pasture, 1994): the only significant exceptions are the Belgian Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond/Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens (ACV/CSC), the largest in the country, and the much smaller Dutch Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond (CNV). A parallel process of deconfessionalization has turned most christian-democratic parties – even if their titles are unchanged – into conventional centre-right political actors, while others have dwindled into insignificance (again, the Benelux countries are obvious exceptions). In the extreme Italian case, the Democristiani who dominated national politics for almost half a century imploded in the 1990s. Hence christian democracy as a nexus between unions and party has all but disappeared. In those countries with mass communist parties and satellite trade unions, an analogous process occurred. Electoral support for the Parti communiste français (PCF) fell below 2 percent in the 2007 presidential election; support for the Partido comunista de España declined to 3 percent in 1982 and after some recovery it has again become marginal. The Partito comunista italiano (PCI) disbanded in 1991, and after several changes of identity is now the dominant component of the Partito democratico (PD), which no longer defines itself even as socialist, though its representatives in the European Parliament sit with the socialist group; the left minority of the PCI who formed Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) retained significant electoral support until the disastrous elections of 2008. As for the ‘crisis of social-democratic trade unionism’ (Upchurch et al., 2009), this is a major theme of our discussion below.

The second key development is structural. Traditionally, both trade unions and left-oriented parties found their core support among manual workers in cohesive industrial communities. The decline of old industrial work, the growth in white-collar and professional occupations and, more generally, rising educational levels have posed challenges for both unions and parties. Many union movements have found these expanding occupations difficult to recruit (at least in the private sector); where they succeed, this dilutes the homogeneity of interests and identities within the membership. In the Nordic countries, where separate confederations cover white-collar occupations and graduate professions, these insist on political neutrality (even though their leaders are typically social democrats). Many observers see structural and ideological shifts as mutually reinforcing, causing the erosion of membership support for any political project, let alone a specifically socialist one. Social-democratic parties for their part have tended to take their working-class base for granted while targeting the ‘median voter’, resulting in a policy convergence with their opponents to the right.



The third key change is in the politico-economic environment, discussed above. Political responses to economic hard times have seemed to involve 'a sort of Gresham's Law... in which policies that reinforce the position of capital drive out policies that reduce its dominance and distribute wealth more equally' (Keohane, 1984: 23). The pursuit of international competitiveness, efforts to contain public finances, loss of faith in Keynesianism and conversion to 'lean government' have become as much the hallmarks of centre-left as of right-wing governments (Moses, 1994; Notermans, 1993). Neoliberal restructuring places inevitable pressures on the party-union nexus: electoral expediency, or simply the limited room for manoeuvre in the management of national economies within the framework of global economic disorder, places social-democratic parties on a collision course with union movements whose own commitments include the defence of workers' incomes and the social achievements of past decades (Piazza, 2001). Little is left of a social-democratic 'project' to inspire either parties or unions and to bind them together.

If the historic ties between unions and parties have lost most of their material and ideological foundations, little but inertia is left to sustain them. It is unsurprising therefore that they have proved fragile. Certainly there is no uniform process of distancing or divorce: there are evident cross-national variations. We survey some of these below: the 'liberal market economies' of Britain and Ireland; Sweden and Denmark as exemplars of the 'Nordic model'; the 'central' group of Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium; and the Mediterranean cases of France and Italy. First, though, it is useful to provide a simple map of the variable geometry of left parties' electoral success (or failure) in these and some other west European countries. Table 1 shows the widespread decline in social-democratic representation, and also the significant support for alternative left and/or green parties in a number of countries. Notably, in France, Germany (almost) and the Netherlands the combined representation of these two groups in the 2009 European elections equalled or exceeded that of the socialists or social democrats (though given the low turnout and the opportunity for protest voting, these results are an imperfect indicator of popular opinion). Widely also, right-wing nationalist parties have attracted considerable backing from working-class voters.

In Britain, where – exceptionally – most main unions (though not the Trades Union Congress itself) retain a collective affiliation to the Labour Party, the strains in the 'contentious alliance' (Minkin, 1991) have intensified with the re-branding of the party as 'New' Labour. Party leaders have viewed the formal links with the unions as an electoral handicap and have attempted both to reduce their financial dependence (unsuccessfully, because of the collapse in individual party membership) and to demonstrate their readiness to adopt policies which provoke union opposition. From the 1990s, the role of trade unions in party decision making and in the selection of parliamentary candidates was substantially reduced; while the government's enthusiasm for privatization and for public sector budgetary constraints provoked conflict with what had become the majority group of trade unions. The fraught relationship resulted in the Fire Brigades Union disaffiliating in 2004, while the RMT rail union was expelled after supporting rival left candidates in opposition to party nominees. Other unions have retained their links, but in many cases have reduced their financial support for the party and have used their funds for a wider range of political interventions. In Ireland, politics remains shaped by the struggle for independence in the early 20th century: nationalism has overridden class politics. Labour is thus a minority party, achieving a peak of just under 20 percent of the popular vote in 1992. Some unions, notably the largest – SIPTU – are affiliated to the party but with less influence than their British counterparts. In practice, most Irish unions seek to influence whatever government is in office. Since 1987 they have signed a series of social partnership agreements – though cooperation has been under severe strain with the economic crisis of 2009.

**Table 1.** 'Left' seats in most recent national<sup>a</sup> and European<sup>b</sup> elections

Country	Year	Seats available		Social democrats		Other left		Greens <sup>c</sup>	
AT	2008	183	(17)	57	(4)			20	(2)
BE	2007	150	(22)	34	(5)			12	(4)
DE	2009	622	(99)	146	(23)	76	(8)	68	(14)
DK	2007	179	(13)	46	(4)	28	(1)		(1)
ES	2008	350	(50)	169	(21)	8	(1)		(2)
FR	2007	577	(72)	186	(14)	37	(4)	4	(14)
GR	2009	300	(22)	160	(8)	34	(3)		(1)
IE	2007	166	(12)	20	(3)		(1)	6	
IT	2008	630	(72)	217	(21)				
NL	2006	150	(25)	33	(3)	25	(2)	7	(3)
NO	2009	169		64		11			
PT	2009	230	(27)	97	(7)	29	(5)		
SE	2006	349	(18)	130	(5)	22	(1)	19	(3)
UK	2005	646	(72)	358	(13)	1	(1)		(5)

Notes: the Table covers the ten west European countries discussed in the article, together with Greece, Norway (not a member of the EU), Portugal and Spain, which are among the few European countries with socialist-led governments at the time of writing.

<sup>a</sup> National elections: lower house only. Source: *Election Resources on the Internet*, <http://electionresources.org/>

<sup>b</sup> 2009 European election (in parentheses). Source: *Results of the 2009 European Elections*, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/new\\_parliament\\_en.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/new_parliament_en.html)

<sup>c</sup> The Green/EFA group in the European Parliament includes representatives of regionalist parties which are neither environmentalists nor left-oriented, such as the Belgian right-wing *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, and others which we have categorised as 'left' in national elections.

The Scandinavian countries were for many years marked by sustained social-democratic governments and a particularly close institutional linkage between social democracy and the dominant manual trade union confederations (in each case, LO). In Sweden, the link between the Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti (SAP) and LO came under strain in the 1970s, as the party increasingly defined its economic policies along lines which clashed with LO interests. In part, this distancing reflected party efforts to attract non-manual voters affiliated to the expanding minority union confederations. The proportion of voters who were LO members supporting the SAP fell from 65–70 percent in the 1980s to 50 percent in the 1990s, while in 1998 some 20 percent backed the Vänsterpartiet (Left Party) (Bengtsson, 2008: 11). The LO ended its collective affiliation to the SAP in 1987, though local union branches can still affiliate, and the current LO president is a member of the party's executive. Since the election of a strongly right-wing government in 2006, which has clashed with the unions over cuts in welfare provision, relations between LO and the party have somewhat improved. In Denmark there was historically a similarly intimate relationship between LO and the Socialdemokraterne, with each organization represented on the other's executive committee; but surveys in the 1990s showed that these links were unpopular amongst the membership, and were cited as one reason why many had become members of the 'yellow' christian union DKF (Bild et al., 1998: 203). As in Sweden, LO agreed to sever the ties, in 2003, although many individual unions remain affiliated. Given the high union density in Denmark, the current right-wing government seems keen to win trade union assent for its social and labour market policies – ironically, perhaps more so than the social democrats. This creates a certain dilemma for union leaders, evident in other countries also: in

negotiating a policy consensus they can moderate attacks on members' conditions but thereby add legitimacy to a politically uncongenial government.

In the central group of countries there is a long tradition of both social- and christian-democratic trade unionism; in three cases (though only exceptionally in Germany) coalition governments involving social- and christian-democratic parties are the norm. In both Germany and Austria, the post-war reconstruction of the trade union movement transcended former ideological divisions. In the German case, this involved formal party-political neutrality. Most union leaders have always been social democrats, but by convention a minority of seats on executive bodies is reserved for christian democrats, who have their own organized fraction, the Christlich-Demokratische Arbeitnehmerschaft (CDA). The latter has always been important in maintaining relatively labour-friendly policies in the conservative Christlich-Demokratische Union (CDU) party; the minister of labour throughout the 16 years of the Kohl government, Norbert Blüm, was a leader of the CDA and a member of IG Metall. Traditionally the majority of SPD parliamentarians, and a significant minority of the CDU, have been trade union members; but the proportions have fallen over time, and today many politicians hold union membership primarily because it 'looks good on their CV' (Hönigsberger, 2008: 172). The predominant union support for the SPD – on occasion a source of sharp criticism from CDA members – has been subject to three related challenges in recent years. First, the traditional manual worker core constituency of both the unions and the SPD declined not only in numerical importance but also in party loyalty, particularly under the red-green government of 1998–2005 (Schroeder, 2007: 5). Second, that government's Agenda 2010 reforms provoked sharp conflict with the unions as well as internal disarray within the party. Third, rivals to the left – the Greens and die Linke – have gained ground at the expense of the SPD; the head of the service sector union ver.di is a member of the former, and a number of regional officials of many unions support the latter.

In Austria, political pluralism within the Österreichische Gewerkschaftsbund (ÖGB) connects to a semi-official structure of fractions, represented in leadership positions in relation to membership support (as reflected by votes for their separate lists in works council elections). The Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ) traditionally attracts about two-thirds of the votes in these elections, followed by the christian-democratic Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP) and a series of smaller lists. Even more clearly than in Germany, this ensures that there is a strong trade union presence within the governing party or parties. In a country with an exceptional tradition of institutionalized 'social partnership' in formulating public policy, top union leaders are commonly also members of parliament and hold seats on the executive committees of their parties – in almost all cases the SPÖ, though the head of the public sector Gewerkschaft Öffentlicher Dienst is a key figure in the ÖVP. The ÖGB president, Rudolf Hundstorfer, was appointed minister of labour in the new SPÖ-led government in 2008. However, many see the degree of union-party intimacy as excessive. In an era of austerity, governments increasingly pursue unpopular policies, and 'the ÖGB as active participant in the workings of the Austrian state has had to endorse and defend policies that not always directly benefit its membership and has found itself on occasion out of step with its membership and fellow citizens' (Suschnigg, 1998: 348). Disenchantment with the establishment politics of social partnership and the SPÖ/ÖVP has contributed to the electoral rise of the far right – which in the 2008 elections gained almost 30 percent of the popular vote, more than the ÖVP and almost the same as the SPÖ. In 2008 the executives of both SPÖ and ÖGB agreed that it should no longer be possible to hold leadership posts in both.

The pattern of Dutch trade unionism in the first post-war decades was dominated by three ideologically oriented organizations. The largest, the Nederlands Verbond van Vakverenigingen (NVV) developed from a strong socialist background towards a moderate social-democratic

position, committed to the elaborate institutions of Dutch corporatist policy-making. It maintained close but informal links with the Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA). The Nederlands Katholiek Vakverbond (NKV) and the smaller protestant CNV were both associated with different christian-democratic parties (which have since merged). In the 1970s there was a move to unite the three unions; CNV pulled out, but the other two amalgamated in 1981 to establish the Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV). This required greater distance from the PvdA, though the party still received the support of the majority of FNV members and officials. The traditional Dutch 'polder model' entailed a commitment to consensual public policy, and all confederations were strongly involved in peak-level bipartite and tripartite bargaining. This consensus was abruptly challenged in 1991 when the coalition government (in which Wim Kok – former head of the NVV/FNV – was deputy premier) imposed stringent restrictions on the disability insurance scheme, which had become in effect a system of redundancy compensation. Both FNV and CNV organized unprecedented mass protests, though unsuccessfully. Thereafter, social partnership has yielded diminishing results for the unions. A further serious confrontation occurred in 2004 over the issue of pensions reform; on this occasion a former deputy president of CNV was minister of social affairs, and the latter union was particularly angry at being sidelined in the debate (Visser and van der Meer, 2010). Most recently, in 2009 the proposal of the government (in which the PvdA was junior partner) to raise the retirement age has provoked bitter resistance from the FNV; but not from the CNV (the minister of labour, a christian democrat, was a former member of its advisory board). In recent years, FNV appears to have moved towards a more assertive and independent political stance, perhaps aiming to connect with widespread popular disaffection with the political elite (which includes the PvdA) – and to respond to the growing willingness of union members to support other left-wing parties and also the far-right Partij voor de Vrijheid.

In Belgium, society is divided not only, as in the Netherlands, into ideological 'pillars' but also between the French- and Dutch-speaking communities; and the trade unions reflect these divisions. For half a century the largest confederation has been the ACV/CSC, followed by the socialist-oriented Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond/Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique (ABVV/FGTB). There is also a smaller liberal confederation. The ABVV/FGTB has traditionally been linked to the socialist party – now divided along linguistic community lines into the Parti Socialiste (PS) and the Socialisten en progressieven anders (sp.a), with union leaders holding a consultative role on both party executives. The ACV/CSC is part of the christian workers' movement Algemeen Christelijk Werknemersverbond (ACW)/Mouvement ouvrier chrétien (MOC), and through this is associated with political christian democracy, which comprises the centre-right Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V) and a more centrist French-language counterpart, now known as Centre démocrate humaniste (cdH). However while MOC adopted in 1972 a policy of political pluralism, ACW retains a 'privileged relationship' with CD&V. The confederation has long observed the principle that officials should not be elected to parliament, and its leaders have developed a greater distance from the formerly allied parties than in the case of the ABVV/FGTB: they clashed in the 1990s with the policies of prime minister Dehaene, and now criticize the neoliberalism of the CD&V (Cortebeek, 2008). Regardless of ideology, the Belgian unions are deeply embedded in national structures of concertation and social dialogue, with an institutionalized system of peak-level collective bargaining and a national council (Nationale Arbeidsraad/Conseil National du Travail) which is a bridge to the government and parliament. There is a two-way interconnection between the political and industrial relations realms. On the one hand, peak-level collective agreements may require government subventions – as with the provisions for short-time working agreed at the end of 2008 – or may provide the guidelines for legislation. On the other, the government often intervenes forcefully in the collective bargaining process, for

example threatening legislation in the absence of an agreement which it considers acceptable (Arcq, 2008: 70). Yet despite the considerable potential for conflict, the unions appear broadly content with the system. It is notable that despite evident strains, tripartite negotiations in 2008–09 over responses to the economic crisis were significantly less fraught than in most other countries (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010).

Industrial relations in France have always been highly politicized, since ‘the French state is not reticent in enacting by law or regulation the norms (on pay, working time, health and safety) that elsewhere are left to other social actors’ (Lallement, 2007: 453). The formal coverage of collective bargaining is over 90 percent – largely because of state extension of agreements – despite a unionization rate now below 8 percent; but its real impact is far less than that of state determination. The legislative route is typically the line of least resistance in regulating labour issues: the Code du travail defines a wide range of employment conditions; the national minimum wage (SMIC) is a point of reference for collective agreements; the unions derive the majority of their resources from subventions linked to their privileged role within a complex network of state institutions (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000: 61–64). The party-political constellation is also exceptional. France and Italy have been marked, in very different ways, by the background of the dominance on the left for the first post-war decades of a communist party closely linked to the majority trade union. In France, ‘there has long been no large “catch-all” party of the left’ (Amadiou, 1999: 127). The Parti socialiste (PS) has never been a mass working-class social-democratic party in the same way as its counterparts in other countries; the fragmented trade union movement – for much of the post-war era dominated by the CGT – has never shared a social-democratic identity, though both the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT) and Force ouvrière (FO) are broadly socialist in orientation. With the eclipse of the PCF, the CGT gave increasing emphasis to collective bargaining – ‘a compromise is not the same as a sell-out’ (*compromis ne veut pas dire compromission*) declared its leader in 2009. In 2003 the union cut its links with the party, declaring that ‘debate with democratic political parties precludes support for or joint elaboration of any kind of political project’. Ironically, this was a return to the principle of party-political neutrality adopted by the original CGT in the Charte d’Amiens a century earlier, and sustained by FO from its formation in 1948. The CFDT was close to the left of the PS in the 1970s, but in 1978 re-oriented its position away from political attachments. After backing Mitterrand for president in 1981, it has refrained from endorsing any party in subsequent elections. More recently, the Union syndicale solidaires (SUD) has had informal links to the anti-capitalist parties which have performed strongly in recent elections. Yet distancing of the main unions from political parties co-exists with a role in which the state remains a central focus of action. In the context of continued government efforts to restructure the labour market and the welfare state, unions have been torn between the goals of sustaining their status as privileged interlocutors and of militant defence of members’ interests, with the CFDT most ready to favour the former and CGT and FO (and particularly SUD) more oriented to resistance on the streets – where ‘protesters have largely won small victories while losing the war’ (Howell, 2009: 230).

The changing political environment of Italian trade unionism contrasts markedly with that in France. There, the communist vote was far higher than the socialist until the late 1960s, but then the positions were reversed and from the late 1970s the PCF went into rapid electoral decline. But in Italy, communist support was always above socialist, reaching a third of the total popular vote in 1976. The corruption scandal of the early 1990s left the PCI virtually unscathed, but the Partito socialista italiano was severely compromised, its electoral support collapsed, and it was dissolved in 1994. The post-communist inheritors of the PCI survived as the only significant party of the left – apart from the PRC, linked to a powerful minority fraction within CGIL. The second main

confederation, Confederazione italiana sindacati lavoratori (CISL), was founded in 1948 and reflected the tradition of catholic trade unionism; though it claimed political neutrality, in practice it was close to the Democristiani. During the 1960s it shifted to a stronger emphasis on company-level collective bargaining, and at the end of the decade accepted the principle of *incompatibilità* – officials could no longer hold political office. The third main union, the Unione italiana del lavoro (UIL), was a mainly social-democratic breakaway from CGIL. Despite the shift of all three confederations to formal autonomy from political parties – and a far more effective turn to collective bargaining than in France – informal links remained close and the political arena remained a common priority. From the 1970s, political exchange became a central element of Italian industrial relations, in part because unstable governments saw union endorsement of their policies as a source of legitimacy (Baccaro and Lim, 2007) – notably over the fraught issue of pensions reform in the 1990s. Yet the new bi-polar character of Italian politics, with a weak and divided left currently facing an ascendant right under Berlusconi, has imposed serious strains within and between the unions and between them and government. CGIL took a harder line than the other two confederations under the 2001–06 Berlusconi government, insisting that a number of established worker rights were non-negotiable (Carrieri, 2003: 175) and refusing to sign the 2002 Patto per l'Italia on incomes policy and labour market flexibility. Again in 2009, it refused to sign a new framework agreement restructuring the collective bargaining system. Conversely, critics accused CGIL of undue acquiescence to the demands of the 2006–08 Prodi government. Intriguingly, the new PD – since it includes the former left-catholic Margherita party – actually embraces leading members of all three confederations; but the unions seem as far away as ever from a common strategy adapted to the new political conjuncture.

## In place of a conclusion

What implications can we draw for the theme of renewing collective representation? Political influence is a function – as both cause and effect – of union vitality. Declining influence in most countries stems in part from the constrained policy options of national governments in an era of neoliberal globalization, but also reflects a general weakening of unions' organizational capacity. This in turn limits trade union strategic options, yet 'union leaders ... retain some leeway in which forms of political action they choose to pursue' (Hamann and Kelly, 2004: 108).

Hard times can often result in strategic paralysis, but can also be a stimulus for the framing of new objectives, levels of intervention and forms of action. Underlying such potential choices is the question often raised by a former British union leader: 'what are we here for?' Unions face both ideational and practical challenges which require credible answers to this question.

Despite the varying trajectories outlined above, most union movements in western Europe remain locked into old identities derived largely from their traditional political allegiances. These define a vision of their societal role which is increasingly disconnected from everyday union activity. 'One confederation defines itself as socialist, the other as christian. What difference does this make in practice', we asked a Belgian union official. Answer: 'we prefer to focus on the 90 percent of issues on which we agree'. Does this mean that inherited identities are now 90 percent rhetorical? Increased autonomy from their associated (and often 'parent') parties both requires, and enables, unions to rethink their social purpose. What are they here for? Which of their old self-definitions have become obsolete, which should be preserved but redefined for the 21st century? How can unions engage in a battle of ideas (a necessarily political endeavour) which assists them in acting as a voice for popular aspirations?

In practical terms, social dialogue and partnership yield diminishing returns, and today often function primarily as a means of damage limitation. This does not mean that political exchange is worthless – it seems to achieve advantageous results particularly in contexts of coalition government with ideologically distinct unions linked to separate parties – but when it no longer serves as a significant means of social and economic advance, it loses its capacity to inspire members and activists. This means that the risks of integration in an elite consensus are heightened. Unions share in the malaise of a social democracy (whether traditional, ex-catholic or ex-communist) which has lost its faith in an alternative model of economy and society. There is in most countries today a chasm between peak-level engagement with the political class and day-to-day experience of the realities of the workplace and local community. This leaves a vacuum which is filled in part by political cynicism and apathy, in part by the rise of alternative forces of both left and right.

A German union official (Urban, 2005) has argued that unions have to (re)learn a role as ‘constructive veto-players’. This can be interpreted as meaning that while unions must certainly defend members’ conditions – the achievements of the decades of (relative) labour strength and expansionary capitalism – defence is not enough. Indeed these achievements, whether the standard employment relationship in Fordist industry or the welfare state of Beveridge and Bismarck, were always deeply ambiguous. Part of the appeal of the often mendacious slogans of ‘modernization’ of work and welfare is to those who experience the regime established through the ‘post-war compromise’ as rigid, authoritarian and patriarchal. In practical terms also, a defensive strategy results in a growing segmentation between a ‘privileged’ core still protected by the old model (the main constituency of trade unionism in most countries) and a growing precarious workforce with diminished social protection (Palier and Thelen, 2010). To escape such traps, trade unions have to be able to combine a willingness to say no – though their capacity to use their traditional resources to veto destructive change is diminishing – with the imagination to present constructive alternatives which can appeal to both segments in today’s fragmented societies and labour markets.

What are unions here for? The whole idea of a labour *movement* implies a goal, a vision, which transcends the immediate task of representation in the workplace, however important this may be. Today, rediscovering such a vision implies a political project which enables the mobilization of a counter-force to neoliberalism, seeking – and creating – new opportunity structures in order to rebuild an articulation between different levels and strategies of engagement, engaging in this process with the ‘mosaic left’ (Urban, 2009) which is increasingly a feature of European politics. In an era of union weakness, seeking complementarities with radical social movements which unions traditionally viewed with suspicion has to be part of the search for enhanced power resources.

Finally, in an era of declining state capacity – whether real or merely professed by governments seeking an alibi for unpopular decisions – unions need to shape a reconnection between progressive national and international political strategies. Politically informed trade unionism in one country is no longer an option, if it ever was. In an era of globalization, the practical meaning of the slogan of labour internationalism has also to be rethought.

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