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## **National unionism and union democracy in crisis**

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## **National unionism and union democracy in crisis**

Roland Erne (UCD)

Rebecca Gumbrell-McGormick and Richard Hyman have written a very perceptive book. In the first chapter, they provide an excellent assessment of systems of national industrial relations that is as precise as it is concise. They not only describe those who conduct labor relations and the processes involved, they also explain why national differences have occurred and how national institutions and class relations have shaped the representation of labor interests in different ways across Western Europe. For this chapter alone, the book deserves to become core reading in comparative labor relations courses. It fills an important gap formed by the absence of updated editions of analytical textbooks in European industrial relations; including those that had been co-edited years ago by Hyman himself. Nonetheless, the motivation for writing this book certainly lay elsewhere than in providing just this chapter.

*Trade Unions in Western Europe* is not a textbook about national industrial relations systems, but a research monograph about the ‘hard choices’ European unions face. Gumbrell-McGormick and Hyman identify the challenges that unions face in these times of crisis and then review the responses of national unions and their leaders across Western Europe. The book also offers advice on how union democracy and a union’s capacity to act strategically – two themes that feature throughout the book – can be ‘rendered compatible and indeed complementary’ (191). Finally, the authors conclude that ‘union revitalization requires a new, imaginative – indeed utopian – counteroffensive: a persuasive vision of a different and better society and economy, a convicting alternative to the mantra of greed, commodification, and competitiveness ... and austerity.’ (204).

From the outset, the authors concede that unions are on the defensive everywhere. Yet, the book's assessment of the ten national union movements also shows that challenging times can also generate innovative responses. So far so good, trade union supporters might think. Yet, several questions still remain unanswered. What array of mechanisms triggers union innovation? And where are these innovative responses to be found in the first place? On one side, the authors maintain that 'many of the union initiatives we have discussed have been path dependent' (191). On the other, the final chapter on union democracy is primarily based on cases from countries and industries with limited institutionalized union power resources (193). This, however, questions the methodological nationalism that guides the study.

*Trade Unions in Western Europe* is the result of a research project that has been funded between 2006 and 2009 by the Danish Research Council. The funding enabled the authors to interview union leaders at confederal level and in sectoral unions – namely in metalworking and public services – and to collect and analyse numerous union documents. The project was originally meant to assess national unions' responses to globalization processes. The central research question of the study changed, however, after it became clear to the authors that this focus was both too broad and too narrow: 'Too broad, in that globalization is a portmanteau concept with no agreed definition (...) Too narrow, in that unions face many challenges—the difficulty of recruiting younger workers, to give just one example—which it would be far-fetched to attribute primarily to globalization (viii).' As the fieldwork for the project was conducted during the unfolding of the global financial crisis, the crisis inevitably became a dominant background theme for the research. Nonetheless, this is not a book about unions' reaction to the welfare and wages cuts or the business-friendly labor law reforms that have been imposed across Europe after the Euro crisis.<sup>1</sup> Because the authors assessed different countries at different times of the crisis' unfolding, the comparative analysis of national

unions' reaction to the crisis has been 'particularly challenging' (viii). In other words, the crisis occurred too late to be adequately studied in all countries covered.

The book consists of three major parts. In the first two chapters, Gumbrell-McGormick and Hyman map the uneven national industrial relations terrain in Western Europe. Conversely, they also highlight the similarity of the challenges unions are facing across countries. Although the decline in union membership in most countries began later than in Britain and has been less severe, the authors accept that 'the trend is now universal' (52). They also share the assumption that unions lost power in the arena of collective bargaining, political influence on governments as well as in standing and esteem in civil society almost everywhere.

The following five chapters assess unions' responses to similar challenges in ten countries of different size, mirroring Peter Katzenstein's claim that small countries possess particularly strong industrial relation institutions. The study's case selection also includes different 'Varieties of Capitalisms' (VoC), namely the 'liberal market economies' of Britain and Ireland, the 'Nordic' countries Sweden and Denmark, countries from the 'central group' Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Belgium, and 'Southern Europe' France, and Italy (viii). Nevertheless, one would be mistaken to assume that this is a book about the relative performance of different types of capitalism or unionism. When Gumbrell-McGormick and Hyman employ the VoC typology, they do not share the claim that there are two successful types of capitalism as asserted by the theory's proponents. The 'four commonly identified varieties of west European capitalism' (viii) are used as a simple heuristic tool that captures different contexts in which national unions operate. Like the VoC proponents, however, the authors employ a classical country-by-country research design that assumes that the national systems that are at the basis of the comparison are politically autonomous.<sup>2</sup>

Quoting Thelen, the authors concede that the power of national institutions can be eroded by ‘processes that unfold beneath the veneer of formal institutional stability’ (29). With John Kelly, however, the authors argue that change in industrial relations ‘is not so much driven by the juggernaut of global product markets but is the result of a complex interaction of markets, institutions and actors’ (viii). Consequently, they only interviewed *national* union leaders, even if the study’s exclusive focus on national actors seems to be anachronistic at a time in which national industrial relations are directly affected by supranational institutions, notably the ECB/EU/IMF Troika and the Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN) of the European Commission. Whereas the authors made a single reference to the Troika<sup>3</sup>, the structural changes prompted by the adoption of the so-called ‘six-pack’ of EU regulations on European economic governance in 2011 do not feature in the book, even though they substantially reduce the autonomy of national industrial relations systems.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the declining autonomy of national systems does not per se disqualify national systems from being the object of comparative analysis. However, the more the features of national systems are determined at the EU level, the more national comparisons exhaust themselves in assessments of different ways of ‘national adjustment’. Given this methodological perspective, it may not be so surprising that the authors perceive present socio-economic and political changes solely in terms of ‘challenges’ for the labor movement, as if new transnational configurations of capitalist political power do not create new contradictions, which may be exploited by social movements.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these methodological limitations, the authors structure their book’s argument around an elegant conceptualization of union power that includes ‘four widely recognized forms’ (30) as well as three ‘complementary power resources that are not necessarily new but which

have been insufficiently appreciated in the past' (31). The first form is *structural*. The more a union organizes workers that hold strategic positions in the production process, e.g. given their specific skills and competences, the more powerful it is. The second is *associational* and refers to unions of workers that are willing to pay membership fees *and* willing to act in unison. The third category refers to *organizational power*, which refers to a union's capacity to convert the maxim 'union is strength' into action. This power arguably very much depends on the quality of a union's internal democratic processes, its education programs, and its internal communication channels. The fourth type of union power is *institutional* and refers to the institutional support provided by socio-economic and political institutions. In addition to these frequently quoted power resources, the authors also evoke three additional union powers: namely 1) *discursive* power, which refers to a union's capacity to act as a 'sword of justice' and an agent for a better society; 2) *collaborative* power that refers to the 'necessary but difficult task' for unions to cooperate with allies due to their 'declining capacity to achieve their goal through their own means' (31); and finally 3) *strategic power* that refers to a union's capacity to make a more effective use of ever more limited resources.

Attempts to renew European unions' associational and organizational powers are reviewed in the chapters that discuss European unions' approaches to organizing and union restructuring. Several unions attempted to stop declining membership trends by means of the 'organizing model' that has been pioneered by US unions. Many unions also made specific efforts to recruit migrant and women workers, or workers with atypical employment contracts. Yet the assessment of successful recruitment drives also shows that these initiatives did not always increase unions' organizational power. Union mobilizations require not only an extended membership base but also 'forming individual members, or potential members, into a collectivity who acts together' (77). Hence, recruitment gains 'may well prove short-lived'

(80). Quoting Melanie Simms, the authors stress that if union organizers merely ‘deploy a depoliticized toolbox of practices’ that consists of building unionism around easily addressable workplace grievances, they propagate a model of business unionism that marginalizes potentially contentious interests and neglects the ‘building of solidarities that could unite workers beyond their workplaces’ (67). In addition, they note that ‘it is ironic that the shift to ‘organizing’, presented as a means of empowering grassroots workers to *become* the union, can at the same time involve a consolidation of hierarchical authority at the centre’ (97). Accordingly, the authors conclude that recent transformations of union structures have been shaped by leadership priorities rather than by greater membership engagement.

Similar conclusions can also be drawn from next chapter on ‘bargaining in adversity’ that shows that unions’ willingness to agree to uncomfortable compromises is causing serious internal tensions. Especially in ‘competitive corporatist’ countries, in which union leaders had access to a ‘lazy route to influence’ (122), the crisis demonstrated the limits of unionism that is centered on collective (concession) bargaining. Until recently union leaders ‘could sit back and negotiate tripartite three-year agreements’ without having to build their ‘own organizational capacity’ as self-critically acknowledged by an anonymous union leader. But when the “competitive corporatist” logic required not only acceptance of a smaller slice of a growing cake but acceptance of ‘a smaller slice of a shrinking cake’<sup>6</sup>, internal tensions between an appeasing union confederal leaderships and more demanding affiliated unions and union members rose to a level that threatened the survival of the union confederation, for example in the Netherlands (129). In December 2012, the breakup of the Dutch union confederation FNV has only been avoided by the stepping down of FNVs’ former leaders, their replacement by directly elected candidates, and a promised breakup of FNV’s three biggest affiliates into smaller units to avoid a monopolization of the confederations’ internal

union debates.<sup>7</sup> Attacks on workers' rights, pay, and conditions also reignited tensions within and between union confederations in Italy and France, despite the apparent decline of past ideological divisions. Yet, the authors also note that the crisis did not trigger a sustained tide of mass protests across Europe (122-130). Whereas there have been numerous general strikes in Europe's south, most other unions entered micro-corporatist crisis management arrangements to prevent redundancies. Nevertheless, Hans-Jürgen Urban, a frequently cited leading *IG Metall* official, seems to be mistaken when he reads the authors' section headline 'Responses to Economic Crisis and Austerity: The Limits of Radicalism' (122) as an endorsement of concession bargaining and 'crisis corporatism'.<sup>8</sup>

The weakening of unions' organizational and institutional resources led the authors to explore, in the final chapters, unions' attempts 'to seek broader social, political and also international forms of intervention' (131). Several unions – the French CGT and the Italian CGIL but also the catholic Belgian confederation ACV/CSC – tried to increase their *discursive* and *coalitional* power by forging alliances with other progressive groups and by developing an 'alternative social vision', albeit 'to varying degrees and with different evidence of effectiveness' (157). The authors also report that national union leaders 'appreciate the growing urgency of effective international organization' but have tended to 'avoid internal discussions' about the EU integration process for fear to of provoking internal conflict. 'This dilemma', the authors claim, 'forms part of a broader tension between the needs for effective strategy and vigorous democracy' (190). Therefore they decided to criticize, in the book's conclusion, the 'efficiency versus democracy' thesis, according to which organized labor must 'match the hierarchal and elitist decision-making of their opponents or interlocutors' (197) to be effective. Instead, they make a different argument, highlighting organized labor's dependence on workers that not only pay fees but are also

willing to act. Even so, the authors' conception of union democracy is much closer to the problematic, classical concept of 'democratic centralism' than it may seem, as shown by the following contention:

The potential anarchy of purely decentralized democracy can be transcended only when articulated ... by overarching coordination. Union effectiveness requires 'the capacity to interpret, decipher, sustain, and redefine the demands of the represented, so as to evoke the broadest possible consensus and approval' (Regalia 1988: 351). This is one of the functions of leadership, which is therefore a prerequisite for participative democracy to deliver beneficial results (192-3).

To be fair, it is logical to say that 'the capacity for collective strategic leadership is likely to be greatest where there is relative homogeneity both of ideology and of membership interests' (195). The problem, however, is that these conditions are never present in practice; thus the need of the central union leadership to 'redefine the demands of the represented'. There are, however, other conceptions of democracy and interest aggregation that do not simply rely on the central leadership's willingness to listen and to act as an honest broker. The more diverse membership interests are, the more there is a need for union structures that ensure that the leadership or one particular membership interest is not able to capture the union agenda. Firstly, there is a need for *direct democratic* mechanisms, such as ballots on bargaining agendas and outcomes. Such ballots do not increase the 'potential anarchy of purely decentralized democracy' but would, on the contrary, hold the central leadership to account and contribute to the aggregation of legitimate collective interests. Secondly, union democracy does not consist only of a vertical (participatory) dimension.<sup>9</sup> Union leaderships may be held accountable not only by the rank-and-file but also by the proportional presence

of different political currents and social interests within a union's leadership structure. In addition, such a pluralist leadership structure would prevent the concentration of power in a few hands and increase the need to find a consensual decision making processes. This can be ensured through 'federal' or 'consociational' models of union democracy in which sectors and specific interest groups (e.g. women, young, or migrant workers) are able to elect their own officials. The search for reconciliation between different interests and perspectives that such a structure implies may certainly represent an inconvenience for union presidents. Conversely, however, it should be noted that company executives recurrently made similar complaints about the lengthy consultation processes caused by worker co-determination laws, even if pluralist governance structures increase company performance. Given the crucial role full-time officials play in union governance, this second, horizontal (pluralist) dimension of democracy may prove as important as its vertical (direct democratic) dimension in counteracting Michel's iron law of oligarchy.

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<sup>1</sup> Clauwaert and Schömann: 'The crisis and national labour law reforms'.

<sup>2</sup> Crouch, 'Typologies of capitalism'.

<sup>3</sup> Albeit only in a single sentence that misleadingly insinuates that the Irish government asked for the Troika's intervention (123). Collins: 'Letters show extent of pressure put on Lenihan for bailout'.

<sup>4</sup> The so-called 'six-pack' of EU regulations on European Economic Governance, which has been adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in 2011, made all areas of national economic and fiscal policy (including welfare, pensions, labour market, and wages policy) of

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subject to a strict oversight by the DG ECFIN of the European Commission. Erne ‘European industrial relations after the crisis.’

<sup>5</sup> I have argued elsewhere that European unions may actually find it easier to politicise the political decisions of supranational political agencies (such as the European Commission) than to politicise abstract global market forces. The on-going replacement of democratic by supranational technocratic modes of governance may therefore hardly be a fatality. Erne, *European Unions*.

<sup>6</sup> Erne ‘Let’s accept a smaller slice of a shrinking cake’.

<sup>7</sup> van het Kaar ‘Major changes afoot for biggest union federation’.

<sup>8</sup> Urban ‘Strohfeuer oder Wendepunkt?’

<sup>9</sup> Ruf, *Zwischen Demokratie und Bürokratie*.