VII. Alternative Futures in a Neo-Liberal Environment — LERA International Section Meeting I

Alternative Futures for West European Trade Unionism

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Abstract

We explore developments in trade unions in four countries—Sweden, Germany, Britain, and France—to test emerging strategic initiatives in adapting to or confronting the new neo-liberal political economy. While aware of the importance of supportive state institutions for union health, we would suggest that political strategy might indeed be a necessary weapon in unions' arsenal if they are to restore their power and influence. Strategic choice for unions will include both industrial and political considerations, and social movement theory can provide insights for our understanding these choices. We display the alternatives open to trade unions on two dimensions. On the first dimension, an industrial one, West European trade unions can opt between an *integrative* approach, by exploring productivity coalitions with employers and social pacts with governments, and an *oppositional* approach, by developing combative and militant mechanisms of protest and dissent. A second dimension, the political, varies from the continuance of a *national* orientation to problem solving to an *international* one. The national approach continues to rely on the maintenance or (re)creation of sympathetic government support for the aims and objectives of organized labour, while the international approach supplements national solutions by the addition of multinational or supranational support structures. Our first three alternative futures represent reformulated scenarios for social democracy, while a fourth scenario is framed within a rejection of the social democratic form and the development of radicalised political unionism.

Introduction: A Crisis of Social Democratic Trade Unionism?

Recent debate on trade union renewal in the Global North focuses on the impact of more than two decades of neo-liberal restructuring and globalization. In the North American context, debate has focused on the extent to which these developments are shifting the strategic orientations of trade unions away from "business unionism" towards "social movement unionism" (Dreiling and Robinson 1998, Robinson 2000, Voss and Sherman 2000). In Western Europe, the impact of neo-liberal restructuring and globalization has produced a different form of crisis with a divergent trajectory of reorientation. This reflects the institutional

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specificity of the relationship among trade unions, political parties, employers, and the state that has predominated in postwar Western Europe, producing nationally specific forms of "social democratic trade unionism." Such social democratic trade unionism has been characterised as a "specific social structuration" (Moschonas 2002:17) marked by a historically specific and contingent relationship among a growing industrial working class, trade unions, reformist socialist and labor parties, and the nation-state.

In Western Europe neo-liberal restructuring has also acted to curtail the industrial strength and bargaining power of trade unions through the process of deindustrialization, union marginalisation, and the marketisation of public services. One consequence is that in many states unions have struggled against a decline in trade union density, particularly in manufacturing sectors exposed to global competition. In addition, the ability or willingness of the nation-state to offer concessions to labour has become severely constrained by the dynamics of global competition. Capital has been forced by the exigencies of international product market competition to increase rates of both intensive and extensive exploitation of their workforces. Rather than challenge capital directly, social democratic political parties have become increasingly attracted to neo-liberal policy prescriptions geared towards national business competitiveness. Where concessions to labour remain, these take the form of defensive or "dented shield" forms of social pacts associated with "competitive corporatism," in which trade unions attempt to mitigate the worst effects of neo-liberal restructuring (Rhodes 1998). Such a reaction reflects the embedded nature within many union leaderships of the ideology of social partnership (Wahl 2004). The continuation of "partnership" practice and competitive corporatism has in turn acted to weaken the traditional social democratic union–party nexus. "Partnership," in this context, represents a denial and/or suppression of class conflict and a direct appeal by the state to workers' "self-interest" at the enterprise level. Keynesian social democratic settlements also involved the "statization of society" (Panitch 1986:189) or "statization of social life" (Poulantzas 1978), with "Habermasian" integrating mechanisms typologised as "pluralist" industrial relations. Neo-liberal restructuring, in contrast, by its very belligerence encourages the "opening up" of civil society through dilution of these traditional institutions. This process of opening up presents trade unions with three principal avenues of strategic and ideological reorientation. First, unions have the option to embrace the associational politics of the "third way" and continue the strategy of social partnership (Cohen and Rogers 1995, Ackers and Payne 2003, Prabhaker 2003, Upchurch 2008). Second, unions may seek to lobby the "party of labour" for a return to "traditional social democracy." Third, we suggest here that unions might exploit this opening up in order to liberate themselves from the institutional and ideological fetters of the Keynesian welfare state so as to reestablish themselves as autonomous "movements" in civil society. The dominant partnership ideology creates distinct institutional barriers to this latter reorientation and, as Rainnie and Ellem (2006) suggest, "labour movements at whatever level have to experience near terminal crisis before the rigidities of old structures, attitudes and activities can be opened up to new and challenging ways of organizing."

The recent work of Burgess (2004) applied to the cases of Mexico, Venezuela, and Spain is an attempt to explore these questions through a rational action approach premised on the cost–benefit decisions of party political and trade union actors. In this paper, we present an alternative analysis. We argue the importance of institutional path dependency in the development and decomposition of party–union alliances and the importance of ideology in framing union identities. Western Europe can only be understood in the context of a crisis of the specific and particular form of social democratic trade unionism. We focus on two interrelated processes of reorientation. First is the extent to which strains within the party union nexus are producing division and fractures within, and between, unions on the basis of an accommodation to, or resistance against, neo-liberalism. Second is the extent to which a weakening of the party union nexus is resulting in the emergence of new union identities framed on a radicalised and politicised unionism. We suggest that there are three important variables that are likely to determine the extent of reorientation and division. First is the ability of unions to repoliticize their relationship with social democratic parties and governments. Second is the ability of unions to open up their internal procedures and modes of representation. Third is the willingness of union members to engage in new and challenging ways of organizing, deemed necessary for wider political and oppositionist engagement. Our case relates primarily to the examples of Sweden, Germany, Britain, and France, and some reference is made to Europe-wide developments through the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).

Variations

National variance within Western Europe is already well articulated by Crouch (1993) and Hyman (2001). Continuity and change are likely in terms of both "path dependency" and "path shapers" (Nielsen, Jessop, and Hausner 1995). Variance flows from the perceived need for trade union leaderships to maintain the "balance" between sectional (or class) interest and (bourgeois) national interest contained in specific political settlements whereby government concessions were granted to the union leaders in return for their exerting some discipline over rank-and-file wage militancy (Flanders 1970, Hassel 2003). In consequence, variable forms of neo-corporatism were *de rigeur* throughout most Western European economies, well entrenched in the "strong" social democratic states of Scandinavia and weakest in the "liberal market" economies of the United Kingdom and Ireland (Padgett and Paterson 1991). Tension was located in the development of bureaucratic forms of representation emanating from the "institutionalization" of trade unions within "pluralist" industrial relations systems. Indeed, it is suggested that such institutionalization and bureaucratization has the potential to erode union legitimacy and mobilizing capacity (Darlington 1994, Müller-Jentsch 1986, Offe and Wiesenthal 1985), and to constrain unions' ability to enact innovative techniques in parallel with the "newer" social movements (Touraine 1981, Melucci 1989). Sweden, for example, is a case of unparalleled intimacy between the unions and main party of labour—the SAP (Social Democratic Party)—even though this relationship suffered a divorce in 1987. Germany represents an example of informal alignment, where a dominant party union nexus was established between the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and unions but remained informal due to the importance attached by the unions to maintaining good relations with parties other than the SPD. Britain, in contrast, is an example of formal affiliation, where union party links are most established, but where consensus-based neo-corporatist practices have nevertheless been much weaker. France represents a case of fragmentation, where no dominant party union nexus of the social democratic type has been firmly established, where union density is lowest, but where the state has encouraged forms of bipartism and sometimes tripartite neo-corporatism.

There are differences between these countries in terms of the strategy of the "party of labour" when in power. In the United Kingdom, following the hubris of the 1980s and 1990s, New Labour attempted to introduce a new "shared value" centred on partnership and consensus. In Germany, France, and Sweden, in contrast, the new capital accumulation strategy of the state has involved a shift to confrontation. In Germany, the crisis is more severe than in Britain because of the depth of division within the SPD created by the identification of the *Partei* with the retreat from the social model. The institutional "thickness" of the codetermination model means that the challenge of industrial restructuring and withdrawal of welfare "rights" would inevitably be a direct affront to the class interests of workers. In contrast, trade unions in Britain have been less integrated into the post-war *body politik* (Crouch 2003). Longer-term societal stability in the United Kingdom has meant that the state has been less inclined to create a settlement with organized labour to ensure continuing stability, and the institutions supporting the interests of organized labour are "thinner" as a result. Hence, neo-liberal marketization has been less of a shock in the United Kingdom, and the political ramifications of this in terms of fractures within the party of labour have been less severe. In addition, the major period of restructuring in Britain took place during the Thatcher/Major Conservative regimes. The spectre of a return to a Conservative regime can be more effectively used by the New Labour leadership to maintain its ideological and organizational grip over the unions. Trade unions affiliated to the British Labour Party may also perceive that they have more power over the party than their equivalents in the SPD because of more formalized nature of the party–union link. This may help explain why the development of trade union dissidence through the "awkward squad" in Britain continues to be divided between a majority who wish to "reclaim Labour" and a minority who have either suffered expulsion from the Labour Party or have sought to explore alternatives outside of the dominant party union nexus (McIlroy 2009). What is common to both countries (and the French example) is the open hostility to neo-liberalism from dissident union and political groupings. Central to the dissidence has been a rejection of the retreat of the state from its former role and functions, manifested in Germany in opposition to the Hartz Reforms, in France to pension and labour law reform, and in the United Kingdom in opposition to continued privatization and private sector interest in public service provision. This opposition works to draw sections of the unions both to oppose state policy and to seek alliances with global justice organizations and public service user groups within a

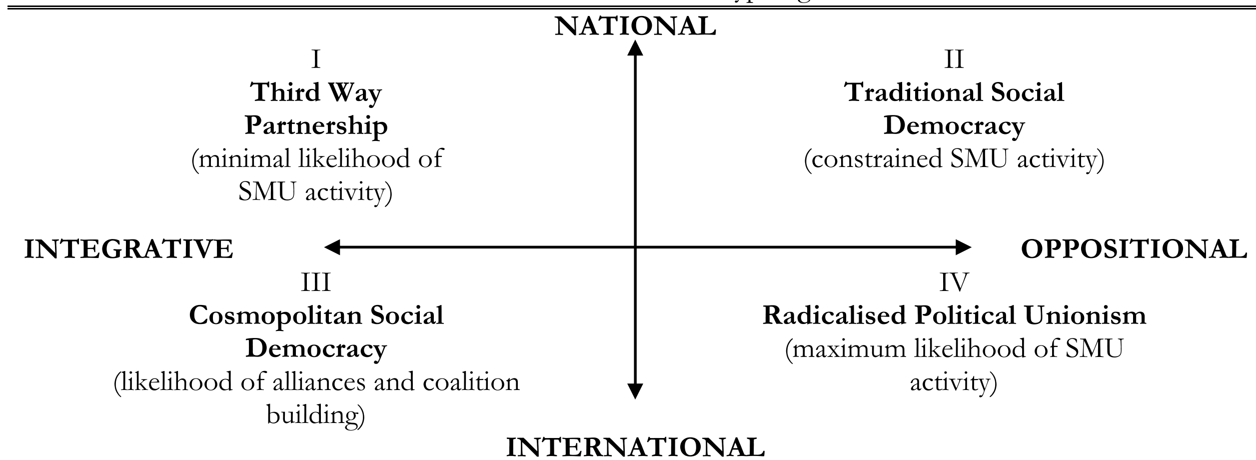
wider popular movement. The fractured nature of unions in France and their alignment with alternative parties of the Left has meant that the crisis of the French social model has been met with a more complex response focused "on the streets" (Gordon and Mathers 2004). Opposition crystallized around debates on the future of the European Union Reform Treaty, reflecting a more generalized popular reaction to neo-liberal market agendas (Grunberg 2005). Union support from the major union federations (CFDT, CGT, and FO) for the protests has been ambivalent, sometime supporting the protests, sometime opposing, and sometimes remaining neutral (Andolfatto and Sabot 2004). The process of union vacillation has also been overlain with differences between the union confederations, involving a "depoliticization" of the CFDT and a turn to militancy by the FO. In the wake of the collapse of the PCF (French Communist Party) and its hegemony over organized labour, a space has opened up to the left of social democracy that has been filled partially by new unions such as SUD and others in the "Group of 10" that offer consistent opposition to the neo-liberal reforms. This development (so far) has not been matched on the political field, where the space to the left of social democracy has remained highly competitive (Damesin and Denis 2005). As with both Britain and Germany, the protest movements have been distinctly anti-neo-liberal in their orientation, and worker opposition to NLR has been intertwined with that of social protest movements outside of and more often than not opposed to the major parties of social democracy. These tendencies within unions have played a critical role in the development of a transnational or European-level challenge to the neo-liberal dynamics of European integration.

Our research framework postulates that the reformulation of social democracy under the impact of neo-liberalism presents itself with three possible alternatives for unions. These alternatives range from Third Way "business"-type unionism to attempts to restore variations of tradition social democracy at the national or international level. An alternative scenario envisages a slow process of decay of the social democratic model of trade unionism and a corresponding attempt to revive unionism through radical, political, and oppositional programmes and identities.

Toward Alternative Futures?

We suggest that the alternatives open to trade unions may be displayed on two dimensions. On the first dimension, trade unions can opt between an *integrative* approach, by exploring productivity coalitions with employers and social pacts with governments, and an *oppositional* approach, by developing combative and militant mechanisms of protest and dissent. Our second dimension varies from the continuance of a *national* orientation to problem solving to an *international* one. The national approach continues to rely on the maintenance or (re)creation of sympathetic Government support for the aims and objectives of organized labour, while the international approach supplements national solutions by the addition of multinational or supranational support structures. In Figure 1, Sections I, II, and II represent reformulated or continuing scenarios for social democracy, while Section IV represents a scenario based on a rejection of the social democratic form and the development of an alternative political identity. Of course, any such two-dimensional model runs the risk of boxing-in alternatives too tightly. In reality there may be ebb and flow between alternatives, as well as tensions within unions as to which direction is desirable.

FIGURE 1
Alternative Trade Union Typologies



Third Way (Integrative, National)

Our first variant, the Third Way, is symbolized by a propensity of unions to adopt the policy of risk minimization. Such minimization, espoused by theorists such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1998), manifests itself in the attenuation of class conflict and its replacement by progressive workplace consensus between employees and employer. Such risk sharing provides the ideological impetus for mutual gains in the workplace, whereby employees work collaboratively with employers to protect the organization from business failure. In the advanced capitalist economies, risk to both employer and employee is minimized by a supply-side strategy that focuses on the upgrading of skills. As such, protagonists argue, social democratic trade unionism might reformulate itself as a protector of worker interests in a globalized economy. Writing within the UK context, Ackers and Payne (1998) also regard collaborative partnership between unions and employers as an extension of pluralist principles within which trade unions can achieve new societal and workplace legitimacy and mitigate risk. In Germany, the transition to Third Way was symbolized by Gerhard Schröder's collaboration with Tony Blair in authoring *Die Neue Mitte*/Third Way (Schröder and Blair 1998). Critics have argued that rather than risk being shared, it is transferred to the employee through work intensification, stress, and increased precariousness. This is explained by Third Way partnership having been adopted by governments and employers as a strategic approach to capital accumulation, rather than any benign desire to befriend organized labour. This Third Way variant reformulates the traditional characterization of social democratic trade unionism by releasing the fetters placed on "business unionism" through the promotion of partnership-based consensus ideology. It produces a rubric whereby trade unions act to restrain class solidarity when it threatens the national interest, expressed in terms of national business competitiveness, while at the same time suppressing sectional interests sometimes expressed as business unionism. Such a reformulation is promoted not only by the union leaderships but also by the state, as it seeks to bypass class solidarity and appeal directly to labour to support national business interest. Evidence of such Third Way approaches within sections of the German trade unions (such as IG BCE—the mining, energy and chemical workers' union; Dribbusch and Schulten 2008), in Britain, with the establishment of the TUC "Partnership Institute" and New Labour government support for "Union Learning Representatives" and workplace partnership initiatives (McIlroy 2008), and in France with the orientation of the CFDT since its "Liberalism or Statism" conference in 2000 (Béroud and Mouriaux 2001). In such cases the emphasis has been on establishing national business competitiveness and relegitimising trade unions through their support for such a project.

Traditional Social Democracy (Oppositional, National/EU)

Leggett (2007) identifies a strand of thought within social democracy that he labels as *critical traditionalists*. This he describes as a "discernible model of social democracy" from which "Third Wayists" have now departed. This variant seeks to return to the values of "old social democracy," exemplified by the

Keynesian Welfare State and a positive relationship between party and unions. It is not accepted that "there is no alternative" to capitalism's love affair with neo-liberal globalization (Garrett 2003; Hirst, Thompson, and Bromley 2008; Wickham-Jones 2000). This scenario envisages within the European context a possibility of an EU-wide restraint on neo-liberalism and the restoration of defence of the public realm. For trade unions, such a position would entail projects to "reclaim social democracy" and to continue to fight left–right battles within the national party machinery.

Early indications of this tension were already apparent in the divorce of the LO union federation from the SAP in 1987, whereby the formal connection between the two was untied but pressure continued to be exerted on the SAP from the unions at workplace or sectoral levels. A strategy of internal lobbying is now seen as the way forward for many "left" trade union leaders in the United Kingdom, who wish to reclaim the Labour Party (Leopold 2006, McIlroy 2009). Such battles have also been reflected in the SPD's Keynesianism debate in Germany, as well as in the militant turn of the FO in France and in the ongoing realignment of the CGT. The strategy depends on activating party members and challenging the leadership while continuing to hold the line of trade union class solidarity against pressures to conform to the interests of national competitiveness. In the process, unions at the national level are drawn into opposing state policy as it relates to modernization and retrenchment of the public sector. Elements of such a strategy form part of the policy approach at the EU level, where the European Federation of Public Service Unions has been active in coordinating a federated campaign for a legal framework on public services (European Federal of Public Service Unions 2005). The credibility of any revival of traditional social democracy is also clouded by a more complex theoretical debate on contemporary capital accumulation strategy. The traditional social democratic position assumes that the specificities of neo-liberalism can be divorced from the generalities of capitalism. From this perspective it would be possible to reconstruct social democracy within the confines of capitalism, most specifically by a revival of Keynesian economic prescription. Some neo-Marxist writers outside of traditional social democratic circles adopt a similar overview. David Harvey (2003), for example, suggests that neo-liberalism is a *particularized* strategy of privatization, marketization, and state retrenchment pursued by belligerent capital as "accumulation by dispossession." Pierre Bourdieu (1998) suggested something similar with regard to the state when writing that in withdrawing the "left hand of the state," governing parties in Western Europe have deliberately sought to distance themselves from class solidarity and labour interest in a drift towards "social liberalism." Critics of this optimistic scenario suggest that the processes of social democracy's subservience to international capital actually predate the death of Keynesianism and the onset of globalization (Callaghan 2002). From a classical Marxist position, both Harman (2007) and Albo (2007) argue that neo-liberalism, rather than being a *variant* of contemporary world capitalism, is now *central* to capital accumulation, and is an overall response by western-based capital to falling rates of profit that became evident throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Brenner 1998, Duménil and Lévy 2005). As a result, social democracy's positive relationship with capitalism makes it extremely difficult if not impossible for these parties and allied trade union leaderships to challenge neo-liberalism without a direct challenge to the power of capital. Indeed, as both Bieler (2006) and Mathers (2007) suggest, in these circumstances the reinvigoration of "Social Europe" is unlikely to be state-led through "Euro-Keynesianism" but instead is dependent on trade unions developing and expanding class struggle both within and across nation-states, whereby key aspects of the dominant EU social democratic *politik* need to be challenged from below.

Cosmopolitan Social Democracy (Integrative, International)

Our third scenario is cosmopolitan social democracy (CSD), which can be characterized as both a meta-version of the Third Way and an international version of traditional social democracy. Held and McGrew (2002) identify right–left variants between "global transformers" who wish to encourage "multi-level democratic cosmopolitan polity" and "radicals" who wish for "bottom up social change" and the "reform of governance, from the local to global level." CSD embraces prescriptions of institutional reform and corporate social responsibility in which "globalization can be better and more fairly governed, regulated and shaped" (Held and McGrew 2002:107). Again, many proponents of CSD envisage the European Union as a key potential agent for such re-regulation. Partnership between employers and employees is often central to the project and is even conceived as a form of new governance typifying the ethos of the European Social Model (Kristensen 2001). At the European level, the ETUC have articulated this CSD "Third Way" position

through its uncritical support for social dialogue, European Works Councils, and the European Employment Strategy.

In its "left" version, the route map to achieving CSD is dependent on a challenge to the neo-liberal imperative, even though the solution to the problem may be constructed in terms of institutional reform. Neo-Gramscian concepts of civil society are utilised to propose agitation "from below." New forms of participative and associative democracy are deemed necessary because of a decline of societal solidarity allied with the risk society, which in turn has created a crisis of representative democracy (e.g., Cohen and Rogers 1995). In the Third Way vision of CSD, the motive for promoting new forms of participative democracy comes from a position of relative pessimism. Old forms of representative democracy, associated with mass state provision of goods and services and "traditional" social democracy, are no longer deemed appropriate to peoples' needs. The CSD project becomes in essence Giddens' (1998, 2006) "social investment state," whereby the role of the state mutates to one that discourages welfare dependency while at the same time providing incentives for personal advancement via education and training. Translated to the restructured workplace, CSD offers something similar to Third Way prescription. The process of *participation* is again postulated as key to economic and production efficiency, either as pluralist networks of stakeholders in the corporation (Hirst 1997; Kelly, Kelly, and Gamble 1997) or in terms of economic democracy expressed through Works Councils.

It is in this segment of reformed trade union identity that we can locate the emphasis on initiatives such as that calling for "Decent Work," international framework agreements, corporate social responsibility, and core labour standards (see Dimitrova and Petkov 2005 for an insight into the Decent Work approach). This strategy, adopted by many of the Global Union Federations (GUFs) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), has as its objective the regulation of labour standards worldwide through agencies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) or even the World Trade Organization (WTO). Such a strategy of engagement for change with the institutions has been accompanied with a push by unions at international level to ally with NGOs and social movements in a process of lobbying. The Decent Work initiative was a central component of the intervention of the ITUC and some unions (e.g., IG Metall) at the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi. This strategy internationalizes the unions' march through the institutions and parallels strategies of the GUFs and ITUC to engage not only with employers through international framework agreements (Croucher and Cotton 2009, Hammer 2005, Hassel 2008), but also with the international financial institutions. However, Bieler (2007) notes a potentially debilitating top-down and hierarchic approach to achieving "Decent Work," which contrasts with the more radical and rank-and-file–based initiatives associated with alternative campaigns at the forum, such as the "Proposal for a Labour Network." Such tensions are at the heart of debates about the origins and direction of new labour internationalism. Hyman (2005) identifies a labour diplomacy model that is based on cooperative relationships among international union leaderships, governments, and institutions but might stand in contrast to workplace-based international solidarity. Martínez Lucio (2007) also writes of a "managerialist" mode of labour internationalism, which displays a tendency of horizontal networking at the level of union leaderships established to enact change through institutional structures. Within Western Europe, such institutionally based managerial internationalism is inevitably geared towards a defence of the "European Social Model" and exhibits traits of our "traditional social democracy" model of nationally based oppositionism. In essence, while trade union strategic identity associated with CSD might represent a process of internationalization and engagement with social movements, its potential to challenge neo-liberalism may be constrained by its focus on institutional reform and employer willingness to comply.

Radicalized Political Unionism (Oppositional/International)

Our fourth segment represents a break to the left from social democracy. It is tempting to identify this fourth scenario as simply that of an international social movement unionism already identified by Peter Waterman (1991) and Kim Moody (1997). Our formulation of radical political unionism, however, implies a refinement of what is commonly (mis)understood as social movement unionism. In particular, we define RPU as class-oriented, high-risk politicised activism, centred in particular on opposition to contemporary neo-liberalism. We suggest that much of the literature on social movement unionism is depoliticized and fails to address the necessary ideological aspects of oppositionist trade unionism deemed necessary to challenge

neo-liberalism. Indeed, much of the literature adopts an emphasis on spontaneity and voluntarism, which, while perhaps correctly placing emphasis on the rank-and-file, tends to omit questions of ideology or political leadership within the union (see Gapasin and Yates 1997). Part of the confusion over whether social movement theory is applicable to trade unions or not may also lie in the preoccupation of many social movement theorists with "postindustrial" analyses of society that deemphasize traditional class struggle approaches based on the antagonism between capital and labour. Such postindustrial analysis reifies information and knowledge above materialist concerns (e.g. Touraine 1981, Castells 1996). In challenging these approaches Dunn (2007) has issued a plea for greater consideration of the objective circumstances of labour within capitalism. Trade unions are class-centred social products of capitalism and are rooted in the everyday exploitation of the capital–labour relationship. As such, trade unions are here for the long haul. We suggest, as have others (Edwards 2008, Tucker 1991), that trade unions *are* beginning to embrace contemporary injustices as part of the global justice agenda, and, in any case there is a rich history of unions pursuing the sword of justice. Tilly and Tilly's edited collection *Class Conflict and Collective Action* (Tilly 1981), for example, devotes itself to examining these relationships over time. Furthermore, as Barker and Dale (1998) have argued, there may not be anything particularly new about the "new social movements" when examined historically in terms of mass protest waves, which more often than not include organized labour as a central component.

The diffusion of ideas and innovation as new movements arise makes *networking* activity a central component of the ability of social movements to thrive and grow (Passy 2003). The architecture of networking is also subject to bureaucratic constraints within the union machine, and in particular to fear of loss of control by the trade union leaderships. A progressive networking approach requires the loosening of bureaucratic stricture to allow active cross-fertilization of ideas within and between unions and, importantly, between unions and other agents within civil society who can help labour's cause through coalitions and alliances. For the union leaderships such a process may be a high-risk strategy unless, we suggest, there was some left-oriented political congruence throughout the union that marries the aspirations, expectations, and frames of reference of both union leadership and activists. Such left political congruence is more rather than less likely as the crisis of social democratic trade unionism deepens. When combined with high levels of union participation, strong networking encourages "high-risk activism" (McAdam 1986), which in turn acts to politicize union members as their propensity to mobilize correspondingly increases. In such a fashion, shared "repertoires of contention" would include strikes, campaigns, rallies, and, in contemporary circumstances, agitational internet-based activity (see Hogan 2006). This will reinforce oppositionism through willingness and propensity to be active rather than passive members of the union.

Examples of the approach outlined above might be the militant orientation of the SUD and others in the G-10 in France over the pensions issue and public sector cuts (Gordon and Mathers 2004, Damesin and Denis 2005), the willingness of left-oriented sections of the IG Metall and Ver.di in Germany both to engage with the *Die Linke* and to mobilize against the Hartz reforms (Jüncke 2007), and the real growth in mobilising capacity (and sometimes membership) of the "rejectionist" Fire Brigades Union (Fitzgerald 2005), the Communications Workers Union in the Royal Mail (Beale 2003), the RMT (Darlington 2007), and PCS (Upchurch, Flynn, and Croucher 2008) in their fight against public service deterioration in the United Kingdom. Our position must be seen in contrast to more pessimistic quantitative analyses of *aggregate* strike statistics, which may be utilized to prove the continuance of labour quiescence, declining worker consciousness, and dormant class struggle in Western Europe. Gall and Allsop (2007), for example, in presenting recent strike statistics across Western Europe, acknowledge the problems of purely quantitative analysis and emphasize qualitative assessment. But despite this acknowledgment they slip into pessimism when they dismiss ongoing class polarization by arguing that the gathered quantitative evidence "does not lend support to the perspective of extant social and political polarization leading to increasingly frequent and widespread mass mobilizations, of which strikes are a central component." Our argument is that our radicalized political unionism is an emergent *minority* rather than majority identity within the unions, but that it nevertheless represents a *qualitative* shift in union strategy and political orientation. We identify this qualitative shift as a propensity of unions or sections of unions and their activists to politicize their industrial struggle. Such politicization focuses on anti-neo-liberalism, is formed within a framework of hostility to government policy, and is often associated with defence of threatened public services.

Within our typology of radicalized political unionism we suggest that leadership will inevitably be to the left of contemporary social democracy. The rejectionist position taken by unions to neo-liberal restructuring must include left political opposition to the accommodation of social democracy to those same forces of neo-liberalism. Furthermore, the type of high-risk activism demanded by this model implies congruence between the aims and aspirations of a politicized union leadership and the majority of activists. Politicization of the struggle manifests itself in a willingness to engage with agents beyond the workplace, often accompanied with new ways of working, which in turn reinforces the tendency for industrial struggle to become embellished with political oppositionism. The high-risk strategies cannot afford to rely on membership passivity, as high levels of union mobilization against state and employer are necessary to sustain the model both practically and ideologically. This may place limits on the potential for radicalized political unionism simply because union members are at varying levels of consciousness, up to and including the working class Tory portrayed in writings on British social history (see Rose 2001 for a review). Within an increasingly polarized society there is also the danger that working people may adopt the ideas of the extreme right. Fichter, Stöss, and Zeuner (2002), for example, have already cautioned about the recent growth of such extreme right-wing ideas and organization within German trade unions. Recent strikes in the UK construction sector in February 2009, which were initially grouped around the slogan "British Jobs for British Workers" (before the slogan was disowned by the strike leadership), also stand in stark contrast to the explicitly anti-neo-liberal strikes and demonstrations that occurred in France and Greece during the same period. Such nuance of leadership has long been recognized in studies of union activists. Batstone, Boraston, and Frenkel (1977:11), for example, in their classic study of British "shop stewards in action" typologize shop stewards within a range of personal and leadership characteristics, but they also make the point that stewards' ideological position may support basic principles of trade union unity "at a number of levels" ranging from a "demand for a socialist society and workers' control" to "fostering co-operation with management." Values and goals of activists are likely to be elastic, and so *congruence* of political vision cannot be guaranteed.

Some Conclusions

The different historical, economic, and political contexts of our countries have shaped and tempered the search for alternative political visions and more radical union identities. The German case, encapsulated in the development and progress of the Left Party, is clearly the most advanced. The new party has managed to secure commitment from minority but nevertheless substantial elements within the trade unions while at the same time bridging our traditional social democracy model (in the guise of "left" Keynesianism) with more left radical politics that imply a clear break with the SPD. This may be an unstable coalition of identity, which will be put to the test as electoral success intervenes and the "responsibility" of government creates new strategic and tactical dilemmas. In Britain we observe much less significant breaks with social democracy, but nevertheless a gathering critique and mutual distancing between New Labour in power and the trade union leaderships. As in most of Western Europe, dissent is most focused in the public sector, where disputes against "modernization" have by necessity been imbued with a politicized flavour. In the United Kingdom, too, there appears more union experimentation with new organizing techniques and a greater openness to coalition and alliance building beyond the workplace, perhaps reflecting the more intensified process of NLR and capital–labour confrontation within this Anglo-Saxon variant of capitalism identified by Robinson (2000, 2002). In Sweden we can observe a continuing thread within the unions of a unique "folk tradition" that has survived outside of other experiences. The linkages between union and community rested on a defence of social democratic values against the values of Anglo-American individualism. In this context, the peculiarities and specificities of Swedish social movement unionism can thus be seen as a product of the enduring hegemony of social democratic values and the enduring legacy of the centralized decentralization of the Swedish labour movement. Finally, in France, despite the vacillations of the main union federations, aspects of the new trade unionism, such as participatory democracy and a focus on issues beyond the workplace, have been strongly present in the G-10 and in SUD. SUD has consistently offered material and political support to the movements of the "*san papiers*" and has developed alliances with the *Confédération Paysanne*. The G-10 participated in the European Social Forum in Paris more than any other federation, and it was engaged particularly around matters such as immigration, gender equality, and ecology in contrast to the Decent Work

approach of the mainstream. SUD has also played a significant part in revealing neo-liberalism as an ideological project, demonstrating how SUD has emphasized the development of a broad social movement that articulates an alternative societal project. However, although developing as a social movement union par excellence, SUD remains small and on the fringe of French trade unionism.

In summary, our review supports the contention that the crisis of social democracy has transformed into a potential crisis of the social democratic model of trade unionism. This marks a qualitative change from previous crises in which challenges to social democratic trade unionism from below were always contained within the party–union nexus or neutralized by the institutions of industrial relations. This is not to argue that these processes of containment and institutionalization of conflict no longer exist or no longer work, but rather to suggest that the limits of the process have been breached to various degrees of significance in each of the countries under observation. We detect new formulations of union identity, engagement beyond the workplace, and newly politicized union strategy. Of course, such new formulations remain fragile and open to division, political tension, and subsequent reformulation. They may also swing between a party-based response and a more syndicalist response. Nevertheless, we suggest that the continuing adaptation to neo-liberalism as a means of capital accumulation by social democratic parties in power will mean a continuation of the crisis, and a parallel opening-up of workers' organized political dissent within wider civil society.

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