How Do Union Members Perceive the Presence of Union Organisation in the European Workplace?

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Throughout most European countries trade union membership and density are in decline. Recent estimates suggest that trade unions within the European Union represented 25.1 per cent of the employed workforce in 2006, whereas in 1980 39.1 per cent of the workforce was represented by trade unions (EC 2008). Trade unions in Europe now represent a smaller proportion of the European workforce than at any other time since 1950. In consequence, the status of trade unions as social partners is threatened and their capacity to represent entire national workforces is questioned. Compounding the issue of representation is the loss of political influence by trade unions as right-of-centre governments ignore or downplay the interest of labour and are more likely to exclude trade unions from institutions of macro-economic policy formulation.

Although there is no agreement on the relative effects of the forces that promote trade union decline, it is generally accepted that external influences such as macroeconomic context, the changing composition of the labour force, management resistance and workplace practices, and state policy have had adverse effects on unionisation (Mason and Bain 1993). In addition, issues internal to unionism are viewed as contributing to the decline, included among which are inadequate recruitment programmes, whether inadequacy is measured in terms of resources allocated or practices implemented (Kelly 1990); union failure to deliver benefits effectively for employees (Bryant and Gomez 2005); and the failure to reform union policy and government to ‘fit’ with the interests of new members (Dølvik and
Waddington 2005). During the period of decline, unionists have gradually turned their attention to the question: how might unions adapt to new circumstances? This research examines the content, implementation and outcome of processes of adaptation within a range of European trade unions.

Following initiatives taken in the United States, unions initially based in Anglo-Saxon countries and latterly unions based in continental Europe turned to the organising model as a means to reverse membership decline and to encourage the participation in union affairs of members from hitherto under-represented groups of workers. In essence the organising model is an approach to union membership and union renewal that encourages local union activity, greater local self-reliance and a collective identity (Russo and Banks 1996). Proponents of the organising model argue that increased recruitment and self-sustaining workplace unionism may result from organising around local or workplace issues, with which members and potential members are likely to identify (Clark 2000). Associated with the organising model is a range of techniques intended to promote union activity among members rather than them remaining as passive recipients of service and support. Among the techniques employed in organising are person-to-person recruitment based, as far as is possible, on the assumption of like-best-recruits-like, the mapping of workplaces to locate members and non-members, strategic company research, the identification of workplace grievances, and the targeting of particular groups of potential members (Sherman and Voss 2000). Unions tend to employ different elements from this range of techniques (Heery et al. 2003), with the practical consequence that variants of the organising model are in operation. Central to most organising initiatives, however, is a direct form of unionism where relations between union and members are paramount
and ‘bottom-up’ processes within unions are highlighted and the top-down’ practices associated with business and servicing unionism downplayed.

Unionists that implement the different variants of the organising model acknowledge that it is at the workplace that the majority of unionists join unions and experience unionism (Waddington and Whitston 1997; Waddington 2007, 2008a, 2008b) and, therefore, that it is at the workplace that the primary organising effort is required. This research examines aspects of workplace relations in a range of European trade unions. Based on a large-scale questionnaire survey covering trade unions based in more than ten countries, the research shows that while members emphasise the importance of a workplace union presence, they also acknowledge that there are insufficient workplace representatives and where workplace representatives are present they are overworked and unable to support existing members. This finding raises questions about how union revitalisation may be brought about, the nature of form of workplace unionism and the deployment of resources at workplace level.
References


