



Trade unions have to change radically. After several decades of growth and economic militancy, unions across Western Europe suffered major defeats while, aided by neo-liberal de-regulation, employers became increasingly assertive if not hostile. In Western Europe, this meant deteriorating terms and conditions of work and the growth of precarious employment. In the East, workers experienced a savage rupture in their working conditions, living standards, and futures. In most countries, trade union membership plummeted and workplace organisation weakened.

Challenges

Among the many challenges facing unions today, restructuring, flexibility and migration present new problems for traditional trade union organisation.

Restructuring

Across Europe, economies have been liberalised, public sector companies privatised, others deregulated, and working conditions undermined. In the electricity and steel industries, for example, one-time national and publicly owned industries are now internationally competitive, mainly private companies, planning to exploit the low-wage industries in Eastern Europe.

The EU's Bolkestein directive which introduces competition into public services throws these problems into relief. It will replace the economics of the provision of public goods (however distorted) with market driven economics, reinforcing existing trends towards privatisation and deteriorating pension and other rights across Europe.

Flexibility

Employers' strategies vary, but generally they seek competitive advantage through imposing

'flexibility' on their workforce. Unions are demanding security of employment. The EU, through the European Employment Strategy, attempts to manage a compromise.

In reality, the thrust of its policy underwrites a primarily neo-liberal economic strategy, with unions left on the margins arguing for 'better jobs and greater social cohesion'. Complementing these developments is an increasing tendency across all sectors towards outsourcing and offshore production and service delivery.

Migration

Unions face specific challenges over migration, especially in its unprotected forms of asylum seeking and people trafficking. Many large employers exploit labour migration, and the poverty and desperation that lie behind it, by using sub-contractors. These employ migrants at low wages and make it difficult for unions to represent workers. Migration is leading to a reshaping of the workforce, and in much of Europe this is exploited by xenophobic and populist politics. Unions have often failed to challenge these politics in clear-cut and unambiguous ways.

Union responses

These challenges and the failure of the unions to, as yet, effectively defend workers and communities, have led to a significant decline in members and active organisation. Many countries have union densities of less than 30% (Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom). Germany's largest unions have lost a third or more of their members. In contrast, where unions continue to have some role in relation to state policy, for example playing a part in the administration of some aspects of welfare provision as in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, unionisation is above 70 per cent, though somewhat passive.

It has been difficult for many unions in the West to go beyond both nationally-based forms of organisation and company specific negotiating frameworks. They find it difficult to develop continental industry-wide trade union strategies by which social demands could be more effectively fought for.

In the East, with the collapse of the command economies in the former Soviet bloc, the official unions underwent some limited reform. But they remain relatively inactive, with little strategic direction in a very hostile environment. There are sporadic exceptions such as a recent metalworkers' national strike in Romania and organisation of the informal economy in Russia (see pge 10) although new trends are not yet clear.

The main strategic responses pursued by unions are flawed.

Mergers

Building super-unions via merger is one response. Merger may have some justification, when two sections of related work groups come together, as with the many unions in the British civil service or unions in public services in Germany (in Germany the number of unions has been halved in twelve years) or when gendered union organisations ended separate organisation, as recently in Denmark. Most mergers however are defensive, desperate attempts to counter membership decline, financial vulnerability and inadequate strategies. Bigger is not necessarily better. The problems they seek to address remain: declining membership, corporate power, malign government policies and vulnerable workers and their communities. Mergers are not a substitute for organising.

'Service' Unions

Another solution has been for unions to remodel themselves as 'service' unions. Here,

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a new trade unionism

for Europe

by Peter Fairbrother

the union brokers deals (insurance, tax and legal advice, mortgages etc) making it a bureaucratic third party between an aggressive employer and a passive membership. Many Spanish unions have followed this route. However, this too is no substitute for the core rationale of unions: organisation with the emphasis on participation, involvement, education and campaigning. On this latter point, the broader involvement of women in both the workforce and unions in the East could stimulate a questioning of familiar union policies and practices across Europe.

Social Dialogue

Building social dialogue is often seen as a panacea for some of these problems. The idea is to involve the partners in the labour relationship, employers and trade unions, in a dialogue, which would lead to bargaining over solutions to a range of problems such as training, working conditions, security of employment and more. Genuine social dialogue, however, depends on strong, free social partners acting independently. This would be an extension of the traditional free collective bargaining relationship, in which industrial action remained the sanction for labour to gain some control over capital. Nonetheless, this strategy is limited by what Attac, the international network campaigning resisting neo-liberalism refers to as 'the tyranny of financial capital.'

Social dialogue works best when the partners are seeking not solutions, but 'frameworks' for trade unions to bargain with employers or policy makers in ways that are not already available. One means is by creating public platforms whereby unions can challenge corporate capital. An example here is the achievements of the International Union of Foodworkers, in seeking to regulate multinationals such as Danone, via the recognition of labour rights, safe working environments and the promotion of training.

A new trade unionism in the making?

To address these challenges more positively, unions have begun to renew themselves and to extend their boundaries of action. There is a variety of signs of a renewal. In the past, the key union dynamic was based on the assumption that union leaders (at all levels) have the capacity to shape union objectives to meet every, often contradictory, need. But revitalisation requires a shift in emphasis from leaders servicing members to a mutually involved and accountable form of organising. It would be one in which members become actively involved in coalitions and alliances with social, community and international movements without necessarily going through the union's national, vertical structures.

Some unions are beginning to re-establish themselves through innovative struggles against the consequences of restructuring. For example, in Terni in Italy 2004/5, young workers in steel unions, supported by local community leaders, played a leading part in challenging corporate decisions, and in the East End of London trade unions are resisting low wage policies (see page 9). Elsewhere practical international co-operation has been promoted by unions such as Ver.di (Germany), Unison (UK) and CGIL (Italy) in the European Social Forum.

A Movement Unionism

There is much here that can be learned from social movements. The global social justice movement has effectively challenged neo-liberal strategies of capital. Especially since Seattle in 1999, these new movements have mobilised and educated millions of young people, reminiscent of earlier phases of the labour movement. But these movements now face difficult challenges. Globalising activism is a necessary strategic move; it is not a sufficient one. The global justice movement needs strong local roots.

Renewal involves promoting unions as campaigning organisations, recruiting beyond familiar membership bases, creating mutually supporting relations between different levels of the unions. It also, crucially, involves looking beyond the union, creating ways of organising appropriate to the workplace, the community, and the dispossessed, and to combining local campaigning with organising internationally. Underpinning these moves is an alternative view of society, where the emphasis is on participation, accountability and public involvement, framing demands socially and politically rather than just economically.

The key to this is a radically democratic form of unionism in which processes of union mobilisation are participative. Only then will unions begin to lay the foundations for genuine alliances with social movements, addressing and campaigning against the degradations of the present form of European capitalism.

Final Comment

For it is trade unionism, with its base in the everyday lives of working people, that makes it possible to confront the way that global capitalism actually works on the ground. This makes the trade union movement the potentially perfect partner of the new movements, and vice versa. For all its weaknesses, the traditional trade union movement remains potentially the most powerful form of popular organisation. Unions are still able to mobilise large-scale resistance to the dismantling of the welfare state, as we have seen in countries like France, Italy and Germany over the last decade. The union form of organisation is a specific one. It defines the continuing tension between labour and capital. Unions remain a vital part of the future. n