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Imagined Solidarities: Can Trade Unions Resist Globalization?

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My title 'Imagined Solidarities' is open to at least three interpretations.

1. The idea of worker or trade union solidarity is today (and always was?) imaginary, illusory, fictitious, unattainable.

2. Solidarity is a utopia, a Sorelian myth, unrealisable yet perhaps capable of inspiring action which results in its partial accomplishment. This is the sense in which Anderson (1983) writes of nations as 'imagined communities': people conceive a commonality with others whom they do not know and of whose specific identities they are unaware, with such powerful sentiments that nationalism is probably the most significant mobilising principle of our time.

3. The integration of diverse and competing (or indeed conflicting) employee interests cannot be achieved mechanically but requires creative imagination.

My argument is that any simple conception of solidarity ('mechanical solidarity' of the working class) is and was imaginary in the first sense; that mythic solidarity ('solidarity forever') may historically have provided inspiration and perhaps helped generate a reality approximating to the ideal, but probably can no longer do so; and that collectivism, particularly of an encompassing character, is therefore a project demanding new forms of strategic imagination.

In the discussion which follows I develop each of these themes, and consider how far the socio-

economic transformations commonly identified as globalization have altered the problem of constructing solidarity.

The Unity of Labour: an Imagined Universal Class

From the revolutionary theories of Marx — a powerful influence on both trade union activists and analysts of trade unionism — derive a conception of the unity of working-class interests and a conception of unions' historical mission to articulate this unity.

The 'classic' Marxian conception rested on at least three foundations. First, in his early 'philosophical' writings, Marx recast the Hegelian interpretation of history. Human emancipation required material force: and specifically, a class whose own particular interests could be achieved not within the existing society but only through transforming society as a whole. As he insisted in the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, the proletariat constituted 'a class with radical chains, a class within civil society that is not of civil society...'. Because of the totality of its oppression within bourgeois society, the working class suffered 'the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself through the total redemption of humanity'. Hence famously, 'the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.'

Second, those who *did* enjoy distinctive interests and advantages in the labour market did so as relics of pre-capitalist relations of production; the advance of capitalism involved the degradation of traditional skills and the homogenisation of the proletariat. Both the rationale and the result of mechanisation involved the reduction of capitalists' dependence on the discretion of expert workers and on the availability of scarce and hence expensive labour power.

Third, the *objective* commonality of class interests (the proletariat as a class 'in itself') would lead inevitably to workers' *subjective* consciousness of their common identity and historical mission as a class 'for itself'. The increasing inefficacy of defensive and particularistic struggles would persuade workers of the need to organise comprehensively as a class

and to pursue the total transformation of society. Trade unions, as agencies of working-class collective struggle, would inevitably be shaped by this dynamic.

It is unnecessary to rehearse the problems underlying this conception; the critiques are all too familiar. The thesis of homogenisation ¾ as much sociological discussion of 'deskilling' in the last two decades witnesses ¾ rests on a unilinear reading of the dynamics of the capitalist labour process and labour market. In practice, new differentiations arise as old ones are weakened (a process which Marx himself, in *Capital*, saw as characteristic of the era of 'manufacture', but as unable to persist with the advance of increasingly mechanised 'modern industry'). The idea of objective class unity seems to conflate the abstract (the structural relationship between wage-labour and capital) and the concrete (the circumstances of actually existing workers and their relations among themselves and with actually existing employers, among others); as Sayer and Walker (1992: 29) put it, 'division of labour is not merely a modifier in the grammar of class'. The conceptual and practical linkage between 'objective' class and 'subjective' consciousness is moreover inadequately theorised (primarily in *The Poverty of Philosophy* and the *Communist Manifesto*) by simple analogy with the rise of the bourgeoisie as a hegemonic class.

Reality is different. We are shaped by our direct experiences, immediate *milieux*, specific patterns of social relations. Broader identities and affiliations are founded on the direct, immediate and specific, through intersubjectivities which link these to the external and encompassing. Solidarity implies the perception of commonalities of interest and purpose which extend, but do not abolish, consciousness of distinct and particularistic circumstances.

Actually existing trade unions reflect these processes. The earliest unions typically emerged as organisations of distinct occupational communities of interest within local labour markets. The development of multi-occupational unionism with a broader geographical compass normally required either the external intervention of a politically driven class project, or the gradual experience of the limited efficacy of too narrow a representational base. The 'one big union' of syndicalist aspirations remained a

dream.

The boundaries of union inclusion are also frontiers of exclusion. The perceived common interests of the members of a particular union (or confederation) are defined in part in contradistinction to those of workers outside. In compartmentalising workers, unions traditionally have compartmentalised solidarity.

Constructing Labour Movements: Solidarity as a Mobilising Myth

'Interests can only be met to the extent that they are partly redefined' (Offe and Wiesenthal 1985: 184). It is a sociological truism that the elusive notion of interests has both objective and subjective dimensions, and that the relationship between the two is never fixed. Through their own internal processes of communication, discussion and debate — the 'mobilisation of bias' — unions can help shape workers' own definitions of their individual and collective interests. Cumulatively, the outcomes compose the patterns of commonality and conflict among the interests of different groups and hence contribute to the dynamics of sectionalism and solidarity within labour movements.

Borrowing from Durkheim — though applying his concepts flexibly — one may define the classic form of interest definition and representation as 'mechanical solidarity'. Durkheim attributed order and stability in traditional society to the repressive imposition of standardised rules and values on members whose circumstances were relatively homogeneous. Traditional trade unionism displayed some similarities. The aggregation of interests which is essential for any coherent collective action involves establishing priorities among a variety of competing grievances and aspirations. One reason why many employers came to perceive the value (to themselves) of the existence of a recognised vehicle of employee 'voice' was that unions filtered out (or perhaps suppressed) certain demands and discontents while highlighting others. Another was that unions could be induced to share responsibility with management for disruptive initiatives and uncomfortable changes.

Trade unions, in other words, are agencies whose role in the aggregation of interests may also involve the (re-)distribution of gains and losses: not only between workers and employers but also among workers themselves. Typically the definition of union-relevant interests has reflected systematically the existing distribution of power within the working class.

What are often presented as expressions of the general interests of the class have traditionally been in large measure representations of the particular interests of relatively protected sections. In Britain in the nineteenth century, for example, craft unions representing a fraction of the labour force with distinctive (relative) advantages were nevertheless widely perceived (and often perceived themselves) as representatives of a general world of labour. In many European countries in the first half of the present century, coal-miners assumed the status of archetypal proletarians and helped inspire a particular iconography and discourse of the nature of collective solidarity and collective struggle. The 'mass worker' in engineering production (and above all, on car assembly lines) subsequently constituted the 'model trade unionist' in much of Europe.

In effect, the type of solidarity typically constitutive of twentieth century trade unionism tended to reflect and replicate on the one hand the discipline and standardisation imposed by 'Fordist' mass production, on the other the patterns of differentiation within the working class between those who were central to this production process and those who were more marginal. Thus within companies and sectors, collective bargaining priorities were normally set by core groups of full-time production workers (typically male, white, with a stable place in the internal labour market); within national labour movements, priorities were imposed by the big battalions (typically the unions of manual manufacturing workers, notably metal workers).

Associated with this form of mechanical solidarity was clearly an implicit bias in terms of *whose* interests counted for most. But also affected was the conception of *which* interests were relevant for union representation and bargaining policy. A specific conception of the relationship between 'work' and 'life' has been seen in retrospect to have informed working-class organisation; one which in particular counterposed a full-time (male) wage-worker in

mine, mill or factory and a full-time (female) domestic worker in the home. That reality was always more complex than this did not prevent the model from shaping firmly the conceptions of which issues were union-relevant and which were not.

The Crisis of Mechanical Solidarity

For over a decade, it has been common for academic writers to speak of a crisis of trade unionism (Edwards et al., 1986; Regini, 1992). Müller-Jentsch (1988) has identified three types of underlying challenge: increasing heterogeneity within the labour force, creating a 'crisis of interest aggregation'; decentralisation of employment regulation to company and workplace levels, resulting in a 'crisis of workers' loyalty towards their unions'; and failure to organise effectively the key occupations in the dynamic sectors of the economy, giving rise to a 'crisis of union representation'. These factors may be viewed as elements in a series of interlocking transformations: a more unstable and segmented labour market; more strategic (or aggressive) employer approaches to the management of labour; intensified competitive pressures in product markets; the support (though to different degrees) of most European governments for deregulation of industrial relations.

Initially, many trade unionists resisted the very idea of a crisis (Mouriaux, 1995: 3). Increasingly, however, there has been an acceptance that traditional policies and forms of organisation have lost their effectiveness; that if unions are to remain significant social actors in the new millennium they must be transformed and renewed. There is widespread discussion within European labour movements of the need for 'modernisation' of trade unions (Mückenberger et al., 1996), even if as yet the evidence of its achievement is limited.

It is my thesis that what is normally conceived as a crisis of trade unionism as such may be better understood as a crisis of a particular *model* of trade unionism, one based on what I have termed mechanical solidarity. The debate on 'modernisation' may thus be reconceptualised as a search for a new model, which again following Durkheim we may term 'organic solidarity'. Before elaborating on this thesis I

will first outline three factors which are commonly identified as underlying causes of the crisis of traditional solidaristic projects:

1. increased internal differentiation within the working population (linked to diagnoses of 'individualism') (Zoll, 1993);

2. intensified competition, restructuring and 'deregulation' (often conceptualised within a 'globalisation' perspective) turning intra-class bargaining increasingly into a zero- (or negative-) sum game (Golden and Pontusson, 1992) and encouraging micro-level 'solutions' to macro-problems;

3. the erosion of egalitarian commitments within labour movements (Swenson, 1989), reflected both in increased internal differentiation among trade unions; and in the eclipse of the communist political model and the exhaustion of the social-democratic.

Internal Differentiation

Without differentiation, there would be no need for solidarity. Solidarity is a project to reconcile differences of situation and of interest, to offer support and assistance to the claims of groups and individuals irrespective of immediate advantage in respect of one's own circumstances. Solidarity became a slogan of labour movements precisely because the working class was *not* a homogeneous unity, because divisive sectionalism was an ever-present possibility, and because painful experience showed that isolated and often competitive struggles by fragmented groups were more often than not mutually defeating.

Yet if vertical and horizontal differentiation is anything but new, has it assumed new forms which imply new obstacles to the attainment of solidarity? One argument is that the deviation from the mean, so to speak, has increased, and that this poses serious problems for union organisation. Traditional patterns of unionisation, in the private sector at least, appear to display the familiar inverted U curve. The most advantaged sections — those with high educational qualifications and favourable career expectations, for example — commonly saw no need

for collective organisation, or may have considered it a threat to promotion prospects to take what might be seen as anti-employer initiatives. Conversely, the poorest, most vulnerable and most insecure sections of the labour force — who may perhaps have had the greatest need for unionisation — commonly lacked the resources to build stable collective organisation, and were easily victimised if they did make the attempt. Unions built their strongholds among the relatively secure, relatively well paid 'core' working class (what some writers termed the 'mass worker') (Paci, 1973). It was in the era when such workers constituted the dominant section of the active labour force that union density in many countries reached its peak, and labour movements as a whole seemed best able to identify shared interests.

One distinct feature of the restructuring of work and employment in recent times has been a two-fold differentiation. At one extreme, the creation of new skills and the blurring of the manual/white-collar divide have had two important consequences. These trends have generated a significant category of 'winners' from the process of technological and organisational change: a new elite probably unresponsive to the appeals of traditional trade unionism; conversely there has been a rapid growth of a 'white-collar proletariat' (often female) whose security and prospects depend on the employer's goodwill. At the other extreme, there has been a substantial growth of precarious and 'atypical' forms of employment, particularly with the decline of manufacturing, the cutbacks in the public sector, and the expansion of an array of private-sector services. This peripheral workforce has in most countries proved painfully difficult to unionise, if indeed unions have even made the attempt. Unions face difficult choices in terms of the constituencies they seek to represent: they can either stick with a declining core, attempt to address the special interests (and advantages) of the new 'elite', or struggle to represent the periphery; but it is an enormous challenge to develop strategies which point effectively in all directions. Certainly this cannot be achieved by rhetorical assertions of a unity of interests.

Increased differentiation links to the issue of individualism. In many European countries it has become common to argue that one of the key problems confronting trade unions has been a socio-cultural transformation whereby traditional working-

class values of collectivism have given way to more individualistic orientations. In one sense this argument is trite and simplistic. Collectivism has never represented an alternative to individual interests and individual identities: trade unionism has traditionally provided a pooling of resources allowing workers more effectively to defend and advance their personal interests. While union members may indeed have been conscious of common occupational or employmental interests, this did not negate their individual circumstances and projects. Trade unions have rarely been able to rely on a spontaneous urge to collectivism: to integrate diversity into an organisation with a common set of objectives has been a task to accomplish, and with no guarantee of success.

This said, it is plausible to argue that the task has become more difficult in recent times. There is a stereotype of the traditional proletarian status which emphasises a common work situation, an integrated and homogeneous local community, and a limited repertoire of shared cultural and social pursuits. Though exaggerated, this stereotype does identify a core of historical reality, particularly in the single-industry manual working-class milieux in which the 'modern' mass trade unionism had its strongest roots. By contrast, in contemporary society the spatial location and social organisation of work, residence, consumption and sociability have become highly differentiated. Today the typical employee may live a considerable distance from fellow-workers, possess a largely 'privatised' domestic life or a circle of friends unconnected with work, and pursue cultural or recreational interests quite different from those of other employees in the same workplace. This disjuncture between work and community (or indeed the destruction of community in much of its traditional meaning) entails the loss of many of the localised networks which strengthened the supports of union membership (and in some cases made the local union almost a 'total institution').

In consequence, trade unionism seems confronted with two main options. One is to develop a much more calculative attachment based on a narrowly specified set of occupational interests. The other is to appeal to a more diffuse set of interests which transcend local and particularistic identities: the classic project of 'social movement unionism' (Johnson, 1994; Waterman, 1993).

Market Coercion

In most western European countries, 'modern' systems of industrial relations became consolidated around the middle of this century as a key element in post-war settlements which though nation-specific contained many common features. Their foundation was the existence of relative job security (at least for a substantial core of primarily male manufacturing workers in larger firms) under macroeconomic conditions of 'full' employment, often buttressed by legal supports. This was in turn facilitated by stable or expanding demand in key product markets and by institutional and other constraints on destructive market competition. The organised capitalism which achieved its high point in the 1950s and 1960s helped establish trade unions as central actors in a variety of national systems of employment regulation (Standing, 1997).

The 'social market economy' which in different forms characterised post-war western Europe (even if the term itself was exclusively German) is challenged by the intensified competitive restructuring of national economies (Mahnkopf and Altvater, 1995). Many writers refer to a process of globalisation, and although this term has been challenged (Boyer and Drache, 1997; Hirst and Thompson, 1996) a transnational concentration and centralisation of capital certainly has occurred, though primarily within separate world areas (North America, Europe, the Asian Pacific). In Europe this has been reflected (as was indeed one of the aims of the Single Market project) in an acceleration of foreign direct investment between EU countries and a rapid process of corporate consolidation through mergers, take-overs and joint ventures.

The past dozen years have witnessed the rise of the 'Euro-company' (Marginson and Sisson, 1996) as a specific type of multinational corporation (MNC). In previous decades, the 'problem of MNCs' for European trade unions was relatively narrow and specific: how to contain foreign-owned (primarily American) enterprises within the regulatory frameworks of national industrial relations systems. In the 1990s the problem has become broader and more serious: the internationalisation of significant

segments of 'national capital' and the potential abdication of key companies from the role of interlocutor within a national system of 'social partnership'. The most dramatic instance, perhaps, is the case of Sweden: the major employers in effect 'joined' the EU long before the country's formal accession, and demolished the classic centralised 'Swedish model' of industrial relations the better to pursue more company-specific and internationalised employment policies. In most other European countries, analogous pressures are apparent. The growing importance of the Euro-company threatens established forms of cross-company standardisation and solidarity while at the same time necessitating new forms of cross-national co-ordination on the part of labour.

The visible hand of the MNCs interacts with the increasingly coercive invisible hand of finance capital. The last two decades have seen a radical transformation involving: the liberalisation and deregulation of international capital and currency markets; the acceleration of transactions (to the point of virtual instantaneity) as a result of advances in information and telecommunications technologies; and the breakdown of the American-dominated post-war system of international monetary stabilisation. The result is a highly volatile pattern of capital flows. Unpredictable (speculative) fluctuations in the paper values of company shares or national currencies are translated into disruptive oscillations in the physical economy.

The matrix for the formative period of capitalist industrialisation, and for the various Keynesian-influenced systems of post-war macroeconomic management, was the regulatory capacity of the nation-state. As Rogers has argued (1995: 370), the scope for pressure on the state to deliver material benefits of general application itself encouraged 'the political project of uniting across differences'. It is indeed true that in most European economies the pivotal importance of the export sector ensured that industrial relations policies were consistent with international competitiveness. Nevertheless the national state, and the parties to collective bargaining, could address the labour market as a more or less closed system. The consequence of globalisation is that market dynamics are increasingly subject to exogenous determination: the 'confidence' of the institutions and agents of international financial transactions sets new, onerous

and often unpredictable constraints on the agenda of national industrial relations (Streeck, 1992). It also means that the attraction to (some) employers of nationally co-ordinated collective bargaining as a means of 'taking wages out of competition' has been eroded (Jacoby 1995: 8).

Another significant feature of intensified market coercion is the internal restructuring of the firm. The traditional large company was hierarchically organised with a high degree of internal standardisation. This structure (which the development, within the largest firms, of divisionalisation by product only partially modified) was conducive to similarly standardised and bureaucratic forms of collective employment regulation. Corporate structure encouraged a particular type of employee solidarity. By contrast, current principles of business organisation have fragmented the terrain of collective action. Increasingly — though faster in some countries than in others — the centralised firm has given way to the 'hollow company' (Sabel, 1992). This process has three key elements: the externalisation through sub-contracting and franchising of many of the non-core functions of the firm; the formal separation of conglomerate companies into legally differentiated subsidiaries; and the devolution of decision-making responsibility to a network of business units. The common characteristic of these changes is the spread of market relationships within the boundaries of the firm, imposing accountancy criteria as the key performance indicators and setting the various sub-units in competition one with another (Coller, 1996; Mueller, 1996).

Intensified competitive pressures have reconstituted the patterns of employment security and insecurity. In the past, in most countries, there has been a rather close mapping between regulation by collective bargaining and a relatively secure labour market position. Union organisation and bargaining strength were facilitated by, and in turn reinforced, internal labour markets which protected the core workforce from the employer's ability to hire and fire at will. Conversely, in many countries there existed a substantial secondary labour market with far weaker (or non-existent) collective regulation, where employment was far more casualised. (A third category, those who constituted an occupational elite, were often also weakly covered by collective bargaining but possessed scarce professional

qualifications which provided relative autonomy from adverse market forces.) The significance of intensified product market competition is that the link between collective regulation and employment security is more fundamentally ruptured: the protection of the internal labour market is undermined if the whole workplace becomes vulnerable to radical job loss or total closure. A substantial proportion of collectivised employees now constitutes an endangered labour force. To the extent that market forces or their proxies have been imposed in public employment, moreover, this vulnerability encompasses sectors previously completely protected from the vagaries of product competition and production rationalisation.

The industrial relations consequences involve at least three major challenges to the trade union role in interest representation. First, there are strong pressures to engage in concession bargaining in the interests of enhanced competitiveness: trading off employment guarantees for restraint in pay bargaining (or even real wage reductions), agreement to changes in the organisation of production which conflict with established protective regulations, and/or more general acceptance of managerial authority. Unions which in previous decades based their appeal to workers on their ability to win tangible improvements in pay and working conditions have a far harder task to justify their existence if obliged to accept the reversal of their former achievements.

Second, the endangered status of unionised companies and workplaces encourages enterprise egoism: survival of the establishment assuming overriding importance for local negotiators. The outcome can become a cumulative undercutting of national/sectoral regulatory standards: a process often deliberately encouraged by MNCs with their ability to 'benchmark' the performance of their various subsidiaries and to base investment (and disinvestment) decisions on relative compliance with management requirements. If the workforce of each production unit becomes driven by the demands of mutual competition, the logical result is both intra- and international social dumping.

Third, within as well as between workforces the process of interest representation more sharply differentiates (relative) winners and (absolute) losers. For employees, the response to increasingly

coercive market pressures seems to involve a negative-sum game. The logic of market relations is that competition reinforces disparities of power within as well as between classes. In the distribution of the costs of competitive restructuring, trade unions' own internal balance of power is likely to favour the relatively advantaged at the expense of the most insecure.

The Eclipse of Egalitarianism

In most countries the rise and consolidation of national labour movements involved clear egalitarian commitments: to a narrowing of income differentials, progressive taxation policy, and universal entitlement to social benefits and services. In many ways, one of the most impressive testimonies to the strength of solidaristic principles was the degree to which working-class organisations drawing their cadres of activists and leaders from the better educated, higher paid and more secure categories of the labour force nevertheless espoused policies of particular benefit to the less advantaged. Sectional interests, in other words, were perceived as best pursued through a more general commitment to social justice. The post-war consolidation of the Keynesian welfare state — whether through the political victory of labour or the acceptance by conservative regimes of the need to reform and humanise capitalism — represented the apparent victory of these principles.

Paradoxically, the form of this victory contained the seeds of its own defeat. The egalitarian project in most European countries was a type of 'socialism within one class' (and often, within one gender). The central achievement of most welfare states was to redistribute income within the working population across the life-cycle (a process which has come to generate increasing tensions with a change in demographic structure). Egalitarian wage policy primarily involved the narrowing of differentials within bargaining groups, to the particular advantage of manual workers classified as lower-skilled. In itself this helped reduce gender differentials; but to the extent that employment has tended to be demarcated between (higher-paid) primarily male industries and (lower-paid) primarily female industries, in those countries where the most

important level of collective bargaining was the industry or sector then inequalities tended to remain large. There is also evidence that recent decentralisation of collective bargaining has been associated with the blockage, or even reversal, of gender equalisation. And indeed, the combination of economic stringency with an increased female rate of labour market participation almost inevitably makes the issue of male-female pay relativities potentially conflictual.

In most countries the post-war decades saw some narrowing of income differentials between manual workers and white-collar employees. Yet to the extent that these categories were separately represented for purposes of pay determination, levelling was often greater *within* each group; and indeed, with the shift in the numerical balance between the two types of employee, white-collar unions often articulated the demand for the defence or even expansion of differentials. In the Swedish case, the result was that the lower range of white-collar salaries might be higher than the top manual wages (Kjellberg, 1992). As technological change blurred the (always to some extent artificial) boundary between the two categories, consciousness of inequity was inevitable: with higher-skilled manual workers either escaping through reclassification to staff status or demanding a widening of pay differentials. Sweden is also a clear example of the erosion of the previously hegemonic role of manual worker unionism, with the share of LO in total union membership falling from 80 per cent in 1950 to 56 per cent today. Both trends shift the balance of power towards the better off.

In part, then, the retreat from egalitarianism has involved a revolt of the (relatively) advantaged against the particular manifestations (rising taxes, narrowing differentials) of the specific form of the egalitarian project. But the retreat also reflects the erosion of the classic ideological foundations of this project. The exhaustion of western communism, and the post-1989 collapse of the Soviet bloc, eliminated one point of reference for traditional notions of class solidarity. Ironically, indeed, in the 1990s the traditional class struggle rhetoric of the revolutionary left has commonly (most notably perhaps in Italy) lent endorsement to the sectional militancy of relatively privileged groups.

In the very period when most mainstream

communist parties came to embrace social democracy, social-democratic egalitarianism itself was in decline, for reasons both domestic and external. Domestically, most European social-democratic parties identified a causal link between declining electoral success and the dwindling of their traditional manual working-class base; the typical conclusion was the need to appeal to the expanding 'new middle class' by diluting or abandoning former policy commitments to generous and universal social welfare funded by high and progressive taxation and to forms of labour market intervention which offset the inegalitarian dynamics of market competition. Externally, intensified transnational competition seemed to spell the end of 'Keynesianism in one country'. As the French discovered at the beginning of the 1980s, and the Swedes at the end of the decade, the location decisions of MNCs and the speculative fluctuations of currency markets punished national governments whose defence of the Keynesian welfare state stood out against the general adoption of neo-liberal principles of fiscal rectitude. The pressures of regime competition — which underlie the German *Standort* debate of the 1990s — will be intensified by monetary union within the framework defined by the Maastricht convergence criteria. Having endorsed the Maastricht project, European social-democratic parties are weakly placed to propagate a programmatic alternative to the neo-liberalism which is at its core.

Imagining Alternatives: Towards Organic Solidarity?

If solidarity is to survive, it must be re-invented. Here too, we may recall Durkheim and his conception of a better integrated social order based on flexible coordination of individuals who were both more differentiated and (as a necessary consequence) more interdependent. His vision (indeed excessively idealised) of 'organic solidarity' was expressed in the insistence that 'society becomes more capable of collective movement, at the same time that each of its elements has more freedom of movement' (Durkheim 1933: 131). The task of moving from an old model of mechanical solidarity to a new model of organic solidarity – or as Heckscher (1988: 177) puts

it, 'a kind of unionism that replaces organizational conformity with coordinated diversity' – demands new efforts of imagination.

Any project aiming to create such a model must recognise and respect differentiations of circumstances and interests: within the constituencies of individual trade unions, between unions within national labour movements, between workers in different countries. The alignment and integration of diverse interests is a complex and difficult task which requires continuous processes of negotiation; real solidarity cannot be imposed by administrative fiat, or even by majority vote.

To construct trade union programmes with which vertically and horizontally differentiated groups of workers can identify requires a sensitive redefinition of *what* interests are represented. If on the one hand unions must be alert and receptive to (possibly altered) expectations and aspirations on the part of actual and potential members, on the other a priority must be to construct an agenda which can unite rather than divide. The representation of workers' interests – and their *definition*, which is necessarily a prior process – has never been straightforward. Building collective solidarity is in part a question of organisational capacity, but more fundamentally it is part of a battle of ideas. The crisis of traditional trade unionism is reflected not only in the more obvious indicators of loss of strength and efficacy, but also in the exhaustion of a traditional discourse and a failure to respond to new ideological challenges. It is those whose projects are hostile to what unions stand for who have set the agenda of the past decades. Unions have to recapture the ideological initiative.

As a starting point, the labour market perspectives of the 'mass worker' with a standard model of full-time employment, firm-specific job security and limited scope for occupational advancement can no longer dictate the central content of bargaining policy. Themes of crucial relevance for contemporary trade unionism are those of flexibility, security and opportunity. These concepts have inspired the offensive of employers and the political right (many of the latter wearing the clothes of social democracy); they must be reclaimed for different purposes.

Flexibility is of course primarily a slogan of those who wish to weaken and restrict labour market

protections, making workers more disposable and more adaptable to the changing requirements of the employer. Yet flexibility can have alternative meanings. The 1970s objective of 'humanisation of work' was in essence a claim for flexibility in the interests of workers through the human-centred application of technologies, the adaptation of task cycles and work speeds to fit workers' own rhythms, the introduction of new types of individual and collective autonomy in the control of the labour process. This agenda has in large measure been hi-jacked as part of the new managerialism of the 1980s and 1990s (with its mendacious rhetoric of 'empowerment', 'teamwork' and 'human resource development'). Can unions recapture the initiative? A key issue in the contemporary world of work, in addition to those raised by industrial workers and their unions a quarter-century ago, is that of time-sovereignty: the temporal linkages between employment, leisure and domestic life; the ability to influence the patterns of the working day, week, year and lifetime. There is a worker-oriented meaning of flexible working time which can directly confront that of the employers — and which offers new potential for integrating very different types of employee interest. So too with other dimensions of flexibility; rigidity and standardisation were impositions of a particular model of capitalist work organisation; to the extent that some of the features of Taylorist-Fordist systems have lost their attractions to employers, space exists for unions to mobilise support for radical alternatives which transcend some of the divisions within the working class.

For example, changes in the organisation of production and the employment relationship (such as teamworking, quality circles, performance related pay, personalised contracts) are often accompanied by a managerial propaganda offensive in which 'empowerment' is a central rhetorical device. Dr Goebbels would have been proud of such discourse, which provides a 'democratic' gloss to employer efforts to intensify production pressures, cut staffing numbers and undermine traditional forms of collective regulation. The 'new workplace' is one in which employees often have increased responsibilities but always with reduced power. By focusing their own demands and activities on this contradiction, trade unions have the potential to address current worker discontents in ways which generalise fragmented experiences and permit new

forms of solidarity in the pursuit of *genuine* empowerment.

The resurgence of market coercion is causally related to a massive growth of insecurity. Part of the function of trade unionism is to resist such trends. To the extent that such resistance is company- or sector-specific, however, its consequences may well prove divisive. The fight for company-level security, if successful, by stabilising the position of 'insiders' may make the labour market situation of 'outsiders' even more precarious. Where public employees struggle to retain protections which in the private sector were lost a decade ago, their unions may be seen as defenders of sectional privilege. (It may have been only because of very distinctive political circumstances that the public-sector strikes in France in 1995 and 1996 evoked considerable popular support.)

In constructing an agenda which links the interests of the precarious, the unemployed and the relatively secure, it is again possible to seek a distinctive trade union application of current rhetoric which is often used mendaciously. One concept which has become increasingly popular among policy-makers is 'employability': the argument is that individuals can no longer anticipate unbroken employment within a single organisation but can avoid labour market vulnerability by acquiring valued competences (including adaptability). Commonly this rhetoric is no more than a means of individualising the problem of unemployment and deficient job opportunities and scapegoating the unemployed for their own marginalisation. Evidently, a purely supply-side labour market policy will result primarily in a more qualified cohort of unemployed (and perhaps in a demographic shift in the structure of employment and unemployment). However, the concept of employability is in principle one which can be made central to trade union policy, in ways which address what Leisink (1993, 1996) calls 'occupational interests'. This would imply the coordination and integration of demands which unions have indeed often embraced: first, for enhanced individual entitlements to education and training, and for flexible opportunities to benefit from these throughout the working life; second, for more effective (and *worker-oriented*) provision both by employers and by education and training institutions; third, for demand-side policies to encourage employment growth and, no less importantly, to

provide *appropriate* employment opportunities for 'upskilled' workers.

Part of the difficulty is that these demands address different interlocutors and involve different levels of initiative, and hence may fail through lack of coordination. (To take a concrete example: the imaginative and innovative proposals of IG Metall's *Tarifreform 2000* were overwhelmed by the macroeconomic problems affecting the German labour market after unification.) The issue of policy formulation thus links to that of organisational capacity. Yet it is surely essential that to address workers' current consciousness of extreme job insecurity, trade unions develop programmes which offer hope of real employment opportunity yet do so in a non-divisive manner. The idea of employability is one which could unite rather than divide. But to achieve this, trade unions must develop new means of articulation with workers' current preoccupations as well as new persuasive capacities.

This connects to the third theme identified: opportunity. Again, this is a concept which has been appropriated by the right but should be reclaimed for the labour movement. For most of the twentieth century, the core workforce which formed the main basis of trade unionism achieved their employment status through the dull compulsion of circumstance. Career advancement and self-directed occupational mobility are aspirations increasingly salient for unions' actual and potential constituencies. The weakening of the ties to the existing occupation and employer is however emancipating only to the extent that real and preferable alternatives are open. The choice among alternative options is an individual project, but one which is illusory unless a genuine and favourable *structure of opportunities* exists. To enhance the opportunity structure is necessarily a collective project, one which challenges both employers' discretion and the anarchy of market forces. In many ways a redefinition of the traditional function of trade unionism, this is another key dimension of a union agenda which can appeal to diverse constituencies in solidaristic fashion.

The logic of all these themes is the reassertion of rights of labour as against the imperatives of capital. Many of the most effective interventions by European unions in the last decade represent partial efforts to articulate a new discourse of workers' rights. To regain the initiative, and to provide the foundation

for new forms of solidarity, European labour movements need to develop these aspects of their programmes in more ambitious and more systematic ways. What is at issue is nothing less than that much abused notion, a new hegemonic project.

To be more than mere paper interventions, such initiatives must connect to a reformulation of the *how* of trade union representation (Accornero, 1992). Organisational forms are inherited from the past and institutionally embedded; while some adaptations have been occurring and others may be pursued, radical transformation cannot be anticipated. More may however be feasible in terms of organisational capacity, democracy and activism. In an epoch when the traditional arena of trade union intervention — the national/sectoral level — has diminished in relevance in the face of challenges from above (global market forces and transnational capital) and below (decentralisation to the individual company and workplace), traditional recipes are often ineffective. Current challenges evidently pose new demands in respect of union intelligence. Knowledge by officials and activists of union organisations, policies and activities in other countries is uneven; some unions and confederations possess significant international departments, in others there are minimal resources. European-level organisations possess extremely restricted capacity either to influence transnational capital or the EU decision-makers, or to communicate with the members whom they in theory represent. Even if it were financially possible to satisfy these requirements by a vast expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus of international trade unionism, this would scarcely be a desirable solution. What is necessary is the development of new channels for the production and communication of trade union intelligence.

This links to the issues of strategic leadership and democratic activism. It is easy to recognise that an urgent current need is for new models of transnational solidarity and for enhanced capacity for transnational intervention. But neither can be manufactured from above. The dual challenge is to formulate more effective processes of strategic direction while sustaining and enhancing the scope for initiative and mobilisation at the base, to develop *both* stronger centralised structures *and* the mechanisms for more vigorous grassroots participation: which entails new kinds of *articulation* between the various levels of union organisation,

representation and action.

Within the European Union, one of the more fatuous of recent rhetorical devices is the idea of 'social dialogue'. Much time and energy are spent by representatives of European labour in discussion with their counterparts on the employer side. Very exceptionally indeed this results in an agreement, couched in such general terms and with such limited content as to contain little of practical significance. Rather more frequently, discussions result in a 'joint opinion'. It may indeed be comforting (or perhaps not!) to know that union representatives may at times be able to align their opinions with those of employers; but the effect in the real world is imperceptible. But *within* and *between* trade unions themselves, the pursuit of dialogue and the search for common opinion are vital requirements. Hence the task of European trade unions today may be encapsulated in the slogan: *develop the internal social dialogue*! Enhanced organisational capacity and organic solidarity demand a high level of multi-directional discussion, communication and understanding. To be effective at international level, above all else, trade unionism must draw on the experience at national level of efforts to reconstitute unions as discursive organisations which foster interactive internal relationships and serve more as networks than as hierarchies.

Finally, modern information technologies offer the potential for labour movements to break out of the iron cage which for so long has trapped them in organisational structures which mimic those of capital. The Liverpool dockers, in their long struggle against a ruthless employer, have used e-mail and the world-wide web to great effect in campaigning for international solidarity. In more routine ways, intelligent use of new modes of information and communication can assist in the work of consciousness building and representation (Müller, 1996). With imagination, unions may transform themselves and build an emancipatory potential for labour in the new millennium. Forward to the 'virtual trade union' of the future!

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Back to the top