

WESTERN EUROPEAN TRADE UNIONISM AT 2000

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Tuesday, 30 November 1999, was not 'business as usual' in France. That day saw between 80,000 and 120,000 French bank workers—more than at any time since 1974—staging a national one-day strike. Their aim was to force the main high-street banks to renew a national collective agreement and, according to the unions, 30,000 of them demonstrated in Paris alone with smaller demonstrations in all French cities.¹ The same Tuesday saw some nine hundred miners riot outside the Prefecture in Metz in Eastern France to force the government to make the loss-making nationalized French coal company increase its 2000 wage offer above 0.5%. At Marseille's Prefecture it was the same tune but a different song. There, another 30,000 people demonstrated peacefully for a Christmas bonus for the unemployed before blocking one of the city's major roads. Meanwhile, in Paris and another twenty cities, several thousands more were also demonstrating for a tougher 35-hour-week law.²

This illustration does not prove that most French or European workers and their unions are returning to their former militancy. As we shall see this is very far from the case. But this one day of mobilization simply reminds us that Europe's working classes are far from being at an all time low and that Europe's socio-political future remains contested. There are huge and growing pressures for Western Europe to adapt to the practices and mores of American managerial and financial capitalism. Yet the positive political consequences of the mid-century defeat of European authoritarian capitalism, of the restraints that this subsequently imposed on Europe's capitalist classes, of the experiences of Christian Democratic and/or Social Democratic governments vying to attract

workers' votes, and of the wave of collective worker mobilizations of the 1970s are still present.

The survival of restraints on neoliberalism in most European countries owes much to their institutionalization after the Second World War and to Europe's divided post-war history. The latter particularly influenced the largely dominant Christian and Social Democratic parties to try to counteract the Stalinized rhetoric of workers' rights that emanated from Eastern Europe with substantial reforms which have by no means yet been completely undone. One clear result has been that unlike during the depressions of the 1880s and 1890s or the 1930s, the deep and scarring economic recession and transformations of the 1980s and 1990s did not witness rising working-class mortality. Indeed, for the first time Europe's response to a major capitalist crisis was not to go to war but instead, despite the continuous protests of sections of the capitalist class, to effect some small redistributions of income (albeit generally between workers rather than by taking from the capitalist class) to offset the worst effects of joblessness. Of course, in the 1990s, particularly since the defeat of Soviet Communism and re-emergence of American hegemony, international capital's remote power over European workers has been growing. Yet, while the glow of social and economic democracy is dimmer in Western Europe than a quarter of a century ago, by comparison with the first half of the century—and with virtually the whole of working people's previous history—it cannot seriously be said to have been completely extinguished. Enough light remains, certainly, to show the way ahead to those who want to see.

In focusing this essay on Western European trade unionism we are obviously leaving out much. The European Union's (EU) fifteen states, even with their population of 369 million and employed labour force of 152 million people,³ nevertheless only account for half the states that lie west of the Urals. And we are well aware that trade unionism is only one element within the complex process by which the working-class presence makes itself felt at the end of the millennium. Moreover, even in the EU, each country's class structures, and the articulations between social classes, are almost all so different that it is difficult to convey an idea of the evolution of these relations in any overall sense.⁴ All we want to do here is provide some sense of the experience of the Western European working classes through observations of the evolution of their trade union movements.

We will look most specifically at four cases, each reflecting the main European types of trade union movement which are often distinguished from each other: the 'Latin' confrontational model (France), the liberal-voluntarist model (UK), the social-democratic model (Sweden) and the neo-corporatist-conservative model (Germany).⁵ But we shall especially concentrate on a comparison of only two labour movements: the French, which could be viewed as one of those which has changed least over the last twenty-five years, and the British, which, now currently experiencing the lowest levels of strike action since records began, can be seen to have changed most.⁶ The British and

the French trade-union movements may be seen as being at opposite ends of a trade-union spectrum ranging from those most influenced by market or business unionism to those where class struggle unionism remains strongest. It would be wrong, however, to see a simple bipolar trade-union ideological spectrum in Europe. Richard Hyman is right to call for greater sensitivity to the complexities of trade-union ideological orientation, and to the pluralistic and contested character of European trade unionism. He points to the continuing existence of a distinct ideological dimension associated with social integration, which embraces commitments to social justice, 'fairness' and class harmony, and notes that all three (market, social integration and class struggle) ideological orientations are present in all movements, and combine in varying alliance patterns.⁷ My own recent comparative study of bank trade-union activists, for instance, found that British trade unionism predominantly combines market and social integration orientations, while French mainly combined those based on class-struggle and social-integration ideologies.⁸

We shall begin with an examination of the processes of occupational and organizational transformation that have restructured European workers' lives over the last quarter-century, the products of the common responses of European capitalisms to the world economic slowdown since the 1970s, and of the fragmentation of the industrial manual working class and the growth in the service sector and white-collar working classes. We will then look at the broad lines of the trade-union crisis that resulted. Nearly one-half of Western Europe's employed workers were unionized twenty-five years ago, but today only roughly one-third are, half of whom work in the shrinking public sector. In a slowly growing labour market the consequence has been a loss of influence over governments and employers, and a marked overall decline in mobilizing capacity, particularly over national sectoral employment regulation.

Yet the ebbing of trade union influence is a complex process. We shall illustrate this in terms of the processes of change in France and Britain. In France, while trade-union membership has fallen significantly since the decade of militancy after 1968, the mass public sector strike wave of 1995 confounded the pundits who had predicted the end of class-struggle in France.⁹ This has been followed by an increase in private-sector strikes in 1999 and the first quarter of 2000 in response to growing pressure from capital to eliminate the 'French exception' shown starkly in the comparatively low share of profits within French GDP. By contrast, the British trade unions seem not yet to have recovered from their significant defeat in the miner's strike of 1984-5 and remain diminished as a social force in terms of numbers as well as ideologically. Socialists, we shall suggest in conclusion, need to reflect on the different experiences of France and the UK in terms of their implications for future patterns of control and conflict, and of the possible contributions Europe's working classes can still make to fundamental political and social change.

THE EUROPEAN WORKING CLASS AND THE
CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

The work carried out by Europeans has changed considerably over the last quarter-century. Four main trends are worth emphasizing here, in the context of trying to better understand the processes of working-class formation. First, work has tended to become physically lighter and less dangerous to the health. In part this is reflected in the virtual disappearance of agricultural employment and the shift from jobs in mining and heavy industry to jobs in service industries. Whereas a quarter of a century ago one in ten worked in agriculture and four out of ten in industry, two out of every three jobs in Europe today are in the service sector. These changes are captured in Table 1.

Table 1: Structural Change in Work, 1974–1998 (ranked by the size of the agricultural work-force in 1974).

	Percentage of persons in civilian employment					
	Services		Industry		Agriculture	
	1974	1998	1974	1998	1974	1998
UK	55.1	71.4	42.0	26.6	2.8	1.7
Sweden	48.3	71.0	37.0	25.9	6.7	3.0
Germany*	46.3	62.8	46.7	34.4	7.0	2.8
France	49.9	69.2	39.4	26.4	10.6	4.4
EU15	48.9	65.5	40.4	29.6	11.7	4.7

*Germany in 1974 was just West Germany; in 1998 it is reunified Germany.

Sources: for 1974 see OECD, *Historical Statistics: 1960–1994*, Paris: OECD, 1996; for 1998 see Eurostat, *Enquête sur les forces de travail: Résultats 1998*, Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2000.

This change obviously affected the kinds of jobs being done. It is often forgotten that both white-collar and manual workers are essential to virtually all production and service tasks. But Table 2 shows how much more dependent Europe's service sector is upon white-collar jobs than is its industrial sector.

The shift from industry to services has huge consequences on the nature of work and on the socialization processes into work. One of the effects for working-class formation arising from the shift from industry to services and to lighter work was that the classic communities associated with male manual workers, of dockers, steelworkers and miners, disappeared. At the same time service-sector work sites tended to be smaller than industrial sites, which in any case were shrinking in size. By 1992 only one third of the total EU work-force was still employed in companies with 250 or more workers, those traditionally most closely associated with high levels of union density and working-class collectivism generally.

Table 2: Occupational Composition of Salaried Employment in EU Manufacturing and Services, 1995.

	Manufacturing (%)	Services (%)
Managers, legislators and senior officials	4.8	8.3
Professionals	6.4	17.4
Technicians	10.2	15.9
Clerks	11.2	17.2
Total 'White-collar' occupations	32.6	58.8
Service workers	3.1	19.0
Craft and related trades	33.3	6.2
Plant & machine operators and assemblers	22.3	5.5
Elementary occupations	8.8	10.5
Total 'Manual' occupations	67.5	41.2

Source: European Commission, *Panorama of EU Industry*, 1997, Luxembourg: European Commission, 1997.

The second significant trend is that a growing proportion of this changing composition of collective work is now being carried out by women. Strongly implanted in Europe's informal economy a century earlier, the last quarter of the century has seen a significant return of women to active economic participation. Table 3 charts these changes between 1974 and 1994.

Table 3: Women's Share (%) of the European Labour Force, 1974–1994 (ranked by level of participation in 1974).

	1974	1994
France	37.0	43.8
UK	37.4	43.7
Germany*	37.5	42.4
Sweden	41.8	48.0
EU15	34.8	41.6

*Germany in 1974 was just West Germany; in 1998 it is reunified Germany.

Source: OECD, *Historical Statistics: 1960–1994*, Paris: OECD, 1996.

By 1998 women made up 22.6% of all EU industrial employment, and 48.8% of all service sector employment.¹⁰ The implication of the trend towards equal participation in paid employment for the processes of working-class formation are twofold: first, the ideology of the 'male breadwinner' is becoming less materially based, with continuing tensions and collective struggles around gender inequalities (and a growing alienation of young male manual workers); while

second, paid work itself is increasingly sharing space at the centre of the process of working-class formation with the family and wider non-work social experiences (like education, old age and the processes of consumption of goods and services), around which women have traditionally mobilized.

Table 4: Employment Structure (%) in France, the UK, Germany and Sweden, 1998.

	France	Germany	Sweden	UK
Directors, senior managers	7.7	5.7	4.9	15.0
Professional, intellectual, scientific (highly skilled)	10.4	12.9	15.1	15.4
Intermediate professions	17.1	19.9	20.1	8.5
Administrative staff	14.2	12.7	10.8	16.3
Personal services and sales staff	12.3	11.3	17.7	14.7
Largely white-collar %	61.7	62.5	68.6	69.9
Artisans and skilled workers	13.5	18.2	12.0	12.1
Drivers and assembly workers (semi-skilled)	10.9	7.5	10.9	8.2
Unskilled manual and white-collar workers	7.8	7.5	5.2	8.1
Largely manual %	32.3	33.2	28.1	28.4
Total numbers in employment (million)	22.5m	33.5m	3.9m	26.9m

Source: Eurostat, *Enquête sur les forces de travail: Résultats 1998*, Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2000.

The third important trend for working-class formation is that work has tended to become more 'managerial'. Much larger proportions of the work-force are now engaged in co-ordinating tasks within capitalism (in administration, buying, sales, marketing, the media, consulting, supervision, etc.) rather than in direct production. Thus in France whereas employers and senior managers (*cadres supérieurs*) were just 7.6% of the work-force in 1975, these same two categories comprised 12.8% by 1998.¹¹ If the definition is widened to include both 'management' and 'professional and related supporting management and administration' occupations in the UK, their proportions rose from 12.3% in 1979 to 17% by 1988, and after a decade of supposed 'managerial layering' in 1998 were still at 16%.¹² The structure of European employment in our four target countries confirms both the dominance of white-collar occupations in national employment, and the high proportions of the combined categories of managers and highly-skilled white-collar workers. The evidence is displayed in Table 4.

In all four countries the numbers of managers and highly-skilled white-

collar workers either equalled (as in Germany) or exceeded the numbers of skilled workers—who constitute a major traditional organizing centre of trade unionism. One estimate suggests that by 2000 some sixteen million ‘managers’ were employed within the fifteen EU states, and where they have received training it has been largely in American-style managerialism. While it is the case that for some of these managers, as with many highly-skilled white-collar workers (including this writer), new technology and the diversification of work has actually made it more intellectually interesting and engaging than twenty-five years ago, for many others this is at best only partly true. These ‘managers’ frequently have little direct autonomy, as the new technologies have increasingly permitted their jobs to be ‘Taylorized’.¹³ By some accounts their experiences of exploitation are not that different from those of less-skilled and less-well-rewarded workers with much less autonomy. A national survey of 20,000 managerial and professional workers in BT, Britain’s flagship telecommunications giant, for example, found in 1999 that 50% worked over 46 hours a week (10% more than 55), 40% said they suffered from stress and 23% had experienced or witnessed bullying at work (a further 7% were unsure).¹⁴ Yet the lack of any clear alternative to the ideology of competitiveness, means that most of these managers simply accept the longer hours and greater stress and pressure that is being imposed on them. Moreover, managers in the private sector have fairly consistently supported Europe’s flirtation with new right politics in the 1980s and 1990s, and have looked to sectional market-ideology trade unionism to defend their privileges rather than to broader alliances involving other white-collar or even manual workers. On the other hand, managers in public sector jobs, particularly in Sweden and most spectacularly in France in December 1995, have been more ambivalent as to market ideology and what it means in terms of their collective identity.

The fourth change in work is a trend towards increased job insecurity and ‘atypical’ work schedules—on shifts, at night, at weekends, part-time, seasonally, on fixed-term contracts and on call-out. A minimum fixed-term contract where a worker signs a ‘new’ contract every 30 minutes has even been adopted by a sub-contractor of France Télécom to provide temporary call centre cover for peak traffic.¹⁵ This in some ways represents a return to the liberalism of the end of the nineteenth century. Large and growing proportions of European workers (particularly women and the ethnic minority workers) do not have permanent, standard hours jobs. Many managers and skilled white-collar workers, too, now experience job insecurity, although it is of a substantially different nature to that experienced by intermediate professionals, administrative workers and semi-skilled and unskilled workers who (as we see from Table 4) together make up 50% of French employment, 47.6% of the German, 47% of the Swedish and 41.1% of the British.

The expansion in part-time working is highlighted in Table 5. While the rise in the proportion of those working part-time should, arithmetically, have

enabled the century-long decline in average working hours worked to continue over the last quarter-century, the reality is more complex.

Table 5: EU Part-time Working by Persons in Employment, 1979–1998, (ranked by 1998 part-time proportion) and Average Part-time Employee Hours.

	Part-time employment (% of all employment)		Average weekly part-time hours
	1979	1998	1996
UK	16.4	24.9	17.8
Sweden	23.6	23.2	23.9
Germany	11.4	18.3	18.8
France	8.2	17.3	22.7

Sources: for 1979 see Eurostat, *Labour Force Survey: 1979 Results*, Luxembourg: Eurostat, 1981; for 1996 part-time hours see Eurostat, *Labour Force Survey: 1996 Results*, Luxembourg: Eurostat, 1998; for 1998 see Eurostat, *Enquête sur les forces de travail: Résultats 1998*, Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2000.

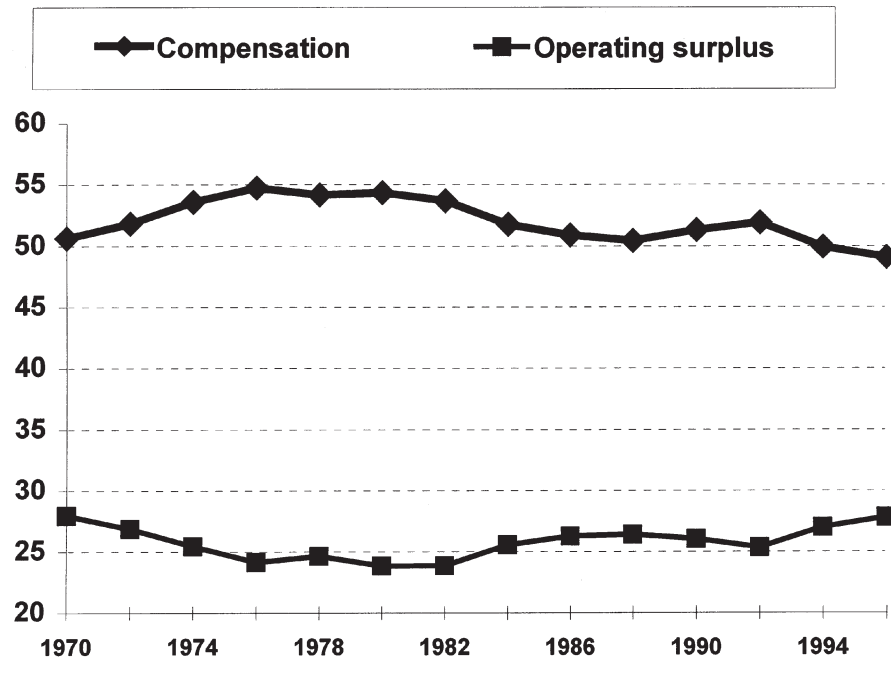
Despite rising unemployment the decline has really continued only in Germany, where part-time working increased considerably but where the unions also made a priority of responding to the recession by work sharing. Elsewhere, the experience generally followed that of the US, where the impact of the growth of part-time working was more than offset by the longer hours being worked by full-time workers. Table 6 shows that many European full-time workers were working longer hours in the mid-1990s than in the mid-1980s.

The growth in less secure forms of employment and in particular in socially disruptive forms of working—at night and on weekends—in the context of the shift from industrial to service-sector employment implies that many of the methods associated with continuous production flows are now being applied in the service sector. The logic of ‘just-in-time’ now dominates the provision of services ranging from rubbish collection to travel or life insurance. From the point of view of working-class formation the effects of the more extensive use of ‘flexible’ work schedules are ambiguous. On the one hand the generalization of precarious work, and in particular its concentration among women and ethnic minority workers, can permit greater understanding of the need for a collective response. On the other hand, ‘flexibility’ is a highly divisive and sophisticated labour-control system that often targets the most vulnerable, or renders the better organized more vulnerable, and frequently makes the physical organization of a collective identity extremely difficult.

While the four trends sketched above are having important consequences for

Figure 1: Share of GDP of OECD Europe Going to Workers (compensation) and to Capitalists (operating surplus), 1970–1996

Source: OECD, *National Accounts, Main Aggregates, 1960–1996*, Paris: OECD, 1998.



the occupational and class identities of Europe's trade unions, one other experience largely overwhelmed them during the 1980s and/or 1990s: the return of high levels of unemployment. Partly this was associated with economic restructuring away from industry, partly too, it was linked to the emergence of labour-saving technologies; but above all it was politically constructed. Europe's political parties, of right and left, adopted more or less monetarist strategies for coping with the slower rates of growth that followed the revaluing of commodity prices in the oil crises of the 1970s. Figure 1 traces the consequences of the new politics. It shows the changing class balance of GDP distribution in Western Europe's OECD member states between 1970 and 1996 as the operating surpluses available to Europe's capitalist classes first fall and then recover their 1970 levels, while the share of GDP going as compensation to European workers first rises to around 55% and then falls to under 50%, below where it stood in 1970.

In this readjustment, labour market flexibility, deregulation, privatization and deflation were all measures that were recommended (or required) by the IMF, OECD and eventually by the European Union itself. Table 7 provides a measure devised by Milton Friedman to assess over a range of fifteen policy

areas the extent to which individual countries moved towards 'economic freedom'.

Table 6: Average Working Hours in Selected European Countries and the US, 1970–1997 (ranked by increases in full-time workers' weekly hours, 1983–1993).

	Average hours actually worked per person in full-time or part-time employment per year				Changes in hours of full-timers
	1970	1979	1990	1997	1983–1993
US	1,836	1,905	1,943	1,966	+4.7
UK	1,821	1,773	1,731	+3.8	n/a
Sweden	1,641	1,451	1,480	1,552	+1.8*
France	1,962	1,813	1,668	1,656	+0.4
Germany§	1,885	1,699	1,557	1,503	–6.1

* = 1987–1994.

§ = Average hours actually worked per *employee* per year.

Sources: OECD, *Employment Outlook*, Paris: OECD, 1991 and 1998.

Table 7: Scores on Friedman's 'Economic Freedom' 1–10 ratings (ranked by extent of 'freedom' in 1995).

	1995 Rating	Initial Rating*
US	7.9	6.1a
Switzerland	7.4	7.0a
UK	7.3	4.6b
NL	6.5	5.5b
Ireland	6.5	4.1a
Germany	6.4	5.9a
France	6.1	3.6c
Denmark	5.9	3.7c
Sweden	5.9	3.5b
Italy	5.5	3.6c

* = Initial Ratings are for (a) 1975, (b) 1980 or (c) 1985.

Source: D. Henderson, *The Changing Fortunes of Economic Liberalism: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, Occasional Paper 108, London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1998.

Among the policies sacrificed along the road towards 'economic freedom' were those promoting full employment. This was not just an economic goal. The notion that Western European society had responsibilities to provide

employment and incomes arose during the shift to the left that occurred in the 1940s, and had been deeply embedded. However, at one point or another after 1980 the goal of full employment as the principal aim of macroeconomic policy was everywhere replaced with the target of low levels of price inflation. The result was that not only did the unions confront the four trends discussed above, they also confronted a massive rise in levels of European unemployment, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Standardized Average Unemployment Rates in Western Europe (% of total labour force), 1974–1997 (ranked by unemployment in 1974).

	1974–79	1980–89	1990–97
UK	5.0	10.0	8.8
France	4.5	10.8	11.2
Germany	3.2	5.9	7.9
Sweden	1.9	2.5	7.5

Source: OECD, *Unemployment Outlook*, Paris: OECD, 1991, 1998.

Conditions of exploitation and alienation clearly have not been eliminated for European workers. The ‘new’ capitalisms of Western Europe have not changed their spots. In this sense the ‘old’ working class has also not gone away. The relations of nearly three-quarters of the work-forces of Western Europe to capital remain distinct, inherently conflictual and are often disputed. However, the changing nature of work, its feminization, its managerialization and its increasing precariousness have had significant impact on working-class identities, posing severe problems for European trade unions.

THE IMPACT OF CHANGE ON EUROPEAN TRADE UNIONS

How then did Europe’s trade unions respond to the four trends discussed above delivered in a political climate where flexibility, deregulation, privatization and higher unemployment were all political weapons used to achieve increases in the share of GDP disposable to its capitalist classes? The unions had, after all, shifted to the left in the 1970s, as had society as a whole. It is important to remember that voting for left-wing parties across thirteen Western European countries only reached its postwar high of 36.8% in 1976–1980, up from its average 33.6% share in 1961–1965.¹⁶ Union movements that had traditionally been quite close to narrower, occupational business unionism, had been challenged from within by newer and broader visions. Common union demands throughout Western Europe in the 1970s included those for ‘workers’ control’, directly-elected workers’ directors, workers’ participation via union-controlled investment funds, for more protection against dismissal for workers’

representatives, for extensive regulation of multinational companies (the International Labour Organization even published a declaration on good multinational corporation practice) and of employment conditions generally, and for extensions of nationalization.

The harsher contexts of the 1980s and 1990s largely, but not entirely, effaced all of these aspirations. The few new progressive reforms already introduced into national laws were either left languishing or repealed by right-wing administrations, and the unions largely abandoned the advocacy of those reforms not yet realized. Trade-union tactics that had worked in periods of low unemployment seemed increasingly ineffective virtually everywhere. Only in Sweden did trade-union membership rise in the new era. Political pressure on the Social Democratic government ensured that government employment initially expanded to fill the gap created by contractions in the private sector, but even here unemployment in the 1990s was allowed to rise to 7.5%—nearly as high as in Germany and the UK. Nevertheless, the robust role played by the Ghent system in Sweden, whereby the unions were largely responsible for the administration of unemployment insurance, ensured that workers (manual, white-collar, skilled and unskilled) responded rationally to the rising threat of unemployment by joining unions. By 1995, 91% of Swedish wage and salaried workers were union members compared to 84% ten years earlier.¹⁷

Elsewhere the dimensions of the ensuing trade union crisis were similar not only in terms of falling union membership and density, but also in terms of an ageing membership, difficulties in feminizing in proportion to the rising share of women workers, problems of unionizing in smaller work-places and especially in the fast-expanding private service sector of the economy. The unions generally became less representative of the work-force, and often much less capable of mobilizing workers, either in terms of voting or in terms of strike action. According to ILO figures, union membership as a percentage of wage and salary earners had by 1995 fallen in the UK to 33% (from 46% in 1985), in the reunited Germany to 29% (from 35% in 1991), and in France to 9% (from 15% in 1985).¹⁸ In Britain's private sector, where firms increasingly decided against recognizing trade unions, the proportion of work-places of more than twenty-five workers which had at least one work-place union representative fell from 38% in 1980 to 17% in 1998.¹⁹ Table 9 shows these changes in union membership; strike rates (which fell everywhere apart from Germany where it remained at a very low level despite a small blip upwards after reunification), and collective bargaining coverage (which remained surprisingly resilient except in the UK).

But while formal national or sectoral collective agreements remained in place, their content tended to leave more and more of the detail to decentralized local enterprise bargaining. More European firms (at least outside the Scandinavian countries) are managing without unions. In larger establishments where unions cannot be avoided employers have increasingly embraced human resource management techniques for involving the unions in the

processes of company policy legitimization, and for persuading local union representatives to embrace a form of enterprise unionism. Thus in both Germany and France in the 1990s many works councils, although formally without negotiating rights on issues concerned with collective bargaining, have gradually become a conduit for 'agreements' that permit greater enterprise-level 'flexibility' than laid down in the nationally or regionally established collective agreement. In Britain the trade-union movement has officially embraced 'partnership' with the employers as a means of trying to secure continued recognition for its representative role.

Table 9: Trade Union Density, Strike Rates and Collective Bargaining, 1980–1994.

	Change (%) in trade union density, 1980–1994	Change (%) in strike rate, 1980/4–1990/3	Change (%) in collective bargaining, 1980–1994
France	–9	–41	+10
Germany	–7	+14	+1
Sweden	+11	–83	+3
UK	–16	–81	–23

Sources: OECD, *Employment Outlook*, Paris: OECD, 1997; Aligisakis, *International Labour Review*, 1997.

Not surprisingly, given these responses to the membership crisis, the unions also faced growing organizational problems. Levels of participation in the unions generally fell, although by how much is difficult to tell. Many unions offered discounted membership to part-time or young workers, and established women-only structures to try and increase their participation. In Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and Britain, packages of financial services, such as credit cards and insurance, were offered as incentives to join. In Germany, Denmark and Britain union leaders frequently responded to the gathering crisis by seeking to take over smaller unions or to merge. This process, of course, did little to appeal to those whose union membership reflected an occupational identity rather than the need for particular services. Membership has fallen but membership heterogeneity has increased, creating greater challenges for effective representation. In Britain between 1982 and 1994 the numbers of Trade Unions Congress (TUC)-affiliated unions fell from 105 to 68 and the total of their memberships fell from 11 million to 7.2 million (1.9 million of these members belonged to unions swallowed up in the 17 mergers between TUC affiliates).²⁰

The evidence to date is that, while these mergers may have guaranteed the pensions of the full-time officials of the unions concerned, they have not made a significant difference to resolving the trade-union crisis. They do, however,

have one important and potentially negative aspect: the muting or even suppression of traditions of dissent and pluralism within the merging unions. The Left inside the trade unions have (except in France) broadly supported mergers on the grounds of 'solidarity' and in the hope that they could strengthen union bargaining power. But they have then found themselves in a still more isolated minority situation in a larger union whose main post-merger purpose appears to be to try and survive the culture shock and power struggles brought on by the merger.

The decline in union membership appears to have slowed or stopped around the mid-1990s. This may be explained by three factors: first, the greater emphasis the unions are starting to place on organizing and recruitment and, related to this, a technological boost from the establishment of direct debit systems of receiving union dues which keeps those who are union members paying more regularly; second, a (possibly temporary) less unfavourable political climate for trade unionism, with most (and briefly in 1998 as many as thirteen) of the EU countries governed by left or centre-left parties; and third, the impact of the general economic recovery in Western Europe which helped lower unemployment and slow the job losses in union-strong industrial sectors.

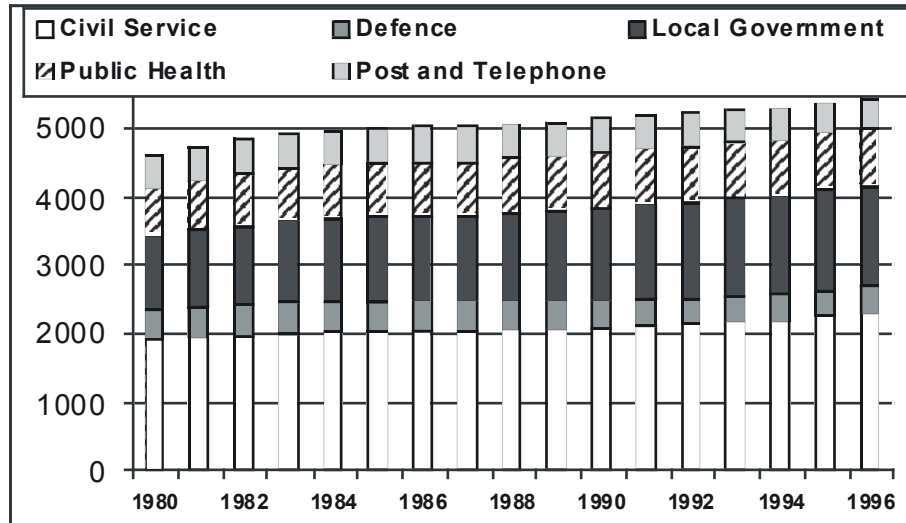
One further element should be added to the outline of a defensive and weak European trade-union response to the open assault being made upon it by capital over the last twenty-five years. This is the European Union dimension. This is not the place to debate whether Europe itself is a possible forum for mobilization, or how effective European social law is in terms of restraining capital. But it is necessary to record that one of the responses of the nationally weaker trade union movements to the crisis was to invest a little more in terms of resources and lobbying in trying to create a European social framework of employment regulation. Partly as a result, watered-down laws have been passed on a range of issues, among which the most significant are measures covering workers' redundancy rights, equal pay rights, consultation rights, working time, health and safety, part-time and temporary working conditions. Rights to organize or to strike have so far been rejected, and most of the substantive law that has been passed has had very little real effect because it is so minimal. However, a bottle can either appear half-empty or half-full, and Europe's unions are still committed at the official level of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) to trying to extend workers' rights through the highly institutional, remote and often non-democratic processes that are available.

CHANGE IN FRANCE AND BRITAIN

The French and UK cases are representative in their own ways of the two extremes of union responses to the changes in Europe of the last twenty-five years. A common lament from French employers is about how little employment relations and government intervention have changed in France since the 1970s. Politically the reason for their concern is fairly obvious. After twenty-three continuous years of right-wing government, from 1958 to 1981, in the

Figure 2: The Growth (000s) in French Public Sector Employment, 1980–1996

Source: INSEE, *Tableaux de l'économie Française: Edition 2000*, Paris: INSEE, 2000.

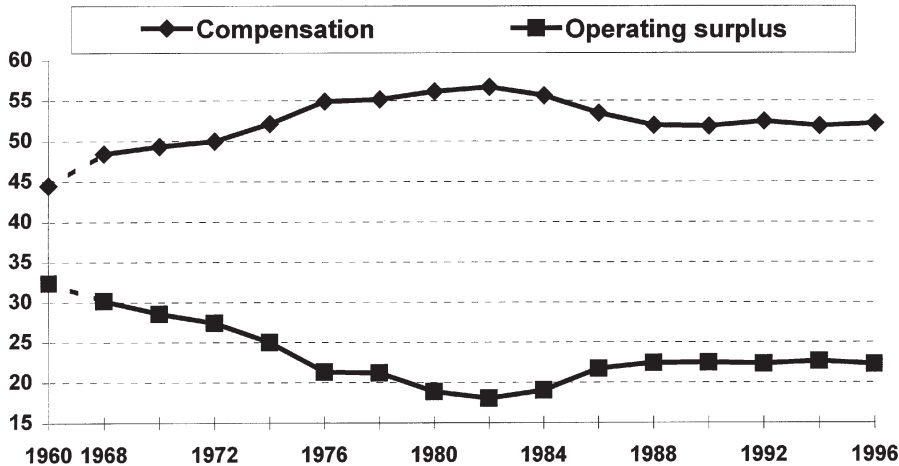


following twenty years France either had a left or centre-left president or parliament governing for all but two years, and for a third of these eighteen years the Communist Party has even been included as a coalition partner. Little wonder, then, that the open adoption of neoliberal policies has been eschewed, and that the employers have felt they lacked allies. For in the same way that New Labour embraced aspects of Thatcherism, the French right (a cross between Gaullist nationalists, Christian Democrats and political liberals) has adopted or retained major aspects of Mitterrandism (many of which were inherited, in any case, from De Gaulle's *dirigisme*).

There were two critical political moments in France since 1981 from the employers' point of view. The first significantly slowed down the pace of deregulation in France. It was the 1988 presidential election, when to most commentators' surprise, Mitterrand was elected for a second term of office. This slowed down the advance of neoliberalism and persuaded the largest component of the right, the Gaullist Party, that this was not an effective political platform on which to run. Immediately France's privatization programme was put into cold storage—from which it re-emerged only with the election of another right-wing parliament in 1993—and although Mitterrand's centre-left Socialist governments of 1988–93 continued to apply monetarism and to encourage employers to increase work-place flexibility, they made no major attack on French welfare and actually increased public sector and in particular female employment in an attempt to counter high unemployment. By 1996,

Figure 3: French Capital's Operating Surpluses and Workers' Compensation as a Share of GDP, 1960–1996

Source: OECD, *National Accounts, Main Aggregates, 1960–1996*, Paris: OECD, 1998.



56% of civil servants and 60% of local government officers were women compared to a private sector female participation rate of 45%. Civil service numbers also rose after 1988, and these increases continued under the right-wing Balladur government from 1993. Figure 2 shows how overall government employment (including the post office and the now partly-privatized France Télécom) has risen throughout the last two decades, from 4.8 million in 1982 to 5.4 million by 1996, by when it had risen from 20.5% of the active population to 21.3%, but was actually one in four of those in a job.

The second critical moment in recent French history was the public sector strike wave of 1995. This occurred just six months after the Gaullist candidate Jacques Chirac had been elected President on a highly opportunistic platform that included defending French social security rights and supporting wage increases. The result of his government's subsequent attack on French public sector workers' pension arrangements was devastating. More workers came on to the streets to demonstrate than had done so in 1968, a month-long railway strike virtually ground the economy to a halt, and in the end the continued popular support for the strikers meant the government was forced to back down.²¹ Not only did this workers' mobilization postpone any serious attempt to reform the pension system, but it also led directly to the 1997 parliamentary election defeat suffered by the right. This election was won by the Socialist Party in coalition with the Greens and the Communists, and on a political programme whose core remained social democratic. It included commitments to introducing a shorter working week to help create new jobs, and to regulating capital movements in and out of France.

The French employers could thus be said to have a point. Since 1988 in particular the resilience of French workers' pensions within GDP has meant that although real wages have not risen, French workers' overall compensation has not continued to fall, and French capital's operating surplus has stopped rising, as illustrated in Figure 3. By 1996 both were still far from recovering their positions of 1968, before the decade of conflict that marked the 1970s.

The argument here is not that French capital is weak. Far from it. As the world's fourth largest economy (after the US, Japan and Germany), its capitalist class has done and is doing well. The argument is that the French state, under pressure from political and industrial representatives of the working class, actually does restrict capital's ability to exploit French workers in various ways. At the lowest level, this means a labour code which states that workers cannot eat their lunches where they actually work, thereby providing a 'legal' reinforcement of the culturally-powerful French lunch 'break', that has virtually ceased to exist for many equivalent British workers. At a higher level it also means that dismissing workers takes much longer and is generally much more expensive than almost anywhere else in Europe. While some suggest this may create a disincentive to invest in France, this factor, if it exists, is probably more than compensated for by the additional costs attached to disinvesting from France or being absent from the French market. Certainly none of a series of econometric studies by the OECD have been able to provide clear evidence that high levels of collective bargaining coverage, high minimum wage rates or employment protection are associated with low economic performance.²² The French unemployment replacement rate (the average income maintained during the first year of unemployment), for example, currently stands at 75% for low-paid workers falling to about 50% of higher-paid workers, compared to an average of just 30% in the UK. Yet from the French employers' viewpoint their freedom to secure 'normal' European levels of profit is being denied by the average 48% non-wage labour costs of employment, compared to the 45% in Germany, 41% in Sweden and 29% in the UK.²³

It is these comparisons with other European and US experiences, the fact that a quarter of the work-force is involved in productive and service activity not under the direct control of the market, and their sense that a strong protectionist and dirigiste state will no longer be the best guarantor of their future prosperity that makes French employers more combative in the current resurgence of industrial relations conflict in France. After the Gaullist and right political parties split again in 1999, the employers have largely given up hoping in the short-term that the right will be re-elected on a neoliberal platform. So, drawing on the anger generated among smaller firms at the 35-hour week laws passed by the Socialist coalition government passed in June 1998 and January 2000, the main French employers' association relaunched itself in 1998 as the 'Movement' of French enterprises (the *Medef*). In 1999, capitalizing on the larger employers' strategic sense of trade-union weakness, the *Medef* threatened to pull out of the social security, unemployment and pension funds that it

jointly runs with the unions unless they accept radical changes. The threat, of course, may successfully split the unions and lead to a new settlement much less favourable to French workers as a whole. But it may also be a bluff that if called could have a reverse effect to that intended: namely it might help reforge a sense of working-class unity and identity between French manual and white-collar workers. Whatever happens, the conflict illustrates the extent to which French employers feel distanced from state power and influence.

Does this mean that the numerically weak trade-union movement feels much closer to the French Socialist Party? Unlike the British Labour Party there have never been organic links between the French unions and socialists. Far from giving money to political parties, the French union confederations tend to be the recipients of benefits in terms of cheap or no-cost accommodation for offices or conferences, provided by local government authorities being run by friendly politicians. If anything, although always secretive and much denied, the strongest links were between the Communist Party (PCF) and the Confédération Général du Travail (CGT) trade union confederation—although these too now can be said to no longer exist in any real form, since the CGT on two occasions in 1999 and early 2000 refused to appeal to its members to support demonstrations called by the PCF. On the other hand, the plurality of linkages between the five state-‘recognized’ trade-union confederations and the government, has meant that informal contacts do occur on a very regular basis. Some socialist ministerial advisers are known to be former trade unionists, and although they lack a formal stature, these avenues all continue to offer ways of exercising pressure on the state as it attempts to secure a social settlement between capital and labour.

More important, however, is the French union movement’s mobilizing capacity. It still has the power, as shown in 1995, to confront a government and play a part in its downfall. Part of this strength lies in the postwar settlement, which constructed the social welfare system that has been run ever since by the employers and trade unions, thereby legitimating the latter’s presence, often directly funding union full-time officials and institutionalizing trade-union pluralism. Because at the time the government did not wish to reward the majority Communist-controlled CGT, it created a situation which formally gave nearly as many rights to minority unions as to majority ones. Unlike the situation in the UK, this encouraged the elaboration of and eventually the preservation of discrete political identities around the trade union ideologies of the market, social integration and class struggle discussed above. In turn, the fact that at virtually all negotiations there was at least one union represented that would criticize proposals from a class perspective (however distorted by Stalinism) meant that the others, too, would often be forced to make their arguments in broad class terms. In 1988, when the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) ceased to espouse a bottom-up conflict perspective, and started a major shift towards the ideologies of market ‘realism’, the loose federal structure of French trade unionism allowed a new formation,

SUD (Solidaires, unitaires, démocratiques) to emerge, first in the nationalized post and telecommunications, and later in most of the rest of the public sector.²⁴ Its growth during the 1990s to a position where it is now the second or third strongest union in terms of votes for public sector works council representatives, testifies to the continued links between the processes of trade-union organization, the wider political perspective of working-class struggle, and the institutional characteristics of the French industrial relations and welfare systems. Indeed, the union legitimation (and the numbers of full-time union posts provided) resulting from their social welfare role is one important reason the *Medef* is now targeting the post-war settlement that brought it about; the other is its desire to bring this potentially highly profitable insurance business into the private domain.

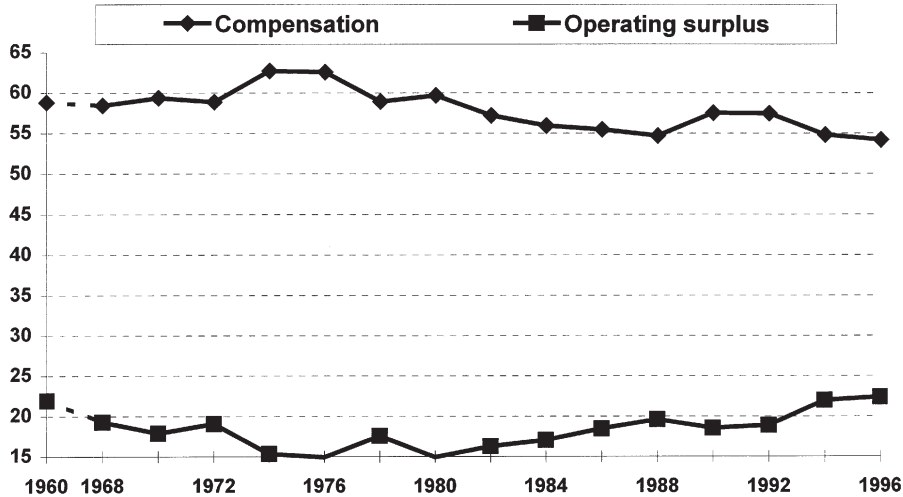
A still more important reason for the survival of union power lies in the fact that although they now persuade fewer than one in ten of all workers to pay union dues, in most larger work-places trade unionists still receive more than three-quarters of all votes cast in works council elections; and on the right issue, when the unions issue a strike call, they can be followed by anywhere between one in five and two out of three workers. Non-unionists in work-places where there are union representatives will almost always say, as frequently as unionists, that it is vital for a union to be present and that the union makes a difference.

The way in which the trade unions represent the working class in Britain is totally different. As we have seen, the British unions have a larger (although declining) membership, but have also always been much more occupationally-rooted and are recognized not as a result of any legal right but by employer acquiescence. In the last two decades the political context has been the near opposite to that of France: instead of two decades of centre-left government, there have just transpired nearly two decades of overtly ideologically right-wing government. This gave virtually unlimited rein to management to reverse the earlier defeats it had experienced over anti-union laws and miners' wage rises in 1972 and over the general election of 1974. In contrast to the continuing influence of French unions as the economy adjusted to the world economic slowdown, the British trade unions were totally excluded by the Conservatives. One outcome was a decisive shift towards increased inequality in Britain. While Sweden and France (where multi-employer bargaining was not dismantled) managed the processes of change in the 1980s and early 1990s without significantly changing income inequalities for those at work, the UK experience tended to mirror (although less extremely) that of the US.²⁵ Moreover, as Figure 4 shows, by 1996 British capital had succeeded not merely in returning to its 1970 level of operating surplus as a proportion of GDP, but in surpassing it by 25%, while simultaneously reducing the share of employee compensation (wages and pensions) since 1980 by over 5%.

There were three key events in the right's successes in Britain. The Falklands War of 1982 proved a godsend to a deeply unpopular Conservative adminis-

Figure 4: UK Capital's Operating Surpluses and Workers' Compensation as a Share of GDP, 1960–1996

Source: OECD, *National Accounts, Main Aggregates, 1960–1996*, Paris: OECD, 1998.



tration, which wrapped itself in the Union Jack and decisively won the 1983 General Election. More strategically, however, there was the historic defeat of the miners' strike of 1984–5 and the context of a 15-year-long period of high unemployment. These bit deeply into union membership and confidence. Between 1980 and 1998 the proportion of work-places with 25 or more employees that reported 100% union membership fell from 18 to 2%; while those reporting no union members at all rose from 30 to 47%; among private sector work-places union density fell from 56 to 26%. By 1998 a national survey of work-places with 25 or more employees found that only 52% of unionized workers felt that the unions were taken seriously by management, and only 46% felt that unions make a difference to what it is like at work. Among *non-unionized* workers views were still much more critical: only 30% felt the unions made a difference.²⁶

The third key event that helped configure late-twentieth-century British trade unionism was the Conservative's fortuitous election victory of 1992. This followed two years after a mass popular class rebellion against the Thatcher poll tax reform had temporarily forged a new vision of 'us' against 'them', where the 'us' embraced wide sections of white-collar middle class as well as manual workers, and had led to Thatcher's removal as Tory leader. Yet the Labour Party failed to capitalize on this broad resurgence of a working-class presence, notably in proposing to raise income taxes on significant elements of the 'new' middle classes, including groups like primary school head teachers, rather than focusing on taxes on the rich and the wealthy. The following five years then

saw the Labour Party fall into the hands of the 'Third Way' Blairites. Under its leadership 'New Labour' rapidly rejected the core social democratic promises of redistribution, of tackling structural inequality and of empowering independent employee representation, all of which had featured in the 1992 election programme, and adopted instead a Clinton-style 'New Democrat' modernizing and liberalizing managerial platform.

Where for nearly a century craft unionism, US-style business unionism and class-oriented unionism (whether of the reformist or revolutionary variety) had flourished hand in hand in Britain, by the mid-1990s the latter had been marginalized. The proud National Union of Miners that had still had a quarter of a million members in 1984 saw its membership drop below 25,000 and Arthur Scargill reduced to a minor sectarian figure—a caricature of the great political and union miners' leader of the 1970s and 1980s. The earlier pluralistic ideology of labourism was largely replaced by a new language stressing 'partnership' and the end of adversarialism. While its core was nothing new—this form of business unionism had been the subject of the Mond-Turner talks after the defeat of the 1926 General Strike—the particular discourse was taken from continental Europe. There it is essentially based on a blend of Christian democracy with human resource management ideology, but in a context where 'partnership' is enforced by a series of constitutional and institutional rights established in the late 1940s when the balance of class forces was much more equal. In the UK, in a voluntaristic industrial relations system, and as an accompaniment of a defensively-motivated union merger movement and of the virtual disappearance of a coherent publicly-articulated socialist critique of capital within the trade-union movement, the adoption of the 'partnership' approach has encouraged a marked homogeneity of trade-union discourse. The old political divisions between 'left' and 'right' in most major unions where politics had been contested for generations virtually disappeared in the late 1990s, and in the few unions where the left has still been able to mount candidates for high office left votes have rarely exceeded 30%. Where has the Labour 'Left' gone? Some of its components have been attracted to the Blairite project. This provides an ideological justification for the shift towards the advocacy of 'third way' employer partnerships that has been embraced by the Britain's recently merged engineering and electrical union (the AEEU). Others have chosen to remain silent in face of the New Labour machine which has so successfully centralized the Labour Party as to place near-complete power over its internal life in the hands of Blair's inner cabinet. This process has been resisted and above all resented by many Labour Party activists, who were thus ready in both Wales and London to support anti-Blairite candidates in the cautious moves Labour is making to restoring or creating some forms of regional and local government. In London, the former Greater London Council leader and virtually the only remaining Left parliamentary critic of New Labour, Ken Livingstone, won the Mayoral election in May 2000 with the support of huge numbers of angry Labour supporters, as well as with the

votes of Conservatives and others just wanting to attack Labour. However, the most important signal from this local election was the massive abstentions by traditional Labour voters angry that New Labour was not representing their interests effectively.

Largely unchallenged, important parts of the trade-union movement are openly seeking to sustain their existence through transforming themselves from bargainers over universal, basic sectoral or occupational labour-market conditions into the providers of services to 'enterprise unionism'. Table 10 illustrates the declining importance of multi-employer collective bargaining in Britain in the Conservative era.

Table 10: The Decline of Multi-employer Collective Bargaining in Different Sectors of the British Economy, 1980–1998.

	1980	1998
<i>Distribution of employees</i>		
Private sector manufacturing	38	25
Private sector services	26	44
Public sector	36	32
<i>Multi-employer collective bargaining with recognized unions</i>		
Private sector manufacturing	57	25
Private sector services	54	12
Public sector	81	47

Source: M. Cully, S. Woodland, A. O'Reilly and G. Dix, *Britain at Work as depicted by the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey*, London: Routledge, 2000.

The strategy of embracing single-employer bargaining will, its advocates contend, make them acceptable as interlocutors, not only to workers seeking independent and adversarial representation but also to company human resource management departments. Its implementation is likely to draw British trade unionism still closer to the American model, where bargaining pressure is exercised essentially on individual firms and not on the basic standards within the wider labour market at the sectoral or national levels. In adopting this approach, 'partnership' supporters are effectively redefining the purpose of trade unionism much more narrowly around market unionism than it has been in the past. Whether this strategy can succeed in providing a meaningful focus for working-class representation at the level of the individual firm in a context where the common trends in work discussed above have become more predominant, and are demanding an increasingly general political response, is, however, far from assured. There is little enough in the American example to give rise to confidence that this is a viable recipe for trade-union influence over twenty-first-century capitalism.

WORKING CLASS CHANGE AND THE FUTURE

We have attempted to provide a broad-brush view of current trends in European working-class formation and trade-union response. In part the range of responses sketched reflect the countries' different political fortunes. During the 1980s and 1990s Britain experienced eighteen years of radical right-wing governments, consistently ready to use the state's power against the unions and in favour of private enterprise. By contrast in France, although a government elected in 1981 on a radical socialist platform had by 1983 given way even on Keynesian reformism, neoliberalism was nevertheless held in check by the strength of the Gaullist Christian Democratic and *dirigiste* traditions, by the electoral intervention of the neo-fascist National Front whose substantial support effectively denied the democratic right the monopoly of political power it might otherwise have enjoyed, and by an electoral system that sustains coalitions, debate and political diversity. The result was twofold: first, French social democracy was not significantly pulled to the right other than by the 'natural' effects of running a successful capitalist economy in an era of monetarism; and second, the presence of Communist and Green parties and others to its left meant the Socialist Party at least retained its rhetorical commitments to redistribution of wealth and regulation of capital. The decline of the Communist Party from about 20% of the vote in the 1970s to 6–8% today has been 'compensated' by the emergence of the Greens with about 8–10% and of the Far Left with 4–6%. The *de facto* political consensus which ensued meant that despite rising and then high French unemployment, and despite significant changes in the balance of class forces in favour of capital, the French state continued to support the welfare and industrial relations social partnership and regulatory systems established after the Liberation and not only retained but actually increased its employment share during the 1980s and 1990s. In Britain where no such political mediation occurred to soften, regulate and protect the working class from global market intervention, and where the political system allowed majority governments to be elected on a minority of votes, labour legislation was rewritten to totally undermine effective trade-union action, and virtually all the industries and services nationalized by Labour after 1945 were privatized or obliged to surrender key parts of their activities to private-sector contractors.

These different political experiences account for a great deal in terms of the range of potential the different movements now possess. In Britain, where union mergers seem to be further disorienting the membership, the crisis has fostered still further depoliticization, alongside a real retreat by the Left. The election of one Socialist Alliance candidate to the Scottish Parliament, the achievement of votes of between five and ten percent for Socialist Alliance candidates in three of London's twenty-five London regional seats, and the two small but militant anti-WTO demonstrations in 1999 and 2000 confirm that there is a Left potential, but also that it is very weak indeed. In France, on the other hand, the crisis has led to a considerable political debate among the activists about how to proceed at a time of considerable organizational difficulty

and challenge from the employers. In turn, in the absence of traditions of all-embracing union formations, disagreements about how far to 'go along with' or 'oppose' the new trends have led both to the very rapid growth of SUD (now a part of the Group of Ten independent trade-union organizations) and to the establishment of several new political-union networks (linking unemployed, anti-racist, Tobin tax campaigns and anti-WTO movements with union activists). Also, and with perhaps even greater implications for the future, outside these often professionally-driven 'formal' protest channels, in November 1998 French 16–18-year-olds staged a massive series of strikes and 200,000-strong demonstrations for more teachers and resources that won significant government concessions. This was followed in the winter of 1999–2000 by a wave of teacher strikes that eventually forced the resignation of the minister of education.

With suitable caution, the discussion and examples from France and Britain suggest certain arguments in the general debate about the direction of Western European trade unionism. First, there is the very obvious point that in order to maintain its genuine claim to representation, the trade-union movement must bring its agenda more closely in line with the aspirations and fears of the changing work-force. Above all, the contrasting experience of Britain and France suggests this means defending by all means necessary and available the concept of *labour market-wide* regulation of employment conditions. This is both a *class* project and one which is probably the only effective way of preventing the 'race to the bottom' which is commonly, and rightly, seen as a consequence of enterprise unionism. It is one which involves unions taking the initiative, as Richard Hyman argues, in establishing a 'worker-oriented meaning of flexible working time', in developing policies for 'enhanced individual entitlements to education and training ... for more effective (and workers-oriented) provisions both by employers and by education and training institutions ... for demand-side policies to encourage employment growth', and in mobilizing to create 'a genuine and favourable structure of opportunities ... necessarily a collective project, one which challenges both employers' discretion and the anarchy of market forces.'²⁷ Collective bargaining needs to be maintained, strengthened or re-established with an agenda that offers across-the-board benefits to all workers.

Second, given the trends towards greater influence of global capitalism within national borders (that we have not had space to discuss here, but by which we mean the increasing share of global capital in, for example, French and German companies and their adoption of American accounting and reporting procedures), it is more likely that the most successful ways of achieving labour market-wide regulation in the future will be *politically* rather than through traditional collective bargaining. This may mean political lobbying of governments, national and European, to pass laws regulating capital and laying down minimum conditions; or it may mean mobilizing workers and consumers in boycotts of particular companies; or it may involve the defence

of immigrant workers' rights to enter the labour market; or it may mean the support for—or the formation of—political parties that will still represent workers' interests. It also involves unions associating themselves more clearly with the objectives of the environmental, anti-genetically modified food, anti-racist, feminist and anti-globalization movements. Their activities question the legitimacy of the contemporary distribution of power and capitalism's priorities for the world's resources, the same ideological starting point for union resistance to individual managements. Above all, the shift of trade unionism towards a more political focus encompasses a broad vision conception of trade unionism and of its responsibility to play a progressive role in society.

These first two objectives imply a third: the need to reshape the texture of collective adversarialism from its current stereotype based around ageing white male manual workers to fit the current dominant model of a feminized flexible white-collar labour force. This involves unions investing in their 'new' activists—through training and research—to provide an organizational underpinning to a critical independent approach both to their companies and to capital. It involves developing new and imaginative ways of struggling, many of which will involve the new technologies that paradoxically permit both greater managerial control, while enabling broader and more sophisticated vistas of employee resistance. By taking the sense of political independence that is still retained by significant minorities of French trade unionists, and generalizing this out, the political will to maintain and develop these independent forms of working-class organization into the new millennium can not only be sustained, but also, clearly, can make a difference.

Europe's working classes are thus faced with two major questions at the start of the new millennium: can their unions continue to provide effective interest representation of working people, and can their social democratic parties (or any other) remain (or become) distinct expressions of a critical approach to capitalism that programmatically and in practice attempts to curb workers' exposure to market forces? We have argued that by 2000, after twenty-five years of attrition, working-class identities are fragmenting and working-class interests are losing ground to capital. However, they are still far from being counted out. This is much clearer in France, Germany and Sweden than it is in the UK. Indeed, and paradoxically for many, the result of the extension of certain minimum working rights under European Union social legislation driven by social democratic and Christian democratic pressure from continental Europe is that UK workers today have access to more employment rights than they have ever had before, and are increasingly exercising them. It should not be imagined, though, that the retention of worker influence in France, Germany and Sweden resulted simply from incorporationist strategies adopted by their capitalist classes. In each of these countries there were higher levels of conflict in the 1990s than in the second half of the 1980s, as the employers kept testing for concrete evidence of worker demobilization. The broad retention and even partial extension of some elements of protection from 'free' market

forces is important as an indicator of the degree of articulation of working-class interests. Essentially they testify to the complexity of running capitalist societies where the owners of capital have to secure some form of legitimation for policies aimed at increasing their operating surpluses at the expense of workers' compensation. European differences and in particular the contrast between the UK and France thus suggest that although facing similar pressures, there is no single monolithic trend sweeping all before it in a headlong rush towards Milton Friedman's 'economic freedoms'. Europe's working classes still have voices and they are still being exercised.

NOTES

1. The employers' estimate of strikers was 20% below that of the unions, but was still substantial at 31.5% of the total labour force. In some cities the banks admitted that between 70% and 80% had been involved.
2. *Le Monde*, 2 December 1999.
3. Eurostat, *Enquête sur les forces de travail: Résultats 1998*, Luxembourg: Office des publications officielles des Communautés Européennes, 2000.
4. For a whole book that attempts to monitor these changes see Mick Carpenter and Steve Jefferys, *Management, Work and Welfare in Western Europe: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 2000.
5. See Jelle Visser, *Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue*, Geneva: International Labour Organization, 1999, pp. 1–60.
6. This comparison is additionally of interest since both these two countries entered the new millennium under 'socialist' governments elected in 1997, thereby posing important questions about the contemporary political reach of the different trade unionisms.
7. See Richard Hyman, 'Union identities and ideologies in Europe', in P. Pasture, J. Verberckmoes and H. de Witte, eds., *The Lost Perspective? Trade unions between ideology and social action in the New Europe: Significance of Ideology in European Trade Unionism*, Aldershot: Avebury, 1996, pp. 60–89.
8. See Steve Jefferys, 'A Tale of Two Conferences: British and French bank trade union activists compared', *Industrial Relations Journal*, forthcoming.
9. See Steve Jefferys, 'Down but not out: French Unions after Chirac', *Work, Employment & Society*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1996, pp. 509–527; Steve Jefferys, 'France 1995: the backward march of labour halted?', *Capital and Class*, no. 59, pp. 7–21.
10. Eurostat, 'Enquête sur les forces de travail'.
11. INSEE, *Tableaux de l'économie Française: Edition 2000*, Paris: INSEE, 2000.
12. HMSO, *Labour Force Survey 1979*, London: HMSO, 1981; HMSO, *Labour Force Survey 1988-1989*, London: HMSO, 1991, ONS, *Labour Force Survey Quarterly Supplement 2*, London: HMSO, 1998.
13. See Carpenter and Jefferys, *Management, Work and Welfare in Western Europe*, chapter 6, for a discussion of these trends.
14. Society of Telecomms Executives, *Stressing Performance VIII*, Wimbledon: STE, 1999.
15. *Le Monde*, 22 April 2000.
16. Bartolini, 1989.
17. International Labour Organization, *World Labour Report*, Geneva: ILO, 1997.

18. Ibid.
19. M. Cully, S. Woodland, A. O'Reilly and G. Dix, *Britain at Work as depicted by the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey*, London: Routledge, 2000.
20. See J. Waddington, R. Hoffman and J. Lind, 'European trade unionism in transition? A review of the issues', *Transfer*, no. 3, 1997; and R. Undy, 'The British movement: the importance of the "aggressive" unions', *Industrial Relations Journal*, vol. 30, no. 5, 1999.
21. For two complementary accounts of the strike see Jefferys, 'Down but not out' and Jefferys, 'France 1995'.
22. See the continuing failure of attempts to 'prove' the economic case for neoliberalism in the OECD's *Employment Outlook* since 1994.
23. See A. Hassel, and B. Ebbinghaus, 'Concerted reforms: Linking wage formation and social policy in Europe', International Conference of Europeanists, Chicago, 30 March 2000.
24. Annick Coupé and Anne Marchand, eds., *Sud: syndicalement incorrect: Sud-Ptt une aventure collective*, Paris: Syllepse, 1998.
25. OECD, *Employment Outlook*, Paris: OECD, 1997, p. 68. The income gap between the bottom decile and median earnings increased by 0.11% and 0.06% per year respectively for US men and women between 1979 and 1989, and by 0.05% per year for all UK workers of both genders.
26. Cully et al., 'Britain at Work'.
27. Richard Hyman, 'Trade unions and interest representation in the context of globalization', *Transfer*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1997.