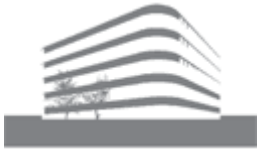

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Author(s): Richards, Andrew John, 1961-
Date 1995
Type Working Paper
Series Estudios = Working papers / Instituto Juan March de Estudios e Investigaciones, Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Ciencias Sociales 1995/70
City: Madrid
Publisher: Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Ciencias Sociales

DOWN BUT NOT OUT:
LABOUR MOVEMENTS IN LATE INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

Andrew Richards

Estudio/Working Paper 1995/70
May 1995

Andrew Richards is Professor of Political Science in the *Center for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences* of the Juan March Institute in Madrid. He presented this paper at a seminar held at the Center on April 21, 1995.

Introduction[1]

Labour, it seems, is in crisis. But what is the nature of the crisis and how, if at all, can it be resolved? Can labour movements, widely perceived to be in a state of irreversible decline, renew themselves? What would a process of renewal actually involve? In this paper, I attempt to provide answers to these questions.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I examine the contemporary fate of organised labour in late industrial societies. First, I present a general overview of what exactly *is* happening to labour movements in the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, I trace the general (though not universal) decline in union membership levels and rates of unionization, and the changing composition of unionised workforces. Second, I describe the multiple threats posed by structural, economic and political change as a means of explaining what is happening to labour. Third, I analyse the effects on labour of what is happening. In particular, I highlight the declining political influence of organised labour, the changing nature of industrial relations, the immense difficulties that labour has encountered in resisting industrial change, growing divisions within its ranks, and the near-collapse of traditional blue-collar trade unionism. In short, contemporary union movements are engulfed by the twin crises of identity and solidarity.

Fourth, I consider the principal theoretical claims being made in the light of labour's current predicament. In particular, I focus on two hotly debated questions. First, are the current reversals being suffered by labour in the 1980s and 1990s a result of long-term structural factors or short-term conjunctural factors? (And therefore is labour's decline inevitable or not?) Second, what are the implications of the contemporary fate of organised labour for the broader theoretical issues of collective identity and solidarity amongst workers and their (potential) allies?

In the second part, I examine the potential for, and means of, labour's revival. I focus largely on the two contemporary _worst cases_ for labour - those of Britain and the USA. In general, I emphasise the contingent nature of labour's contemporary problems, and argue accordingly that a _space_ exists in which

labour's decline may be reversed. Political salvation alone will not compensate for the overarching need of labour to revitalize its own language in a rapidly changing environment. Such a process involves rethinking its relations with existing constituencies and reaching out to new ones. *To the extent* that such a process of renewal has been evident in the 1980s and 1990s, local-level initiative and vitality may be contrasted with the relative bureaucratism and apathy of unions at the national level. In an increasingly fragmented and decentralised working environment, the resilience of local-level unionism is of key importance for the future well-being of labour as a whole.

In the third part of the paper, I present some brief concluding perspectives.

Labour Movements in the Contemporary Era

Labour in the Postwar Period.

Trade unions formed one of the principal cornerstones of the postwar consensus in the advanced capitalist world. As Table 1 demonstrates, in a climate of political compromise and sustained economic growth, trade union membership levels and rates of unionization (union _density_) rose steadily from the late 1940s until the late 1970s (and, in some cases, into the early 1980s).[2]

Table 1. *Levels of Union Membership and Rates of Unionisation in Six Countries during the Postwar Consensus**

Year		Australia	Britain	Canada	Sweden	USA	W.Germany
1945	m	1.200	7.875	0.953	1.357	12.090	4.135
	u	46.0	38.6	30.4	60.5	28.9	29.1
1950	m	1.605	9.289	1.215	1.614	14.090	5.477
	u	56.0	44.1	32.8	67.7	28.0	33.1
1955	m	1.802	9.741		1.799	16.043	7.084
	u	57.7	44.5		70.8	29.8	37.2
1960	m	1.912	9.835	1.826	1.973	15.539	7.545

	u	54.5	44.2	34.5	73.0	26.3	37.1
1965	m	2.116	10.325	2.041	2.198	16.949	7.827
	u	53.6	44.2	35.3	74.9	26.2	36.5
1970	m	2.315	11.187	2.550	2.557	20.234	8.233
	u	50.5	48.5	35.9	73.2	27.1	37.6
1976	m	2.790	12.707	3.137	3.165	21.940	9.111
	u	54.3	52.8	34.6	82.9	25.3	40.6
1978	m			3.300	3.365		9.376
	u		54.2	34.6	86.8		41.3
1979	m				3.424		9.519
	u		54.5		87.1		41.4
1981	m				3.542		9.679
	u				88.6		41.0

m = membership in millions; u = % of workforce unionized.

* Figures for British union membership levels include both TUC- and non-TUC- affiliated unions. Figures for U.S. union membership levels include workers both inside and outside the AFL-CIO. (AFL-CIO membership alone increased from 12.62 million in 1955 to 14.07 million in 1975). (Gifford 1990:59).

British figures in the 1976 row are for 1977. Canadian figures in the 1945 row are for 1946; those in the 1950 row are for 1951, and those in the 1960 row are for 1961. West German figures in the 1945 row are for 1947.

Sources: Bain and Price 1980:38,88-89,107-108,123-124,134,142; Visser 1989:96,120,197,241.

During this period of growth and consolidation, however, important long-term changes in the internal composition of organised labour were already underway. Two trends in particular are worthy of note. First, as traditional heavy industry declined throughout the advanced capitalist world, trade unionism became increasingly white-collar in character. In Britain, between 1948 and 1970, white-collar union membership increased by 80%, while blue-collar membership rose by a mere 0.8%. (Walsh 1985:75). In 1911, white-collar membership stood at only 14.58% of blue-collar levels. By 1951, however, this proportion had risen to 30.67% and by 1971 to 51.39%. In absolute terms, white-collar union membership levels rose from 2.175 million in 1951 to 3.57 million in 1971, an increase of 64.1%. (Bain and Price 1980:41-42).

In the USA, white-collar unionism rose from 13.6% of total union membership in 1956 to 26.9% in 1976. (Bain and Price 1980:102). In Germany, white-collar unionism had accounted for only 15.8% of total union membership in 1957. By 1972, however, this proportion had risen to 20.7%, and by 1982, to 24.9%. (Bain and Price 1980:136; Walsh 1985:43). In Sweden, the shift to white-collar unionism was decisive. Between 1950 and 1975, it rose from 2.9% to 72.6% of blue-collar union membership levels. During the same period, while manual trade unionism had increased 45.7% from 1.214 million to 1.769 million, white-collar unionism had more than trebled (221.4%) from 0.4 million to 1.29 million. (Bain and Price 1980:148). A similarly dramatic trend was also evident in Denmark. Between 1950 and 1976, white-collar unionism rose from 34.1% to 75.4% of manual union membership levels. During this period, the ranks of white-collar organized labour increased 217.9% from 197,500 to 627,500. (Bain and Price 1980:154).

The second major change in the internal composition of organized labour concerned the growing entry of women into the workforces of advanced capitalist countries. In Britain, women accounted for 20.8% of all trade union members in 1945. By 1977, they accounted for 29.5% of the organized workforce. (Bain and Price 1980:38). Between 1972 and 1979, the number of women trade unionists increased by 34%, compared to only 13% for men. (Walsh 1985:75). In Germany, the proportion of women members in the country's largest union confederation (the DGB) increased from 16.5% in 1973 to 21.0% in 1982 (or 22.5% of all German union confederations). (Walsh 1985:27).[3]

Outside Europe, a similar pattern was apparent. In Australia, the proportion of trade unionists who were women increased from 21.6% in 1945 to 30.1% in 1976. During the same period, the number of women trade unionists more than trebled from 259,100 to 841,300. (Bain and Price 1980:123-4). In Canada, the proportion of trade unionists who were women rose from a mere 8.4% in 1945 to 35.5% in 1984. (Bain and Price 1980:115; Coggins et al 1989:68). And in the USA, the proportion

of women trade unionists rose from 16.6% in 1954 to 24.9% in 1976. (Bain and Price 1980:88-9).

Structural shifts in the advanced capitalist countries from blue- to white-collar sectors of the economy, and the influx of women into the workforce, therefore combined to change the face of organized labour in the postwar period. Yet such trends, despite taking place in a context of overall union growth and expansion, were potentially troubling ones. Statistics for most advanced capitalist countries demonstrate that rates of unionization among the white-collar and female sections of the workforce were markedly and consistently lower than those for the traditional blue-collar (and overwhelmingly male) sections of the workforce. In the case of white-collar unionism, Table 2 highlights the contrast in four countries.

Table 2. *Blue-Collar and White-Collar Rates of Unionization during the Postwar Consensus in Four Countries**

Year		Britain	Denmark	Sweden	W.Germany
1950	b	49.1	54.4	75.2	
	w	31.3	45.5	51.9	
1957	b				38.2
	w				22.3
1960	b		64.3	83.4	
	w		50.6	56.8	
1961	b	49.7			39.8
	w	30.0			19.2
1965	b	47.6			39.7
	w	29.8			19.6
1970	b	52.1	72.1	89.6	40.4
	w	34.3	51.1	68.7	19.3
1976	b		83.1	92.3	44.8
	w		56.9	81.1	20.9

b = % of blue-collar workforce unionized; w = % of white-collar workforce unionized.

* British figures in the 1950 row are for 1951; those in the 1965 row are for 1966, and those in the 1970 row are for 1971. Swedish figures in the 1976 row are for 1975. West German figures in the 1976 row are for 1977.

Source: Bain and Price 1980:41-42,136,148,154.

Similarly, while the entry of women into the workforce was a dramatic and positive challenge to the deeply masculinist culture of Western labour movements, the overwhelmingly white-collar, part-time or temporary nature of most women's work meant that unionization rates among women were significantly and consistently lower than those for men. In Britain, for example, while unionization rates for women rose from 25.0% in 1945 to 38.9% in 1977, rates for men during the same period increased from 45.1% to 62.1% - thus unionization rates among women in 1977 were *still* lower than the 1945 level for men. (Bain and Price 1980:38). In

Australia, a similar pattern was evident. While unionization rates among men increased from 49.3% in 1945 to 59.7% in 1976, rates among women lagged behind, rising in the same period only from 37.0% to 44.9%. (Bain and Price 1980:123-4).

In the light of these internal trends, therefore, the notion of the postwar consensus as a golden era of growth and consolidation for organized labour must be treated with caution. In fact, the structural shift from heavily unionized blue-collar economic sectors to more weakly organized service and white-collar sectors meant that by the late 1970s - despite thirty years of growth - the *traditional* foundations of trade unionism in most advanced capitalist countries were beginning to crumble. Indeed, as the postwar consensus came under increasing economic, political and ideological attack from the mid-1970s onwards, the vulnerability of organized labour was glaringly revealed, and an era of growth came to a rapid halt.

Organised Labour in Retreat: An Overview

The 1980s proved to be a decade of despair and retreat. In most advanced capitalist countries, levels of union membership and rates of unionization had peaked by the late 1970s/early 1980s, and have since declined. The _decline of labour_, broadly defined, has become the received wisdom underpinning a burgeoning body of literature.[4]

Certainly, in quantitative terms alone, trade union losses were severe. In Britain, TUC-affiliated union membership reached a postwar peak of 12.173 million in 1979, but had declined by 17% to 10.08 million in 1983, and a further 13%, to 8.80 million, in 1987. (Maksymiw et al 1990:1). By 1994, the TUC estimated that its membership stood at 6.8 million.[5] The rate of unionization[6] declined from a postwar high of 54.5% in 1979 to 45.8% in 1984.[7] Elsewhere in Europe, the trends were similarly bleak. In France, where levels of union membership in the postwar period had always been comparatively low, total union membership fell from a modest postwar peak of 3.88 million in 1975 to 2.94 million in 1985, while unionization rates during the same period dropped from 21.4% to a dismal 14.5%.

(Visser 1989:71). In Italy, between 1980 and 1985, union membership fell from 9.006 million to 8.851 million, and rates of unionization from 54.4% to 51.0%. (Visser 1989:120).[8] In the Netherlands, between 1978 and 1985, union membership levels fell from 1.791 million (a postwar high) to 1.538 million, while rates of unionization declined from 39.1% to 28.6%. (Visser 1989:152). Organised labour in the USA, meanwhile, endured its worst decade since the struggles of the 1920s. Between 1980 and 1984, the number of US union members fell from 20.0 million to an estimated 17.3 million, while the rate of unionization dropped from 23.0% to 18.8%. (Coggins et al 1989:404). By 1992, union representation in the private sector stood at a mere 12%. (Brody 1992:33).

The reasons for the seemingly international retreat of organised labour are complex and manifold. During the 1980s, economic, structural, industrial and political changes interacted, in different ways and to differing degrees, to undermine and reshape the traditional foundations of union activity and organization.[9]

Economic recession, and generally higher rates of unemployment throughout the advanced capitalist countries, certainly sapped the bargaining strength of unions and deprived them of members. Unemployment tended to be concentrated in areas of high union density. For example, the *geographical* distribution of British trade union workers became much more skewed in the 1980s. Most union workers were still to be found in the traditional industrial heartlands, where rates of unionization remained high (67% in Northern England, 64% in Wales) but where, of course, the brunt of plant closures and redundancies was being borne. In contrast, rates of unionization in the areas of Britain where large numbers of new jobs *were* being created remained low (41% in the South-East, and only 20% in East Anglia). (Maksymiw et al 1990:17).[10]

Ongoing structural changes also undermined the traditionally strongly unionized sectors of advanced capitalist society such as heavy industry and manufacturing. In both absolute and relative terms, the manufacturing sectors of

most advanced capitalist economies shrank considerably during the early 1980s and showed few signs of robust recovery thereafter. Levels of employment in manufacturing slumped,[11] while the percentage of workers employed in manufacturing, as Table 3 demonstrates, declined steadily throughout the 1980s.

Table 3. *Percentage of National Workforces employed in Manufacturing, 1981-1993*

Country	1981	1987	1993
Australia		16.15	14.18
Canada	19.18	16.90	14.45
France	24.45	21.49	19.17
Germany	(1984) 31.40	31.33	28.66
Japan	24.82	24.11	23.73
Norway	19.53	16.56	14.56
Portugal	(1983) 24.52	24.23	(1991) 23.63
Spain	24.03	22.12	19.90
Sweden	23.41	21.88	18.23
USA	21.28	18.25	16.15

Source: Calculated from International Labour Office 1994:xlviii-lii.

Such a trend ensured that unions based in these sectors suffered steady (and in some cases, staggering) membership losses in the course of the 1980s. In the USA, for example, 10.8 million workers lost their jobs through plant closures and cutbacks between 1981 and 1986. (Coggins et al 1989:404). These losses consisted primarily of full-time, overwhelmingly male, and heavily unionised jobs in basic industries such as steel, transportation, automobiles and rubber. (Coggins et al 1989:404). In the process, the United Auto Workers, between 1980 and 1988, lost over 300,000 members. Between 1980 and 1987, the Machinists lost 32% of their membership, the Carpenters 22%, and the Electrical Workers 23%. (Salvatore 1992:89).[12] Between 1980 and 1993, the membership of the USWA fell from 1,200,000 to 560,000. (Noble 1993:115).

Similar trends were evident elsewhere. In Britain, during the recession of 1980-81, nearly half of the TUC membership gained during the 1970s was lost. (Maksymiw et al 1990:17). In the early 1980s, Britain became - for the first time since the industrial revolution - a net importer of manufactured goods. Between 1979 and 1987, the number of jobs in manufacturing fell sharply by 1.954 million (or 27%), most of these belonging to full-time, male workers. As in the USA, unions whose respective memberships were heavily concentrated in the blue-collar industrial and manufacturing sectors of the economy fared badly during the 1980s. The country's three largest unions suffered considerable membership losses between 1980 and 1987. The TGWU's membership fell 35.4% from 2.07 million to 1.35 million, that of the AEU fell 45.6% from 1.5 million to 0.82 million, and that of the GMB by 16.9% from 0.964 million to 0.8 million. Smaller unions fared little better, with the memberships of the NUR, UCATT and USDAW declining by 34.7%, 26.4% and 17.6% respectively.[13]

However, the decline in the manufacturing base of late industrial societies not only tore into the ranks of blue-collar workers, but changed the very structure of employment itself - with further adverse consequences for unions. In the 1970s, trade unionism had been underpinned by "well-organized, male full-time workers, employed in large manufacturing plants" (Winchester 1989:514). In contrast, the 1980s saw an explosion of part-time, temporary and relatively insecure jobs (especially amongst women and the young) located in smaller and more dispersed workplaces - all of which, as many authors point out,[14] have been traditionally weak areas of union organization.[15] Thus some 9.16 million new jobs were created in the USA between January 1980 and mid-1986, but of these, 30.5% were in the retail trade, and 58.9% in "miscellaneous services" - areas of the economy with low rates of unionization, and low rates of pay.[16] (Of these new jobs, 84.3% were taken by women). The number of part-timers in the nation's workforce rose by 12 million between 1981 and 1987. (Coggins et al 1989:404-5). Cobble notes that "contingent" workers - those employed in part-time, temporary, leased, on-call or subcontracted

jobs - made up an estimated 25% of the US workforce in 1994. (1994:474; see also Parenti 1995:25; Brody 1994:59).[17]

Furthermore, in the wake of a changing industrial structure, substantial labour-saving capital investment, the increasing use of sub-contracted work, the export of labour-intensive activity to _world-market factories_ in the Third World and to _rural_ sites in the First World (Lash and Urry 1987:6), workforces in late industrial societies are increasingly dispersed in smaller-scale enterprises. Hall argues that in most European nations,

> "nonunionized sectors employing many more part-time workers in small establishments and service occupations now constitute the fastest-growing segments of the economy. Hence, women, part-time employees, and workers in services or small industrial establishments, who were formerly marginal to the organized working class, form a growing portion of the labour force". (1987:14).

In Britain, for example, the dramatic decline of large-scale enterprises in the 1980s severely undermined the traditional souces of trade union strength. (Beaumont 1987; MacInnes 1987). The proportion of the workforce in establishments of 500 or more employees fell from 54% in 1978 to 48% in 1982, while the proportion of enterprises employing 10,000 or more workers fell from 35% to 30% in the same period. (Maksymiw et al 1990:17). The number of workers in closed shops fell from between 4.7 and 4.9 million in 1980 to between 3.5 and 3.7 million in 1984. The proportion of manual workers in private sector manufacturing who were covered by collective bargaining arrangements fell from 65% in 1980 to 55% in 1984, reflecting both the closure of large plants and the trend toward the unilateral imposition of pay settlements on the part of employers. (Coggins et al 1989:387).

In addition to the adverse impact of economic and structural change, employers in the 1980s were decidedly more hostile to organised labour than they had been in the recent past. In the course of the decade, as many authors have described, a profound change in the structure of industrial relations took place. In a deteriorating economic and political climate, national-level bargaining was undermined as employers largely succeeded in decentralising union-management

relations to the company and/or plant level.[18] In the process, the role of labour movements as national institutions - one of the hallmarks of the postwar consensus - was lost.

In part, such a change was driven by the structural factors described above. Many authors have noted how industrial change and increasingly fierce global economic competition have underpinned the emergence of _post-Fordist_ methods of production which have, in turn, led employers to eschew macro-level systems of negotiation. Instead, during the 1980s, employers became increasingly convinced that "they had to search for differentiated, rather than uniform, responses to the variability of conditions in different workplaces". (Regini 1992:7). As a result, there was a near-wholesale shift "in the _centre of gravity_ of economic and industrial-relations systems from the level of macro-economic management to the micro-level of the firm". (Regini 1992:7; see also Lash and Urry 1987:5).[19]

However, there can be little doubt, given the economic conditions prevailing in the early 1980s, that employers also sought to regain control and initiative in industrial relations at the expense of the unions. (Crouch 1986:9). In some cases, they were emboldened and supported in their efforts by the presence of conservative governments determined to undo the influence that organised labour had acquired in national economic policy by the mid-1970s. (Sabel 1987:26). Of all late industrial societies, this was particularly the case in Britain and the USA where, arguably, labour movements suffered the worst series of setbacks.

Thus in Britain, the assault on the power of the labour movement represents one of the least ambiguous aspects of Thatcherism in the 1980s. In economically adverse conditions, unions now faced a government which cast them as scapegoats for economic decline, was keen to foster individualism rather than collectivism, and pursued market discipline, rather than collective bargaining, as a means of moderating and resolving industrial conflict. (Hyman 1992:157; Maksymiw et al 1990:17). As a means to these ends, the Thatcher government broke swiftly with corporatism by rejecting tripartite methods of economic planning (MacInnes

1987:140) and, in the course of the 1980s, enacted a barrage of anti-union legislation[20] which, amongst other things, curbed picketing, attacked the closed shop, enforced ballots for union elections and strike calls, vastly increased the state's policing powers in industrial disputes and sought to weaken - if not sever - links between the unions and the Labour Party. (Fulcher 1991:237-244).

In such a climate, British employers in the 1980s became much more reluctant to recognise trade unions than they had been in the 1970s, and more willing to terminate existing agreements with trade unions. (Maksymiw et al 1990:17; see also Price 1986). Consequently, the stage was set for a series of spectacular clashes (particularly, though by no means exclusively, in the public sector) between unions and employers. (Of these, the 13-week strike waged by the ISTC against British Steel in 1980 (Hartley et al 1983), and the year-long strike by the NUM against the National Coal Board in 1984-85 (Richards 1992), are the two most important examples).

In the USA, too, adverse structural changes[21] were exacerbated by a deteriorating political climate. It is noteworthy that the strident anti-union tactics and policies adopted by US employers in the 1980s were initiated by *government* action. When, in 1981, the Reagan administration fired, en bloc, striking PATCO air traffic controllers, it "signaled the legitimacy of extreme tactics toward unions and strikers". (Moberg 1992:78; see also Tyler 1986). Encouraged by the government, employers proceeded to use anti-union legislation and non-union strikebreakers to force concessions from organized labour on a scale not seen since the 1920s. (Coggins et al 1989:404). Moberg reports that during the 1980s, employers dramatically increased their use of both lockouts and "permanent replacements", threatening to use the latter in one third of all strikes, and actually using them in one-sixth of all strikes - a rate not seen since the first two decades of the 20th century. (1992:79). In such an extremely hostile environment, American unions in the 1980s suffered a series of brutal and demoralising industrial defeats,

of which those at the hands of Greyhound, Eastern Airlines, Phelps Dodge and Hormel are amongst the best known.[22]

The developments described here were not, of course, exclusive to the USA and Britain. They were part of a general trend affecting organized labour throughout most of the advanced capitalist world. However, as a means of understanding the nature of its contemporary crisis, a description of the (quantitative) decline of labour will not, in and of itself, suffice. Instead, there is a need to recognise that the 1980s brought profound qualitative changes to the world of organised labour. These must be considered if its prospects for renewal are to be placed in context.

The Nature of the Crisis.

In the light of a decade of decline and defeat, we may identify two principal crises that now beset labour movements in late industrial societies. The first is a crisis of *identity*. The 1980s saw a considerable acceleration of the compositional changes in the ranks of organised labour that had been underway, as already noted, for some time. The most dramatic manifestation of this was, of course, the demise of traditional blue-collar unionism.[23] I have already referred to the membership losses suffered by unions based in the traditional industrial sectors of the economy.[24]. In the USA, by 1985, for the first time in the history of the union movement, blue-collar workers no longer comprised a majority of its membership. (Troy 1986:86). By 1986, it was estimated that less than 40% of AFL-CIO members worked in blue-collar jobs. (Kirkland 1986:397). In contrast, the fortunes of white collar unions were boosted.[25] In the USA, despite a steep fall in the aggregate level of union membership, the ranks of the Service Employees International Union, for example, grew by 17% between 1980 and 1987. (Salvatore 1992:89). In Britain, too, the 1980s saw a growth in the relative importance of white collar and service sector unions. For example, the principal banking union, BIFU, and the local government

union, NALGO, actually increased their memberships between 1979 and 1987 by 25.3% and 0.75% respectively.[26]

In addition, the structural changes underpinning the continuing demise of blue-collar unionism boosted the relative importance of women within the labour force in general and, by extension, the ranks of trade unions. Between 1981 and 1994 participation rates in the labour force throughout the late industrialised world fell among men but rose among women.[27] As such, during the same period, women increased their share of the employed labour force.[28] In the USA, an increase in union membership among women in the 1970s and 1980s partially compensated for a decline among men. By 1992, women accounted for 37% of all union members, compared to 24% in the mid-1970s. (Kessler-Harris and Silverman 1992:63). In Britain, between 1983 and 1987, the number of women trade unionists increased by 21% from 2.36 to 2.86 million. (In the same period, the number of male unionists fell 23% to 5.94 million). By 1987, women accounted for 32.5% of total TUC membership (compared to 23.4% in 1983), and six of Britain's twenty largest unions (BIFU, COHSE, CPSA, NUPE, NUT and USDAW) had a higher proportion of women in their ranks than men. In addition, 49.3% of NALGO's members were women. (Maksymiw et al 1990:1,7).[29]

In terms, therefore, of the *identity* of labour movements in late industrial societies, such compositional changes challenged the role of the blue-collar, male, industrial worker as the traditional mainstay of trade unionism. As Visser observes, "blue-collar workers .. will become an ever smaller minority within the labour movements of which they were once the proud founders. Inevitably, their voice will carry less weight in general councils, national confederations, and bargaining fora". (1992:28).[30]

The second principal crisis engulfing contemporary labour movements is one of *solidarity*. During the 1980s, a growing division emerged between unionised and non-unionised sections of the late industrial workforce. (Hyman 1992:151). Indeed, many authors have noted how continuing structural and compositional changes

have created a _core_ of reasonably secure, relatively skilled, full-time, unionised workers, and a _periphery_ of those in relatively insecure (temporary and/or part-time), semi-skilled, low-paying, and non-unionised jobs. (Crouch 1986:7; Hall 1987:10-11; Pérez-Díaz 1987:118; Taylor 1993:146).[31] The general management drive for _flexibility_, moreover, accentuated the division. In essence, managers sought to "isolate a core of privileged employees" (Boreham and Hall 1994:334), involving the "functional flexibility of multi-skilled _core_ workers in full-time employment, and the numerical flexibility provided by the employment of trainee, part-time, temporary, or subcontracted workers. Such tendencies divide labour and set up barriers to its effective organization". (Fulcher 1991:255; see also Lane 1989).

However, in the face of rapid economic and structural change, and management and government hostility, the ranks of the *unionised* workforce have also been increasingly wracked by divisions. Such conflict has taken place at all levels of union organization, and has assumed different forms. National union confederations struggled in the 1980s to maintain the unity of an increasingly disparate set of constituent members. Blue-collar unions based in declining industrial sectors found themselves at odds with white-collar unions attempting to organize in expanding and highly competitive areas of the economy. (Koelble 1992:61ff; Winchester 1989:503ff). Pressures of economic decline, managerial aggression and rising unemployment tended to promote organizational defence as a key union priority. This undoubtedly led to increased inter-union conflict as unions sought to compensate for membership losses by encroaching on other unions' territory.(Winchester 1989:505-10).[32] A politically harsh climate, moreover, further fuelled disagreements between unions over questions of tactics and strategy. In Britain, for example, the TUC was riven by divisions between unions, such as the AEU and EETPU, espousing a "new realist" strategy of accomodation with respect to government anti-union legislation, and moderation (including no-strike agreements) in industrial relations, and those, such as the NUM, promoting a strategy of outright defiance and industrial militancy. In such circumstances, the TUC's ability to speak for all unions was severely limited.

In addition, *individual* unions were increasingly fragmented by the process of structural and economic change. This was true not just of general unions (which have always struggled to unify workers in different economic sectors[33]) but also of those based largely in a single industry. For example, one of the primary obstacles faced by IG Metall in developing industry-wide bargaining strategies during the 1980s and 1990s was that it organised all metal workers in both declining and growing sectors of the German industrial economy. (Allen 1990:267; Markovits and Otto 1992). The attempts, meanwhile, of the British NUM to unify the mining workforce in defence of jobs in the coal industry were severely hampered by material differences within the coalfields and the unevenness of the Thatcher government's pit closure programme. (Richards 1992). Such cases exemplify the general process whereby "the balance has shifted from national policy co-ordination and the pursuit of general interests towards greater local discretion and the recognition of separate interests in some unions". (Winchester 1989:514).

The solidarity of labour movements in the 1980s was further undermined by a general weakening of the authority and influence of national union leaderships and centralised union confederations (Hyman 1992:151), and growing conflict between national and local levels of unionism.[34] In part, this was a result of the politically-driven demise of neo-corporatist structures of industrial relations, which saw unions excluded from deliberations with governments and employers at the national level. In addition, though, the largely successful efforts of management to shift the locus of industrial relations to the company and/or local level further strained the national unity of labour movements. (Visser 1992:38). As several authors have pointed out, drives for internal flexibility and company-level mechanisms of employee participation threatened the viability of unions' national strategies. (Hyman 1992:155; Hall 1987:10; Sabel 1987:45). This "disaggregation of industrial relations" intensifies the "obstacles to solidaristic trade unionism". (Hyman 1992:155). In sum, as Sabel has posed the problem, "change works against (unions), isolating work groups and undermining national strategies to reinforce solidarity and the unions' position as the sword and shield of collective interests". (1987:45).

In the wake of the 1980s, two questions have become the focus of a heated debate: can the decline of unions be reversed, and can the divisions within their ranks be overcome? In response, two contrasting (though not incompatible) perspectives have emerged regarding the current and future fate of trade unions.

On the one hand, authors adopting a _conjunctural_ perspective have taken a relatively optimistic view of the current state of organised labour, or at the very least have questioned the alleged *inevitability* of its decline. Hyman, for example, has attacked the thesis that sectoral and occupational shifts in employment are inevitable sources of union weakness and decline (1992:161; see also Visser 1992:28), while Francis Green concludes his study of the effects of compositional change in the British workforce thus:

> "not all compositional changes are _inexorable_. It is evident that many compositional changes in the economy are influenced by government policy .. this result might be taken to give support to the _optimistic_ view of the trade unions' current predicament that the falls in density are largely not _inexorable_ but are of a short-term nature and reversible". (1992:456).

Fulcher has also argued the need to "correct excessive notions of union decline", as a strong cyclical element underpins labour-market power relations. (1991:256). Visser, meanwhile, rightly stresses the importance of the legal, institutional and political environments in which union movements operate. Thus a favourable environment protected Canadian unions even in the 1980s[35], while a hostile environment exacerbated the problems of US and British unions. (1992:40-1; see also Fulcher 1991:257).

Furthermore, Kelly points out that divisions, defeat and decline were not new to the 1980s. Levels of union membership, and degrees of union influence, have ebbed and flowed in the past. Indeed, he argues that many of the disasters of the 1980s were also characteristic of the 1930s - a period from which, of course, union movements subsequently recovered. On this basis, Kelly argues that current trends may be reversible:

> "those who believe in a crisis of the labour movement have made a series of analytical errors. They have mistaken short-term cyclical trends, such as the decline in union membership, strike frequency and bargaining power, for long-term, secular trends". (1988:285,289).

In contrast, those authors favouring more structural explanations for the decline of labour have adopted a decidedly more pessimistic view of its current - and future - plight. Both Salvatore and Troy have attacked the claims of cyclical theory and emphasised instead the impact of longer-term structural changes in late industrial society. Salvatore notes that more than one third of US labour's decline occurred during the 1950s and 1960s - decades of general economic growth and eventual liberal Democratic ascendancy. Moreover,

> "organized labor's absolute and relative decline over decades in which the labor force itself grew dramatically suggests that the hoped-for resurgence does not lie in awaiting a liberal-populist reprise of the 1930s or _waiting for Lefty_". (1992:87).

Troy also argues that during the most recent cyclical experience, union membership fell with the economic downturn but did not revive thereafter:

> "between 1980 and 1982, a period dominated by recession, unions lost nearly 1.4 million members; between 1982 and 1984, a period of strong economic recovery, unions lost yet another 1.25 million members .. this episode may be the largest non-cyclical-associated loss in union annals". (1986:96-97).

Instead, long-term structural changes, such as the rise of a service-dominated labour market, indicate that union movements are in a permanent state of decline. (Troy 1986:77,89,93,107).

However, such pessimism is not based solely on the shortcomings of cyclical approaches. Instead, many authors have correctly placed the contemporary problems of organised labour in the much broader context of ongoing changes in the class structure of late industrial societies. Even prior to the trauma of the 1980s, Eric Hobsbawm warned, for example, that the working class was riven by increasingly serious conflicts of interest. (1978). The events of the 1980s merely reinforced his basic conviction that "workers are crumbling into groups with diverging and contradictory interests". (1989:74). In particular, the demise of blue-collar unionism is seen as particularly damaging for the foundations of trade unionism, and a dramatic manifestation of the wider process of class change. As

Hyman points out, the old _smokestack_ industries are "typically seen as a natural generator of solidaristic collectivism". (1992:153). With the sharp decline of such traditionally militant occupational cultures as those of the miners (Richards 1992) and dockworkers (P.K.Edwards 1992:385), the 1980s bore witness to the disappearance of what has variously been termed the "classic labour movement" (Hobsbawm 1989), the "core working class" (Lash and Urry 1987:5) or the "quintessential" members of the working class. (Hall 1987:14). This, moreover, was no mere quantitative change, but represented the demise of a set of powerful traditions and cultures within the labour movement. As such, some authors have pinpointed the 1980s as a decade in which organised labour's historic role as a class-conscious *movement* was lost for ever. Hobsbawm, for example, argues that while the _working class_ has not disappeared as such, "class consciousness no longer has this power to unite" (1989:71), while Touraine explicitly links the decline of a "class conscious labor movement" to the "disintegration of the "classic" working class .. the very basis of class consciousness is disappearing and the labor movement is being replaced by interest group unionism". (1986:161; see also Touraine et al 1987).

In this way, therefore, the pessimism generated by the quantitative decline of organised labour is compounded by the claim that structural change has destroyed a crucial and historic element of the language of trade unionism - that which makes it a *movement* committed, however ambiguously, to an alternative order.

* * * * *

In assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of these two contending perspectives, I argue that a basis for the renewal and reinvigoration of labour movements exists. The value of conjunctural perspectives lies in their challenge to the alleged *inevitability* of labour's decline.[36] In this context, it is indeed worth

remembering that defeat and division are not new to organised labour, and that many of the contemporary obstacles to the effective organization and functioning of trade unionism are politically constructed rather than structurally determined.[37]

Yet the existence of divisions in the past is, of course, no guarantee that the divisions of the present will be overcome. The 1990s are not the 1930s. In *this* context, structural perspectives on the changing class foundations of organised labour have to be seriously considered. Yet the message of structural arguments regarding the *implications* of the demise of "traditional" blue-collar labour for working-class solidarity as a whole is, in fact, muddled. On the one hand, some have argued that the decline of blue-collar labour and the concomitant rise of white-collar labour do not signal the demise of the working-class per se. Thus Hobsbawm argues that "the problem is not so much objective de-proletarianization which has been brought about by the decline of old-style industrial labour, but is rather the subjective decline of class solidarity". (1989:73; see also R Edwards 1979:163). In addition, those arguing for the growing "proletarianizaton" of white-collar labour also dispute the disappearance of the working class per se. (Aronowitz 1983; Braverman 1974; Kelly 1988).

On the other hand, others argue that the demise of blue-collar labour is *synonymous* with the disappearance of the working class itself. Gorz, for example, argues that developments in late industrial societies have replaced the working class with "a non-class of non-workers or the _neoproletariat_ .. the old working class .. is no more than a privileged minority. Most of the population belong to the post-industrial neoproletariat". (Giddens 1987:279; Gorz 1991; see also Hyman 1992:154). Other authors have also argued, in different contexts, that the former working *class* is, in fact, being broken down into competing groups with no common objective class interest. Thus Lockwood (1989), and Marshall and Rose (1988), have criticised the notion that white-collar labour is being _proletarianised_, arguing instead that it is informed by a very different set of interests.[38] Meanwhile, as Fulcher notes, the emerging core/periphery distinction within late industrial workforces has been generalised to the level of the class structure as a whole by the notion of dualism. (1991:256). At a minimum, this implies that class-based strategies on the part of unions will no longer suffice as a means of bridging the divide between the increasingly beleaguered ranks of organised blue-collar labour and the growing "disprivileged underclass of employees". (Lane 1989:605; see also MacInnes 1987:144).

The Basis for Renewal

In the light of the empirical trends and theoretical debates outlined above, there is a clear need to avoid both any overly-cheerful optimism associated with conjunctural perspectives and any overly-pessimistic determinism associated with structural perspectives.[39] Instead, it is important to recognise the powerful element of contingency that has existed in the general process of union decline. Thus despite severe constraints, a _space_ exists within which unions could construct a response to the general crisis engulfing them.

But what is the nature of such a space? I argue that while a favourable political and/or legislative environment would undoubtedly ease the plight of organised labour, this, in and of itself, will not suffice as a means of long-term renewal. Instead, labour has to renew itself from within by reviving itself as a movement. As a means of developing this general argument, I present, first, the scope for _change from without_, before turning to the question of why internal renewal is the key challenge for contemporary unions.

Change from Without.

In the face of the dual threat of government hostility and corporate aggression, it is certainly necessary to emphasise the current politically constructed obstacles to unionism. This is particularly true of the USA, where the repressive and extremely restrictive role played by labour law tends to be overshadowed by the seemingly inexorable decline of organised labour itself.

It therefore needs to be remembered that many of the institutions designed originally to protect and/or enhance the rights of organised labour have been steadily undermined since the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935.[40] The 1947 Taft-

Hartley Act severely undermined the gains of labour by removing many important union weapons (such as the secondary boycott), and paving the way for intrusive regulation of internal union affairs. (Moberg 1992:76; Brody 1994:61). By the 1990s, many of the economic pressures which unions had once been able to exert - to great effect - on employers, were now illegal. For example,

millions of nonfactory workers (teamsters, longshoremen, waitresses, cooks, musicians etc.) who had successfully organized between the 1930s and the 1950s had relied on mass picketing, recognitional picketing, secondary boycotts, "hot cargo" and pre-hire agreements. Such tactics, by the 1990s, had long since been outlawed. (Cobble 1994:478). Yet legalizing such weapons again would facilitate union efforts to organize the late industrial workforce: "from domestic cleaners to the millions of fast food workers toiling for minimum wages". (Cobble 1994:478; see also 1991).[41]

Furthermore, by the early 1990s, union busting had become a major industry, with over 1,000 consulting companies engaged in a $500 million annual business. (Parenti 1995:215). During union election drives, management is able to "propagandize workers as a captive audience", as union organizers are denied access to the worksite. (Parenti 1995:215). Moreover, even the penalties and constraints imposed on employers for *illegal* union-busting activity are puny. As such, an increasing number of companies throughout the 1980s decided that breaking the law to defeat a union was worth the relatively small price.[42] By 1993, approximately 10,000 workers were being fired illegally every year for their union organizing activities. (Moberg 1992:76; Parenti 1995:215).[43]

In addition, the growing politicisation of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) compounded labour's problems. Ostensibly an independent federal agency created to protect labour's right to organize, and to pursue grievances against management, the NLRB was, in fact, heavily stacked by the Reagan and Bush administrations with probusiness appointees reluctant to protect workers from being illegally fired for union activities and willing to impose only token fines on

management for serious violations of labour law. (Parenti 1995:215; Galenson 1986:64; Tyler 1986:374).

The political and legal environment in which unions operate therefore matters. Indeed, the general hostility[44] of the American environment has ensured that "no other labor movement stands so exposed to the forces of its economic environment". (Brody 1992:36).[45]

Change from Within.

It would, however, be a grave error to assume that the salvation of organised labour lies, in the long run, with a political solution. Legislative reform alone cannot compensate for continuing structural and compositional changes in the late industrial workforce. Instead, unions will have to renew themselves from within, rethink their relations with existing constituencies, and reach out to new ones - for what, and for whom, do they now stand?

Such a process involves critically examining the inherited _language of unionism_, for it is this language that must be revitalised if labour is to meet contemporary challenges. This, in turn, means that a series of questions must be addressed. Historically, what have unions done and what have they stood for? How resilient has this inherited language been in the face of contemporary challenges? How sustainable is the thesis that unions no longer are, and no longer can be, *movements*? Closely related, how *flexible* is the inherited language of trade unionism? In the wake of its crisis of solidarity and identity, is a language informed historically by the interests and culture of blue-collar labour *capable* of accomodating and promoting the needs and interests of others? Will a class-based discourse suffice, or must "a new rationale, a new vocabulary of motives" (Hyman 1992:166) be constructed? How realistic is the view that "scope remains for strategic initiatives by and within labour movements, allowing new means of transcending divisions and forging common interests"? (Hyman 1992:166).

The Historical Role and Language of Trade Unionism

Unions have always played an ambiguous role in capitalist societies. Historically, unions emerged as the defenders and promoters of the immediate concrete interests of workers. At the same time, however, trade unionism often involved the articulation of an alternative order. Forged in struggle, unions were - at a minimum - potential sites of critique and opposition within capitalist society.

The _two faces_[46] of union activity have ensured that the language of unionism has been complex and often contradictory. As such, it is essential to emphasise that no _golden age_ of unproblematic labour solidarity ever existed. As Hyman has correctly noted, "a mythical belief in some previous golden age of proletarian unity and unproblematic trade-union solidarity distorts our perception of current labour-movement dynamics". (1992:166). Instead, the contingent nature of labour movement solidarity must be acknowledged:

> "from historical experience we can learn that there are no short-cuts to the identification and (re)definition of interests in a solidaristic manner; it is alway necessary to campaign and struggle for (relative) unity among workers and their organizations". (Hyman 1992:166).

Unionism, therefore - in whatever guise - had to be *built*. Moreover, the pursuit of even the most basic demands incurred, more often than not, the wrath of employers and governments. The physical construction of unions, as workers' institutions, was very much a contingent phenomenon that took place in an extremely hostile environment.[47]

Furthermore, history demonstrates that uniting workers in the same industry (let alone different ones), and forging a collective class identity, were processes of painstaking construction, from the local level upwards.[48] And even when established, trade unions have, historically, *divided*, as well as united, workers. The development of unions tended to perpetuate narrower occupational identities rather than broader class identity: "in embracing particular categories of workers as members and excluding others, each union gives institutional reinforcement to certain perceptions of common interest while presenting obstacles to alternative contours of solidarity". (Hyman 1985:105).

In addition, the more circumscribed version of unionism as a vested interest seeking incremental reform did not sit easily with that which viewed unionism in decidedly more radical terms. In all western capitalist societies since the industrial revolution, union movements (both at the confederal and individual level) have been riven by such perennial debates.

For our purposes, which current in the language and practice of unionism has predominated? At a general level, it is clear that the more restricted version of unionism eventually prevailed. Perhaps the classic example of unionism's _inner conflict_ took place in the USA during the first half of the twentieth century, as the American Federation of Labour's (AFL) dominance of the American labour movement was challenged severely (though ultimately unsuccessfully) by first the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and later the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). (Galenson 1986:46ff). However, by the time the AFL merged with the CIO in 1955, there was, in the wake of the latter's postwar anti-communist purges, little to distinguish between the erstwhile rival federations. (Galenson 1986:61). The dominant language of American labour was that of "business unionism", with its hard-nosed, anti-theoretical emphasis on the practicalities of bargaining, and an equally emphatic rejection of radical social transformation.[49] Such a philosophy was never better expressed than by George Meany, the longtime President of the AFL-CIO - "all ideology is baloney" (Sloane 1991:102) - or by Jimmy Hoffa, onetime President of the AFL-CIO's largest affiliate, the Teamsters:

> "Everybody who writes about me seems amazed that I call (the running of a union) a business, instead of a crusade or something. Well, it is a business. We're not labor statesmen here. We're not humanitarians or longhairs. Look, what do you hire us for? Is it to throw a picnic for you? Is it to study the European situation? Or is it to sell your labor at the top dollar?" (Sloane 1991:146).[50]

The USA undoubtedly represents the extreme case of a labour movement eschewing a broader political role and vision for itself. Nonetheless, even in Britain, where the discourse of socialism and social democracy was considerably more entrenched, unions have carefully segregated _politics_ from _industrial relations_. (Hyman 1990:144). The TUC has seen the role of trade unions as defending and improving their workers' conditions of employment, primarily through collective bargaining:

> "the use of unions' industrial muscle to sway government was normally viewed as improper .. even when the language of class struggle entered the vocabulary of trade unionists, their actual practice was typically more mundane and more parochial". (Hyman 1990:144-145).

It is the predominance of this language of trade unionism -informed by the interests and culture of blue-collar labour, and passively entrenched in the political economy of postwar capitalism - which may now be seen as inadequate in the light of continuing changes in the composition of late industrial workforces. Thus many scholars of organised labour point to a profound _dislocation_ of trade unions, as institutions, from the interests and needs of an increasingly differentiated workforce, which has led, in turn, to a crisis of representation. In this gloomy view, unions, in the course of the postwar period, became bureaucratised and complacent - in Western Europe, through the politics of the social-democratic consensus, and in the USA, through the politics and policies of the New Deal and Great Society. Unions have been shell-shocked by, and slow to respond to, the harsh realities of the 1980s and 1990s.

Unions are, for one thing, caught in something akin to a blue-collar *time-warp.* Crouch, for example, argues that the central defining characteristic and sense of direction of most union movements have remained the interests of the manual working-class, with an especially important part played in defining that interest by the main traditional industries. (1986:6). Yet even in the best of times, traditional blue-collar unionism, based on the skilled, male, manual working class, was exclusionary in nature (Heery and Kelly 1995:163). In the infinitely worse times of the 1980s, such a tendency has been exacerbated. As such, the great modern tragedy of organised labour involves its steady descent from being a movement capable of articulating the wider interests of the exploited in general, to a sectionalised, and seemingly selfish, narrow interest group. Thus Hall, surveying Europe in the late 1980s, laments the current inability of organised labour to summon up _moral authority_ among national workforces. (1987:19).[51]

As ever, the gloomiest prognosis is reserved for American labour, where the AFL-CIO has been criticised for steadily *narrowing*, rather than *broadening*, its vision and strategy in the face of profound socioeconomic change. American labour

unions are now bureaucratised, undemocratic hierarchies lobbying for the particular interests of workers in their own industries. (R Edwards 1979:201). This is especially damaging at a time when, since 1979, hundreds of thousands of black workers, women and the young have suffered permanent or long-term layoffs. (Aronowitz 1983:85). The protection, at all costs, of skilled craft jobs of the already-unionised has severely damaged the credibility of the labour movement as the moral voice for the ever growing ranks of less privileged workers - especially poorly unionised black workers and the black unemployed (suffering unemployment rates twice that for white workers), and the almost completely non-unionised ranks of low-paid, unskilled immigrant workers from Mexico, Central America and South East Asia. (Davis 1986:151-153).[52]

As such, organised labour stands indicted. Edwards accuses unions of having abandoned the political leadership of the working-class, and of being only _pretenders_ to working class-wide organization. (1979:201-202). Davis, meanwhile, argues that the narrowness of labour's essentially bureaucratic strategy and vision - that is, confining its efforts mainly to lobbying at the elite level for labour reform, and not tackling head-on the problems of mobilising old constituencies and organizing new ones - means that the "union movement may be in the process of abandoning the majority of the American working class". (1986:153).[53]

Nonetheless, it is dangerous to make sweeping generalisations. Thus while moderate trade unionism may have *prevailed*, it did not triumph completely. Instead, dissenting currents, holding steadfastly to a more militant vision of unionism, have maintained (even in the USA) a presence within the mainstream of organised labour. After all, in several advanced capitalist countries (France, Italy, Spain), the existence of rival union federations has often reflected schisms over strategy and ideology. Meanwhile, even where a single union confederation has prevailed (such as the British TUC or the German DGB), it has been wracked by continual conflict, along similar lines, between affiliated member unions.

Nor, of course, are individual unions monolithic or static entities. As Paul Smith has rightly noted, unions embody both bureaucratic and democratic relationships, and can mobilise both accomodative and combative forces. The relationship between these dimensions is not predetermined, and hence the _locus_ of power within unions can shift. (P Smith 1995:142,144). For example, in the USA, even within the intensely conservative and bureaucratised Teamsters' union, a socialist subculture, dedicated to democratising the union's internal structure, and broadening its vision, has continued to flourish in the most adverse of circumstances. (LaBotz 1990). Conversely, in Britain, the NUM - despite its reputation as a bastion of industrial militancy - always struggled to unify a multiplicity of local and regional cultures and traditions. A sharp contrast could be drawn, for example, between the business unionism of the Nottinghamshire coalfield, and the radicalism of the South Wales mining valleys, where the union assumed the status of a popular institution with a role and vision that transcended the immediate concerns of the mining communities themselves.[54]

In addition, the *distinction* between moderate and militant unionism is anything but sharp[55], especially when placed in the context of struggle and crisis in which workers have so often found themselves. Struggles initially informed by the most immediate material grievances can lead to a raised consciousness on the part of those involved. As such, defensive struggles may assume a decidedly _offensive_ quality in the eyes of employers, governments - or, for that matter, bureaucratised union leaderships. Within a framework of *institutionalised* trade unionism, therefore, the foundations for a broader movement have survived. It is upon organised labour's willingness and ability to strengthen *these* foundations that its future depends.

Renewal from Above?

In terms of the need for revitalization, democratization and the construction of new alliances and strategies, the main initiative appears to be coming far more from the local, rather than the national, sphere of union activity. In a sense, this is

inevitable. As already noted, the standing and influence of national-level unions have been severely damaged by the collapse of corporatism and the systematic shift in industrial relations to the local level. Even this trend, however, cannot account entirely for the general sluggishness of national unions at a time of severe challenge. National unions, for example, have been slow to reach out to - let alone organize - new sections of the workforce. While aware that the workforce of the 21st century will be increasingly female and multi-racial in character, union leaderships that remain predominantly white, male and old are ambivalent on the issue of replenishing their diminishing ranks. (Noble 1993:124). Thus Millward records in 1990 that 10% of non-unionised workers declared that "no-one ever asked me to join" as their reason for non-membership of a union, while 25% of non-unionised workers in workplaces without recognised unions cited the lack of a union to join as an _important reason_ for non-membership - "further potential for union recruitment may thus come as much from penetrating a wider range of workplaces as from signing up free-riders in those that are already unionised". (1990:39).

In the USA, between 1960 and 1980, the AFL-CIO succeeded in organizing only 2 million of the 35 million new workers added to the labour force. There was no significant effort to unionise the largest and most rapidly growing section of semi-skilled labour in the economy - the millions of women clerical workers in banking, insurance, health and education. (Davis 1986:128). By the late 1970s, Silicon Valley, California, with its 1,500 non-union firms employing 200,000 unorganised workers, represented the single largest _open shop_ in North America. Indeed, it was not until 1985 that the Communication Workers, for example, launched major organising drives at companies such as IBM. (Davis 1986:130). Yet the 1980s saw income from union dues increase in real terms to $4 billion per year. Union *organisers*, however, remain neglected. In California, for example, of 7,000 union staff, only 112 are organisers. Nationally, only between 3% and 8% of union budgets are devoted to organising. Indeed, Moberg has estimated that one third of the decline in union organising successes resulted from a fall in union organising activity. (1992:77,78; see also Aronowitz 1983:149).

There are, nonetheless, some signs of initiative at the top. After eight years of Thatcherism, the TUC finally launched an Organizing Fund aimed at the services sector, and at companies located in towns and industrial estates with no tradition of trade unionism. (Winchester 1989:509). More notably, the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute, founded - at long last - in 1989, has made great strides in attempting to bridge divisions of class, race and gender. With 70% of the Institute's interns female and/or people of colour, the Institute recruits from rank and file members of affiliated Unions, community and political campaigners, and middle class college graduates. It overcomes the normally prohibitive costs faced by smaller unions in private industry in recruiting, training and deploying organizers, and has urged more traditional unions to recognise that organising is no longer an expression of narrow industrial solidarity. The USWA, for example, now organises home health care workers and graphic artists. (Noble 1993:124; Kusnet 1992).[56]

In addition, there are signs of an increasingly positive response from unions at the national level to the needs and interests of the growing number of women within the ranks of organised labour. In the 1970s and 1980s, the DGB and its constituents gave a high priority to recruiting women. Recognising the public sector as the largest source of female employment, unions such as NUPE in Britain, OTV in Germany, and the Danish General Workers' Union have endeavoured to attract more women to their ranks. In Britain, by the mid-1980s, 25 unions had appointed equality/women's officers. Unions were devoting increasing resources to campaigning on issues of great concern, historically, to women - the TUC, for example, has reinforced its commitment to a statutory minimum wage, a shorter working week, flexible working practices, and the public provision of child-care facilities. Individual unions, too, have concentrated on specific issues such as equal opportunities (ASTMS), sexual harassment (TGWU and AUT), and equal pay for equal-value work (APEX, TASS and USDAW). Without question, such strategic initiatives - if sustained - would help to overcome women's historical mistrust of unions in general. (Kelly 1988:130-136).[57]

Renewal from Below?

Nonetheless, in an increasingly decentralised and fragmented environment, it would be a delusion to think that labour can renew itself without a significant reinvigoration of its grassroots. (Davis 1986:310ff.). In this context, two claims may be made regarding the vitality of the local sphere - first, to the extent that unions have moved beyond their traditional _terms of reference_, and constructed new social alliances and solidarities, the initiative has come largely from below; second, to the extent that unions *did* score victories in the 1980, they did so on the basis of activism and initiative at the grass roots level.

There are two dimensions to the relatively greater vitality[58] of unionism at the local level. First, in their *traditional* role as defenders of workers' interests in the workplace - that is, as institutions of industrial relations - unions have remained remarkably resilient. The power of local unions is, of course, double-edged. On the one hand, local level autonomy has set very strong limits to the ability of national unions to devise coherent strategies at the national or sectoral level. (Locke 1990; Mershon 1989). On the other hand, local unionism, especially in a decentralised environment, is, in an obvious sense, that much closer to the needs and interests of the workforce.[59] For this reason, several authors have noted the critical role played by a vibrant local unionism in maintaining overall union strength. For example, Fosh argues that vigorous local leadership can generate levels of participation in, and commitment to, workplace unionism even among allegedly instrumentally-minded white-collar workers. Meanwhile, Hancké (1993), in a survey of Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden, argues that unions with strong locals in the 1960s and 1970s - but especially in the 1980s - lost fewer members or actually gained some, while those without strong local structures of participation saw membership rates decline by between a quarter and one third.[60]

The second dimension to locally-generated renewal can only be termed _non-traditional_. In part, this has involved the internal democratization of union organizations themselves.[61] In the USA, where unions have rarely been models of democratic procedure, important grass roots initiatives took place in the 1970s

within the USWA, UMWA and UAW. Within the UAW, black autoworkers succeeded in making the union a more racially representative and sensitive institution, and forcing it to tackle problems of race discrimination in the workplace. In so doing, a previously distant institution was brought that much closer to the needs and interests of a large but previously alienated section of the American labour force.[62]

The most spectacular example in the USA of locally-initiated internal reform concerns the country's largest union, the Teamsters, where a grass roots reform movement - Teamsters for a Democratic Union - succeeded against overwhelming odds in bringing the almost entirely unaccountable national leadership of a notoriously violent, corrupt and autocratic institution under much greater regional and local control. (LaBotz 1990).

In addition, however, to the proces of internal democratization, local initiative has played a key role in propelling unionism beyond its traditional concerns and into the construction of new alliances. This is a critical development in an era when companies - especially multinationals - have acquired phenomenal power with which to hire and fire workers, close or move plants, technology and capital within and beyond national borders and, in so doing, fragment and recompose national workforces.[63] In the face of such awesome power, it is quite clear now that even if struggles originate in the workplace, they can no longer be waged solely within its confines. Just as companies, therefore, are not just economic actors but social institutions whose activities loom well beyond the immediate economic domain, so unions must, in response, become once more social institutions themselves.(Kessler-Harris and Silverman 1992:66).[64] In this context, it is worth noting that in terms of their everyday activity, trade unions - even in the traumatic years of the 1980s and 1990s - showed signs of moving towards a more social- or community-based unionism in a bid to make themselves relevant, once again, to both actual and potential members. In some cases, this involved attempting to tackle head-on the immensely difficult problem of the non-unionized working poor (often immigrant

labour) and the unemployed - that is, those decidedly third-class citizens used so often as sources of cheap labour and strikebreaking.

For example, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) was notable for its attempts - especially in the New York area - to tackle the problem of illegal immigration and organizing among the working poor. In doing so, moreover, the union reversed membership losses suffered over the last twenty years in this notorious _sweat-shop_ industry. The union's efforts included campaigning for an amnesty for undocumented workers, a vigorous programme of organizing Chinese and Latino workers - the mainstays of the underground economy - through literacy programmes, close community links, and energetic rank and file activity by young, socially conscious organisers. (Aronowitz 1983:147-148). Further examples of such initiative in the early 1990s included the establishment by the UMWA of Miners for Democracy in the hostile territory of Wyoming as a means of attracting non-union labour via associate membership. In Cincinnati, Ohio, the local AFL-CIO labour council launched its own community organizing programme under the banner of the National Association of Working Americans. With 2,000 members, it subsequently mobilised local support for a state universal health care plan. In Boston, the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union pioneered, in 1991, a housing trust fund, prompting the AFL-CIO at the national level to do likewise. (Trumka 1992:60).

Inevitably, though, it is concrete episodes of conflict between workers and employers that highlight, however tentatively, both the basis for, and constraints on, locally-driven processes of renewal. As a range of recent studies have demonstrated, to the extent that workers *were* able to score victories in the 1980s (however limited or partial) it was because they developed new alliances, from the bottom up, with the wider community. Furthermore, such struggles not only incurred the wrath of employers, but often were undertaken in the face of indifference or outright hostility of their own national union leaderships. The four references that follow are no more than sketches of very complex episodes; they are

notable, however, for having been undertaken in extremely hostile environments, and for highlighting at the local level the different kinds of renewal that need to take place at a much more general level if the future well-being of organised labour as a whole is to be secured.

The first example is that of the strike waged in 1983 in Arizona by predominantly Mexican-American copper miners against the giant Phelps-Dodge Copper Corporation. Kingsolver has traced the way in which against a background of economic decline, family fragmentation and the waning fortunes of the local union (USWA), an 18-month struggle was sustained not only by the miners themselves, but the women of the mining communities who, in the face of martial law, went from "slapping out tortillas for the picketing male strikers" to establishing their own all-female picket lines, travelling to California and New York on speaking tours, and corresponding with union activists in Latin America and Europe. In short, involvement in a decidedly traditional, blue-collar struggle altered women's perceptions of "what was important, worthwhile, and within their power to do". (Kingsolver 1989:178).

A second major example of local-level initiative and resilience - possibly the most important in the USA in the 1980s - was the protracted struggle waged by Local P-9 of the UFCW against the Hormel Meatpacking Company in Austin, Minnesota, between 1984 and 1986. In the wake of declining safety standards in the USA's most dangerous industry, and attempts by the company to slash wages, the local union embarked on strike action. The struggle was notable, first, for the scale of local initiative involved, including the picketing of other meatpacking locals throughout the Midwest and establishing, largely through the efforts of women in Austin, several immensely successful support groups with which to sustain the strike.

Second, new alliances were constructed in the course of the strike. Not only did this overwhelmingly white, northern, male workforce campaign at traditional labour events, but at solidarity rallies for Central America and for the embattled

farmers of the American upper Midwest. When the company's South African connections were exposed, Local P-9 proceeded to build alliances with black communities throughout the USA, anti-apartheid groups and the African National Congress itself.

Third, and most tragically, such activity and initiative met with opposition not just from the company, but from the national union, which disapproved of the local's anti-concessionary strategy and which eventually took the local union into trusteeship and sanctioned and promoted the replacement of Hormel strikers with strikebreakers.

Notwithstanding its dismal outcome, the strike nonetheless demonstrated the possibilities for a robust local-level democracy and activism, family and community mobilisation, and an impressive range of creativity and outreaching to other groups and communities throughout the USA in a bid to overcome the highly localised nature of the initial threat. To a very great degree, social or community unionism achieved this objective. (Green 1990; Kwik and Moody 1988).

The third example of locally-inspired revitalization of unionism is that of the 18-month long strike waged in 1985-1987 in Watsonville, California ("frozen food capital of the world") by 1,000 members of the Teamsters' Union - about 80% of them Mexican or Mexican-American, overwhelmingly female, and with half speaking only Spanish. The strike was notable for the exceptional - if not unheard of - level of solidarity: after 18 months, not a single striker had returned to work. Second, women, once again, played the key role in sustaining the strike for so long and constructing alliances beyond the immediate community (notably, in this case, with the United Farm Workers). Third, the role of the union was transformed. Locally, a mobilised workforce succeeded in forcing a white, male, racist, deeply bureaucratic (and arguably corrupt) union leadership to be more accountable and sensitive to local workers. Furthermore, at the end of the strike, the workers successfully defied attempts by both the company and the national union to impose an unpopular strike setlement. In so doing, they illustrated the gains to be made

from transfroming a moribund local union into a campaigning, and mobilising, social institution. (Bardacke 1988; La Botz 1990:273-281).

The final example concerns the success with which local members of the UAW, in the mid 1980s, prevented General Motors (GM) from closing down the last remaining auto plant in California, at Van Nuys. During the steep recession of 1980-82, five of the state's six auto plants had shut down. When GM announced its intention of closing down Van Nuys, local auto workers eventually scored a surprising victory when, in 1986, GM conceded that it would not, after all, close the plant. There were several keys to the success with which the local UAW overcame a very localised threat posed by an extremely powerful multinational company. First, in the context of Southern California, great skill was shown by the local union in synthesizing issues of race and class. With 50% of the 5,000 GM workers Mexican-American, and a further 15% black, the union built on a local history of excellent race relations. In comparison with the generally abysmal record of the national union, the local emphasised that unionism was strongest when it actually addressed issues of race discrimination as a way of uniting all workers. White workers were encouraged to appreciate the national and racial sentiments of black and immigrant workers, and to see their strengths as crucial resources for workers of all nationalities. Second, acknowledging that a traditional trade union struggle, confined to the plant itself, could not possibly be won in the face of GM's power, the union successfully constructed a wider social alliance encompassing the GM workers themselves, the Mexican-American and Black communities, local business people, college students, local churches, and especially the United Farm Workers (then under the leadership of Cesar Chavez) who themselves provided a model of a predominantly Latino workforce utilizing the broader Chicano community to protect their own particular interests. Five years after its inception, the campaign, and the coalition underpinning it, remained vital forces in the local union and in the city's wider labour movement.

There are, of course, limits to one local union's resistance - the local union itself was not united on the strategy of opposing militantly GM's demands for

concessions (especially on the issue of flexibility), and encountered additional opposition from the national union. Nonetheless, in a period of immense corporate power, the ability of a locally-rooted mass movement to keep a plant open against GM's will represents, at the very least, the potential of a strategy of resistance which moves beyond the immediate workplace. (Mann 1988).[65]

Conclusions

The 1980s and 1990s have proved to be a period of great change and challenge for trade unions. The composition of the late industrial workforce is being rapidly and profoundly transformed, with the collapse of _traditional proletarian communities_ being the most startling manifestation of this process. It is clear that the leadership of organised labour continues to lag behind this transformation, and has been slow in its attempts to resolve labour's twin crises of identity and solidarity. Indeed, unions have been slow to realise, it seems, that their position as national-level actors, with access to national bargaining tables, and presiding over well-established closed-shop agreements, are gone (though whether permanently remains a source of debate).

In this paper, I have offered a partial solution to what is a broad and general problem. That is to say, that while unions have been, and will remain, primarily institutions of industrial relations, they must, in addition, renew themselves as movements. To the extent that such a process is underway, initiative is coming from, and revitalisation taking place at, the local level.

Such a grass roots perspective is not without its problems. As already noted, local level power and resilience does not rest easily with the need to fashion strategy at a more general level. Thus, while spontaneous action at the grass roots level has often succeeded in constructing new solidarities, it is not clear how, in the subsequent absence of the overt threat or general crisis which initially precipitated the struggle, these may be sustained and cemented.[66] Furthermore, it is not easy to

predict how profound and permanent a grass roots-driven internal transformation of a union will actually be.[67]

These difficult problems notwithstanding, it is nonetheless my contention that the local arena of union activity constitutes the principal basis for renewal and revitalisation. As I have discussed, relying on a bureaucratised "insider" strategy of lobbying for reform at the national level does little to resolve (and indeed, may perpetuate) the crises of identity and soidarity.[68] In any case, unions simply cannot afford to wait for political salvation through the election of friendly governments and the passage of favourable labour legislation - this may be akin to "waiting for Godot". (Morris 1995:134).

Instead, local-level renewal is of the utmost importance. Labour solidarity has always been a constructed and contingent phenomenon built on local foundations. It is now more so than ever in an era of generally decentralised industrial relations, increasingly localised threats, fragmented workforces and growing corporate power. In such an environment, no strategy of national solidarity can be constructed or sustained without a reinvigoration of unionism at the local level. The potential exists for unions to reposition themselves both within and beyond the workplace as the representatives of the majority of working people. The environmental changes just noted have, after all, brought to the fore issues of democracy, control and accountability (especially in the face of resurgent corporate power and mobility), and that of job security in an era of increasingly *in*secure employment[69] - all of which suggest the need for a strong union presence at both the workplace and community level.

The few bright spots that I have identified within the general gloom of the 1980s and 1990s suggests that unions are at least *capable* of moving in the required direction - that is, reinvigorating, through internal democratization and reform[70], their links with existing constituencies and, by taking struggle beyond the workplace and into the wider community, reaching out to new ones.

Appendix 1. *Levels of Paid Employment in Manufacturing, 1979-1992 (Year-end averages, in millions)**

Year	Austria	Britain	France	Italy	Sweden	USA	W. Germany
1979		7.193		4.754			
1980	0.627	6.840	5.188		0.602	20.285	8.433
1981	0.618	6.840	5.010	4.686	0.579	20.170	
1982	0.593	5.889	4.914		0.550	18.853	7.913
1985		5.320	4.608				7.609
1987		5.119	4.393	3.986			7.717
1988			4.345			19.350	7.765
1989	0.536			4.054	0.558	19.442	
1990				4.084		19.117	
1991	0.539				0.480	18.445	
1992	0.521				0.399	18.291	

* 1992 figure for Sweden is November; 1992 figure for Austria is September; 1990 figure for France is October; 1988 figure for France is July; 1988 figure for West Germany is September.

Source: International Labour Office 1993:37,38,40; 1992:32,33; 1986:36-37; 1984:31,32,33,34.

Appendix 2. *Participation Rates (%) in Labour Force, by Gender, 1981-1993*

Country		1981	1984	1987	1990	1993
Australia	M			75.60	75.80	73.90
	F			49.00	52.30	51.90
Canada	M	78.60	76.70	76.80	76.10	73.50
	F	51.80	53.70	56.40	58.50	57.50
France	M	68.80	66.80	64.90	64.00	62.80
	F	43.20	44.60	45.20	45.50	46.10
Germany	M		71.30	70.80	69.10	
	F		40.40	41.70	43.00	
Ireland	M		73.30	70.90	69.30	
	F		33.60	34.80	35.30	
Japan	M	79.80	78.80	77.30	77.20	78.00
	F	47.70	48.90	48.60	50.10	50.30
Norway	M	79.30	78.40	78.70	76.00	74.10
	F	56.40	58.10	63.70	62.40	62.30
Portugal	M		68.30	65.30	65.10	
	F		43.00	42.20	44.30	
Spain	M	73.30	71.00	69.20	67.50	64.70
	F	26.90	27.80	31.20	33.80	34.90
Sweden	M	87.30	86.40	85.80	86.90	81.60
	F	76.30	78.20	80.40	81.90	77.20
USA	M	77.50	76.90	76.70	76.60	75.60
	F	52.20	53.70	56.10	57.60	58.00

Source: International Labour Office 1994:xxi-xxxiv.

Appendix 3. *Percentage Share of Employment, by Gender, 1981-1994*

Country		1981	1984	1987	1990	1994
Australia	M			60.19	58.53	59.96
	F			39.81	41.47	43.04
Britain	M					55.19
	F					44.81
Canada	M	59.59	57.70	56.56	52.27	55.43
	F	40.41	42.30	43.44	44.73	44.57
Italy	M					65.07
	F					34.93
Japan	M		60.28	59.91	59.25	59.54
	F		39.72	40.09	40.75	40.46
Norway	M	58.19	56.73	55.12	54.12	54.01
	F	41.81	43.27	44.88	45.88	45.99
Portugal	M		60.18	58.87	57.53	55.22
	F		39.82	41.13	42.47	44.78
Spain	M	71.24	70.46	69.45	67.73	66.02
	F	28.76	29.54	30.55	32.27	33.98
Sweden	M	53.60	52.68	51.80	51.83	51.27
	F	46.40	47.32	48.20	48.17	48.73
USA	M	57.17	56.27	55.24	54.65	54.39
	F	42.83	43.73	44.76	45.35	45.61

Source: Calculated from International Labour Office 1994:8,9,11-17.

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