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Radical Political Unionism Reassessed

John McIlroy

Connolly and Darlington's paper presents valuable data on developments in trade unionism in Britain and France and enhances our understanding of the trajectory and dynamics of collectivism in an important sector. My reservations about its analytical framework are two-fold. First, the authors insert their case studies into a 'model of "radical political unionism"', projected as a left alternative to social democratic unionism. Flowing from the 'crisis' of the latter, this involves closing the gap between the political and industrial spheres and the radicalisation and internationalisation of both: across Western Europe activists are demonstrating 'a propensity to politicize their industrial struggle'. Engendered by neoliberalism, radical political unionism constitutes an 'emergent minority trend' which 'nevertheless represents a qualitative shift in union strategy and political orientation' (Upchurch et al 2009a: 519-21; 2009b: 172). Following Upchurch and his colleagues, Connolly and Darlington characterize the RMT and Sud-Rail as bearers of class-struggle unionism engaged with social-movement unionism and based on 'strategies aligned to new left-wing political formations' (1-4).

Second, they locate this narrative in debates about union revitalization.

Taking scholars to task for pessimistic estimations of the likelihood of resurgence in the near future, they offer the RMT and Sud-Rail as exemplars of achieved revitalisation and potential precursors of general recovery in Britain, France and beyond. Recognising the problem of the less favourable environments in which many other unions operate, they conclude vaguely: 'it seems possible that similar forms of

radicalised political unionism could become more widespread within sectors of the European trade union movement' (29).

I am not sure this model strengthens our understanding of what is happening. Announcement of a European-wide trend to a radical political unionism of any significance is premature. It requires enlargement and homogenization of small scale, uneven processes in distinctive polities and industrial relations systems. To conclude we are witnessing 'a qualitative shift', even allowing for acknowledgement of its minority character, is to invest restricted, disparate phenomena with undue weight and cohesion. Without deprecating their progress, to see these unions as prototypes for successful emulation in more hostile contexts is to underplay specificity, generalise beyond the evidence and minimize the depth of wider union decline, and the structural and ideological factors which prompted it and continue to constrain its reversal. Given its size and resonance, the contribution Sud-Rail can make to dissemination of radical political unionism is questionable. That it can stimulate revitalisation of a fragile French movement appears doubtful. These issues are discussed by Jean-Michel Denis. After brief reflections on Germany and France this comment concentrates on the RMT and Britain.

Recent writing has focussed on these countries (Upchurch et al 2009a) and Germany provides the best example of new developments. Rooted in history, they are assimilated to continental change with difficulty. The *Linkspartei* or Left Party was founded in 2007. It undoubtedly reflected reaction against the neoliberalization of the SDP and engaged disgruntled union officials with political dissidents around former finance minister, Oskar Lafontaine, as well as sections of the successor to the East German ruling party led by Gregor Gysi. With 80,000 members it accommodates a variety of Marxist groups (Hough et al 2007). The party was initially remarkably

successful. It gained 12 per cent of the vote, 76 seats in the Bundestag, 181 in regional parliaments and 8 in the European Parliament. Recent performance has been less impressive. Given Germany's coalition politics, it remains a candidate for participation in government. Qualifications must be registered about the extent to which its project is radical political unionism rather than revival of the social democratic left. Its politics are as old as they are new: its 'programmatic points' derive largely from Keynesianism and left social democracy. A powerful, nostalgic emphasis is on reforming not replacing the SDP. In the West the party orientates to unions: there is little compelling evidence that it has had a qualitative impact on their strategy and politics. Its arrival cannot be readily perceived as stimulating class struggle, fostering politicisation or encouraging workplace action over political issues compared with the earlier years of the century (c.f. Juncke 2007; Hough and Kob 2009).

There is nothing on this scale in France. Differences between the two trade unionisms outweigh similarities to an extent which questions their incorporation in one model. Social democracy never achieved the position it held in the British and German labour movements. The most important innovation referred to by Connolly and Darlington, the *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* (NPA), with the *Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire* at its core, has considerably fewer than its original 9,000 members. Its influence is insignificant compared with the *Linkspartei*. All the Trotskyist groups remain small in relation to the *Parti Socialiste* (PS), although their popular figures Olivier Besancenot and Arlette Laguiller of *Lutte Ouvriert* have sometimes won around 5 per cent of the vote in presidential elections. In the 2009 European elections the NPA achieved 4.9 per cent of the vote and LO 1.2 per cent. In the 2012

presidential elections the NPA candidate won 1.15 per cent of the vote (*Guardian*, 23 April 2012).

Another actor is the *Parti de Gauche* led by Jean Luc Mélenchon. Based on former PS members, it combined with the Communists in the *Front de Gauche* for the 2009 elections and the 2012 presidential elections. In the latter it won a disappointing 11 per cent of the vote, compared with 17.9 per cent for the National Front. Its boycott of the *Front de Gauche* provoked further defections from the NPA's dwindling ranks. French trade unionism has been more radical than its British or German counterparts; but qualitatively smaller and more divided. With density at 8 per cent, compared with 25 per cent in Germany, mobilising power largely depends on the *delegates du personnel*. The struggles against Sarkozy's reforms demonstrated continued combativity. On the evidence it is difficult to conclude they reflect more extensive politicisation of workers related to the NPA and its supporters in the SUD unions, still less a 'qualitative shift in union strategy and political orientation'.

This latter judgement is certainly contentious when applied to Britain. Upchurch and his colleagues talk of 'a crisis of social democratic trade unionism', at other times of 'strains' and 'tensions' between social democratic parties and unions (2009a: 527). The latter is more exact. If there is a crisis it is reflected more in decline of coverage, collective bargaining, power and purpose, than in transfer of political allegiance or transcendence of reformism. The fact that the Labour Party, PS and SDP are very different organisations, their distinctive links with discrete union movements conditioned by dissimilar histories is not simply a qualification but a constraint on model-building. In Britain, where the links have been organic, nothing resembling the Left Party or even the NPA has appeared. Faced with the neoliberalization of Labour, most unions, enrolling the bulk of membership, have

remained loyal. Haltingly and ineffectually they have embraced a rhetorical 'reclaim the party for social democracy' approach. They have created a culture of complaint and compliance when New Labour was in government, protesting when it was safe, uncritically supporting the party when elections loomed. There is more left talk and sabre-rattling when the Conservatives are in power. The longer-term threat to the enduring alliance may stem from the resilience of unions which traditionally were not affiliated to the Labour Party, such as the National Union of Teachers, Royal College of Nursing, and the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), within broader patterns of membership decline, rather than defections to left-wing politics from existing Labour Party affiliates (McIlroy, 2009).

In 2010 sixteen unions with 4.7 million members affiliated 3 million members to Labour (ibid: 166). The RMT and the Fire Brigades Union, (FBU) which disaffiliated over Labour opposition to a major strike, are not just a minority; representing in aggregate 125,000 members, they are a fractional one. These defections are noteworthy; as no other union has followed since 2004 they hardly constitute a trend. Nor have the RMT or FBU advocated further exodus. In terms of creating an alternative to Labour, their exits were unilateral. Little attempt was made to develop dissatisfaction or struggles inside the party. There were impediments, from the loyalty of the big battalions who dominate the union vote inside the party to avowedly unpolitical TUC staff who oppose alternatives to Labour (TUC, 2009: 155-8).

But successful strategic thinking is typically long term: arguably the RMT surrendered a minority voice in a party of government for a minority voice in a small nationalist group, the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). Certainly the latter had six representatives in the Scottish Assembly. Within two years it split, the Scottish RMT

disaffiliated and the SSP is today practically defunct. The RMT's relationship with another small group, Respect likewise came to grief. The breach with Labour was not root and branch: an RMT group of 23 Labour MPs continues to prosecute the union's interests in Parliament, perhaps suggesting the party's continued pertinence. The limitations are apparent: when its convenor John McDonnell stood for the party leadership the RMT provided vocal support but, because of disaffiliation, no votes.

The possibilities of successful left-wing activity inside Labour are restricted. But the same applies outside. Connolly and Darlington record that the RMT has hesitated to move towards the optimal form of political representation for unions – a new party. They refer to three more limited projects the RMT has initiated but we need to estimate their weight and success. The electoral coalition, 'No 2 EU – Yes to Democracy', contested the 2009 European elections. It mustered few new forces or any radically new politics. Its additional supporters were the remnant of the Communist Party (CP), around the *Morning Star*, and the Trotskyist Socialist Party (SP, formerly the *Militant* tendency). As its title suggests, the campaign made concessions in its central thrust, opposition to the Lisbon treaty and EU-led liberalisation, to the nationalism of the old Labour – CP left. For some on the left EU neoliberalism and deregulation are no worse than home-grown varieties. 'No 2 EU' attracted no sponsorship from other unions and its candidates won 1 per cent of the vote.

Unlike its predecessor, the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) has not received national RMT sponsorship, perhaps because it has contested British elections in which opposition to Labour might prove internally divisive. Key leaders, the general secretary and president, have lent personal support. TUSC is organised by a self-appointed steering committee. The SP is the driving force while its competitor,

the Socialist Workers Party, participates. TUSC's programme turns on public ownership 'under democratic control'. It includes demands redolent of the old Labour left, from repeal of anti-union legislation to withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. In the 2010 general election, TUSC's 42 candidates attracted an average 371 votes. In the 2011 local government elections 174 candidates gained in total 25,000 votes and in 2012, 134 candidates gained 43,671 votes (w.w.w.tusc.org.uk; McIlroy, 2011:122, 139-41). Labour won 29 per cent of the vote in 2010 compared with 35 per cent five years earlier. There is evidence its support fell further among workers. There is dissatisfaction with Labour: it is not being channelled to groups to its left (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010: 352, 389-91).

The third initiative, the National Shop Stewards Movement, the first step to revitalise the grass roots, split in 2011 over building a national anti-cuts organisation. Social movement unionism figures in the new model in the form of RMT affiliation to the Stop the War Coalition, Unite Against Fascism and the World Social Forums. Similar links, often emblematic and episodic, have been made by unions in the past. The RMT shares them with non-radical unions, such as Unison, Unite and the GMB. They do not engage substantial numbers of members; they infrequently impact on mainstream union activity.

The evidence does little to support arguments that the recent history of the RMT affirms the emergence of a minority radical political unionism on any significant scale. The view that we are seeing tensions, tussles and adjustments within the continuing dominance of Labour is more mundane but realistic. The RMT still subsists to a degree organisationally and politically, within the orbit of Labourism. It has not evolved as a distinctive, oppositional political entity, comparable with unions historically aligned to Communist and anarchist formations

in other European countries. It is difficult to discern the forces which could produce a socialist party. Change takes time. The absence of proportional representation in national elections militates against it. And since 2004 testing the water has produced results undeniably 'poor' (*Socialist Worker*, May 14, 2011).

This suggests a further qualification. I do not want to diminish the role of leaders and activists. But we need to consider them in interaction with members. Any model of radical political unionism has to attend to 'ordinary' members. There is little convincing evidence that RMT members positively embrace the initiatives discussed above. Active endorsement rather than passive toleration is indispensable to socialist progress. Labour history is rich in examples of division of spheres and the privatisation and individualisation of politics, with militant representatives, with political concerns, mobilising for industrial, not political, goals less active members with diverse, typically less radical, politics (cf. Darlington, 2007: 46).

At a launch rally I attended, Brian Caton, retiring general secretary of the Prison Officers Association, told his audience that he was enthusiastic about TUSC; he could not deliver his members. Similar reasoning may underpin the RMT's organisational abstention. In 2004-5, the RMT's statutory ballot, required to permit the political fund necessary to resource political activity *of any kind*, saw 88 per cent in favour; but the turnout was only 37 per cent, not necessarily a sign of opposition, scarcely an indication of enthusiasm. Historically the number of members opting out of paying into that fund was negligible – even after disaffiliation from Labour. In 2005-6, 432 members opted out. The following year there was a dramatic increase: 9,000 members opted out and the figure is now 10,179 (Certification Officer, 1997-2010). Whatever the reasons this does not suggest politicisation.

The utility of the model is not enhanced if we examine other unions cited as examples (Upchurch et al 2009a: 172). The FBU is not involved in the above initiatives. It finances left causes, provided some support to Respect and confirmed its disaffiliation; its orientation might be dubbed 'reclaim Labour from outside'. It cultivates links with Labour MPs. With eight other unions, including the RMT and PCS, it is a member of the Trade Union Coordinating Committee – again convened by McDonnell. The leadership of the PCS which has 292,000 members is dominated by the SP, although 90 per cent of members abstain in executive elections. The union has adopted a programme based on socialist and Keynesian conceptions. It was traditionally a non-affiliated body in recognition of the diversity of its members' views: it only established a political fund in 2006. Electoral efforts are limited to Make Your Vote Count – putting questions related to PCS policies to candidates. There are plans to stand anti-cuts candidates: a consultation exercise secured 150 returns from 800 branches, although two-thirds responding were in favour. Some characterize sections of the membership as compliant in current strategy but passive and largely unradicalised (Funnell, 2011; McIlroy, 2011; 139-141).

Connolly and Darlington present an impressive picture of the RMT's industrial militancy. Its connection with the political initiatives discussed above is, on this account, tenuous. Left-wing activists, it is asserted, have infused militancy 'with a distinctive political cutting-edge'; moreover, 'a left-wing political orientation and strategy has been highly influential in shaping the nature of membership strike mobilisation' (19, 26). If there is a fit between socialist politics and industrial militancy among activists it is far from clear that such a fit operates among strikers. The majority of stoppages are concerned with wages, the labour process, job loss, discipline and safety. They are short 24 or 48 hour stoppages, in compliance with

anti-union legislation. There have been strikes, but not recently, over privatisation; but members have not struck over 'external' political issues, the NHS, public expenditure, wars or environmental questions. There is no evidence that the stoppages that have occurred produced recruits to TUSC or socialist groups in appreciable numbers.

In the absence of examples it may be concluded that we have not progressed from previous periods of militancy (Hyman 1989: 212-238) or the position where mobilisation remains on the terrain of industrial problems – not activists' political radicalism - and makes few political converts. The same appears to apply to the FBU and PCS. The reality may be closer than we would like to think to the quotidian economism of CP shop stewards and their members or a CP-dominated union such as DATA/TASS (McIlroy, 2007: 231-3, 246-8). The RMT may still reflect, as British trade unionism historically has, a fissure among members between militancy, on the one hand, and allegiance to electoral politics and mainstream parties, usually Labour, on the other (Hinton, 1983: 197-200). We keep returning to the need, part of wider silences in industrial relations for which Connolly and Darlington should not be reproached, for more research into members.

Political unionism has not coincided with membership growth in Germany, where decline has been persistent, or France (Upchurch et al 2009b: 190). Despite optimism (Heery et al, 2003), the position is similar in Britain – unions lost 342,000 members, 2009-10, while density fell to 26.6 per cent, its lowest since the early 1930s (Achur, 2011). Decline has slowed but proceeded on all conventional indices. Most academics recognising the power and enduring cathartic impact of the factors which sustain it – a neoliberal state and employers, inimical economic change, unfavourable trends in industry, employment, the class structure, class culture, and workers' consciousness – have signed up to the realist camp (Simms and Charlwood, 2010:

143). Unlike some optimists, Connolly and Darlington acknowledge there is a problem when discussing revitalisation of generalising from one case to others where the position is less propitious. The problem is elided by assertion of the *possibility* of radical political trade unionism becoming more widespread in European unions. The *probability* of transfer, estimated via analysis of the factors, forces and processes which facilitate or curb emulation by other actors in other sectors and translation from rail to different union environments, requires future address.

It is hard, for example, to imagine Britain's biggest unions, Unison or Unite, breaking with Labour to embrace or transcend TUSC. The Unison leadership considers affiliation non-negotiable; it initiates disciplinary action against those who share the approach of the RMT leaders. In Unite, the left caucus is dominated by supporters of a leadership which outside platform rhetoric has little time for radical political unionism. In the industrial sphere, extensive replication of the successful aggressive bargaining, propensity to strike and solidarity from rail to other sectors appears unlikely. What comes across, indeed it is recognised by the authors, is the specificity of the favourable environment in which the RMT operates compared with other parts of the private sector where the problems of revitalisation primarily reside (Gospel 2005; Metcalf 2005).

The agency of activists is important; so is the fact that it interacts with circumstance and clashes with stronger agencies hostile or indifferent to trade unionism. The conditions in which RMT activists organise – grievance over privatisation, profits, work and wages, expanding passenger markets, government subsidy, employer vulnerability, willingness to make concessions - are undeveloped or absent in many habitats central to revitalisation. If we eschew abstract, idealist invocations of 'agency' and, abandoning voluntarism, consider actual agents, rooted

in material reality, activists in these areas are declining, weak and reactive (Terry 2010). Effective leadership may maximise potential in unpromising territory. A circumscribed plea for imaginative leadership and calculative militancy in other sectors, for harder strategies tailored to distinctive milieux and a particular balance of forces, may stem from consideration of rail. That is different from the hazard that radical political unionism has a reasonable chance of spreading to other sectors across Europe as an instrument of revitalisation. The economic tremors and austerity that emerged after 2007 have not run their course. We may see resurgence in combativity and conflict. Fundamental reconfigurations of organised labour – whether exemplified in the growth of the Labour Party around World War I or the emergence of Communism in France or Germany in the aftermath of 1917 – are usually contingent on seismic events and the agency of powerful components of existing movements, not marginal groups. Scepticism about radical political unionism in the present and its qualitative growth in the foreseeable future seems sensible.

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