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The Crisis of “Social Democratic” Unionism

The “Opening up” of Civil Society and the Prospects for Union Renewal in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany

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This article defines and explores the crisis of social democratic trade unionism in three countries in western Europe. The authors contend that a particularized form of postwar trade union orientation was socially constructed in Britain, Germany, and France in which a party union nexus gave special privileges to unions in return for compliance with state policies in the national interest. This arrangement has broken down in recent years under the pressure of global product market competition. As a result, trade unions are being forced to adopt alternative strategic orientations, involving both a fracture in the party union nexus and a willingness to work within wider civil society.

Keywords: *trade unionism; community unionism; neoliberalism; social movement unionism; party union nexus*

Introduction: A Crisis of Social Democratic Trade Unionism?

There is a growing debate concerning the impact of neoliberal restructuring and globalization on trade union organization and vitality. In the North American context, the debate has focused on the extent to which these developments are shifting the strategic orientations of trade unions away from “business unionism” toward “social movement unionism” (Dreiling and Robinson 1998; Robinson 2000) and the

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extent to which the resulting “new labor internationalism” provides the basis for union revitalization and renewal (Goldfield 1989; Moody 1997; Waterman 2001; O’Brien 2004; Ghigliani 2005). In western Europe, the impact of neoliberal restructuring and globalization has produced a different form of crisis and a divergent trajectory of reorientation. This reflects the institutional specificity of the relationship between trade unions, political parties, and the state that predominated in postwar western Europe and that produced nationally specific forms of “social democratic trade unionism.” Social democracy is a historical phenomenon marked by the integration and interpenetration of socialism and trade unionism and the de facto integration of the labor movement into parliamentary democracy (Minock 1988). This integration was achieved through a historical “settlement” in which trade unions recognized the legitimacy of private property and the market in return for “concessions” based on the delivery of state welfare and state support for collective bargaining. The ability of labor movements to extract concessions was based on the close institutional connections between trade unions and a “dominant party of labor” with an ideological commitment to social justice, political liberalism, and the welfare state. Hence, social democratic trade unionism was the product of this “specific social structuration” (Moschonas 2002, 17) marked by a historically specific and contingent relationship between a growing industrial working class, trade unions, reformist socialist and labor parties, and the nation-state.

The processes of neoliberal restructuring and globalization have produced a serious crisis in this form of trade unionism. The industrial strength and bargaining power of trade unions has been undermined by deindustrialization and a drastic decline in trade union density. The ability of the nation-state to offer concessions has become severely constrained by the dynamics of global competition. In this context, social democratic political parties have become increasingly attracted to neoliberal policy prescriptions, and where concessions remain, these take the form of defensive or “dented shield” forms of concession associated with “competitive corporatism,” in which trade unions attempt to mitigate the worst effects of neoliberal restructuring (Rhodes 1998). The development of new strategic orientations around “partnership” and competitive corporatism reflects a weakening of the union-party nexus that has been induced by the institution-dissolving dynamic of neoliberalism. The development and consolidation of Keynesian social democratic settlements involved the “statization of society” (Panitch 1986, 189) or “statization of social life” (Poulantzas 1978). Neoliberal restructuring involves the “opening up” of civil society, and this process of opening up presents trade unions with two principal avenues of strategic and ideological reorientation. First, unions have the option to embrace the associational politics of the “third way” and adopt the strategy of social partnership (Cohen and Rogers 1995; Ackers and Wilkinson 2003; Prabhaker 2003). Second, unions can exploit this opening up in order to liberate themselves from the institutional and ideological fetters of the Keynesian welfare state in order to reestablish themselves as autonomous “movements” in civil society. There are, however,

serious institutional barriers to these forms of reorientation, and as Rainnie and Ellem (2006) suggest, labor movements at whatever level have to experience near-terminal crisis before the rigidities of old structures, attitudes, and activities can be opened up to new and challenging ways of organizing.

In this article, we explore the possibilities and limits to trade union reorientation in the context of the crisis of social democratic trade unionism in western Europe. We develop a comparative case study analysis of developments in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France in order to highlight both common trends and tendencies and the enduring impact of nationally specific path dependencies. The purpose of our analysis is to provide an institutional analysis of neoliberal restructuring and trade union strategic orientation in western Europe to complement and extend existing analyses that have been developed in the North American context (cf. Robinson 2000, 2002). We focus in particular on two interrelated processes of reorientation associated with the crisis of the party–union nexus: first, the extent to which strains within the party–union nexus are producing division and fractures within and between unions on the basis of an accommodation to, or resistance against, neoliberalism; and second, the extent to which a weakening of the party–union nexus is resulting in the emergence of new union identities based on social movement unionism or new labor internationalism. We suggest that there are three important variables that are likely to determine the extent of reorientation and division: first, the ability of unions to repoliticize their relationship with social democratic parties and governments; second, the ability of unions to open up their internal procedures and modes of representation; and third, the willingness of union members to engage in new and challenging ways of organizing. We begin by exploring the divergent institutional contexts of the case study “labor regimes” in order to provide a rationale for our choice of cases and to contextualize the crisis of social democratic trade unionism in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. This is followed by a discussion of the political fractures and political reorientation of trade unions in our case study societies. We conclude with an assessment of how the opening up of civil society has provided the basis for strategic reorientation and highlight the diminishing strength of national institutional specificities and the increasing importance of strategic political choice as the basis for trade union revitalization and renewal.

Institutional Factors

Both Crouch (1993) and Hyman (2001) have noted the formation of differences in industrial relations and labor regimes between the West European liberal democracies. Crouch, utilizing a historical perspective and focusing on postwar settlements, defines the concept of alternative “European state traditions.” Hyman, in analyzing Britain, Germany, and Italy, constructs a triangulation of market, class, and society and posits each country differently in terms of “geometry.” In essence,

both authors offer an explanation of difference dependent on historical trajectory specified in institutional form. This would assume that industrial relations' outcomes are a dialectical product of both structure and agency. As Nielsen, Jessop, and Hausner (1995) suggest, continuity and change in social democracy is likely in terms of both "path dependency" and "path shapers." In addition to national variance, we can also note tensions within the explicit party–union nexus. A key characteristic has always been a perceived need for trade union leaderships to maintain the balance between sectional (or class) interest and national interest. There is thus a tension between the "sword of justice" and "vested interest" roles of unions (Flanders 1970, 15–16). In the postwar period of ascendant social democracy, this tension was contained by a political settlement whereby government concessions were given to the union leaders in return for their exerting some discipline over rank-and-file wage militancy (Flanders 1974; Coates 1984; Hassel 2003). Variable forms of neocorporatism were de rigueur, more entrenched in the "strong" social democratic states of Scandinavia and weakest in the "liberal market" economies of the United Kingdom and Ireland (Bornstein 1984; Padgett and Paterson 1991). A second tension was located in the potential development of bureaucratic forms of representation emanating from the "institutionalization" of trade unions within "pluralist" industrial relations systems. The accommodation between trade union leaders, employers, and governments was often seen by rank-and-file members to be against their own economic interest. Indeed, such institutionalization and bureaucratization of the union leaderships has the potential to erode union legitimacy and mobilizing capacity (Offe and Wiesenthal 1985; Müller-Jentsch 1986; Darlington 1994).

In Hyman's (2001) historically determined triangulation, Britain lies between the axis of market and class, in contrast to Germany, between society and market. Hyman's Italian example, between class and society, can usefully be applied to our example of France, where a conflictual industrial relations regime combined with the critical mass of a large postwar Communist Party restrained the development of the social democratic model. Differences in the points of triangulation reflect varying emphases on the importance of the market economy within the general *body politik*. In Britain, the dominance of the liberal market economy is in contrast to the "social market" in Germany. Trade unions in Britain have also proffered a pronounced liberalism in their historical development, with Marxist ideology relegated to the margins (Hinton 1983; Phelps Brown 1986). In Germany, the political orientation of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) has exhibited more equal balance between the ideologies of socialism and liberalism, and the postwar compromise between capital and labor was pronounced in terms of its structure of codetermination and economic democracy. However, both Britain and Germany have a shared experience of a dominant party of labor. In both countries, strong organizational and ideological links have existed between a "single party of labor" and the leadership of the trade unions. The formal link is stronger in Britain. In Germany, links are based on the overlap between membership of the SPD and trade unions rather than direct

funding or committee powers (Hamann and Kelly 2004). France has typically been characterized in terms of the fragmented nature of its labor movement regime. The Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) has traditionally been aligned to the Communist Party, while the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) gradually moved to align itself with the Socialist Party. There have thus been alternative party union links as well as federations, such as Force Ouvrière (FO), that have broken from past links. In more recent years, alternative unions to the left have emerged, such as L'Union syndicale Solidaires (SUD) and the G10. However, low levels of union penetration have prevented the development of a dominant party–union nexus in the social democratic tradition. Despite this, the *dirigiste* state in the postwar period has encouraged state planning and the development of a social model that is firmly in the social democratic tradition of welfarism combined with liberal democracy. We now turn to a more detailed examination of individual countries.

Partial Fracture in Britain

Recent changes in the relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions have “presented the political world with a puzzle” (Ludlam 2004, 70). On the one hand, the unions continue to maintain a strong affiliation to the party, with 5 million of the 6.8 million members of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in affiliated unions. The unions still provide 55 percent of the party funding and remain crucial at the local level to Labour’s electoral machine (Leopold 2006). Union leaders retain access to the ears of government ministers, even though the formal machinery of neocorporatism is largely absent. On the other hand, the party has sought to distance itself from the unions and has pursued a modernization strategy premised on a deliberate weakening of the party–union link, enacted through a retraction of trade union influence and power within the party by altering block vote arrangements, truncating union “sponsorship” of members of parliament (MPs), and seeking alternative funding arrangements from business sources (McIlroy 1998; Ludlam, 2004). Ludlam (2001, 2004), reflecting on these more recent events, suggests that the link may be gradually weakening due to the gradual erosion of Labour’s connections with its traditional working-class base. Leopold (2006, 3), in a separate assessment, concludes that the “distancing” between unions and Labour has had the effect of shifting the unions away from “insider” status or a “union-party bonding” model to one of “internal lobbying.”

Central to an understanding of Ludlam’s puzzle is the difference between the aspirations of the unions and the reality of New Labour’s industrial strategy. New Labour has been the vanguard of the workforce flexibility agenda. Its modernization program for the public services, involving privatization, private financing, and internal marketization, are also to the forefront of developments within the advanced economies. While New Labour represents some continuation of Thatcherite neoliberalism, it is also required, because of its union connections, “to make more concessions than its predecessor with trade unions and social-democratic policy preferences” (Crouch 2001,

104). The nature and scale of concessions are a source of extreme tension. Substantive tension over jobs, pay, and public services has been compounded by New Labour's ideological commitment to the "third way," central to which has been a downplaying of class conflict and the espousal of consensus politics and partnership. In essence, partnership represents a new regime of capital accumulation that challenges adversarialism. It has been presented by New Labour as a panacea to the problem of declining productivity growth (Department of Trade and Industry, 1998, 2002, 2004). Government funds have been made available for joint employee–employer partnership initiatives and the development of union learning representatives at the workplace level (with protected rights similar to health and safety representatives). However, in attempting to create a new institutional framework, New Labour declines to equate employee representation with trade union representation, preferring instead a new model of multichannel employee voice that can contain nonunion employee representation as an alternative. A result of these constrictions is that a second front of opposition has opened up between sections of the union movement and New Labour over its partnership orientation. Indeed, some newly elected trade unions leaders (the "awkward squad") have questioned the new shared value of partnership as an alternative to the traditional values of free collective bargaining (Murray 2003). Evidence of the failure of New Labour to develop a new institutional framework is compounded by three major unions that have developed critical positions. For example, Amicus General Secretary Derek Simpson has advised branches to revisit previous agreements signed under his predecessor's regime.¹ The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) has also pulled out of a national agreement with Royal Mail (Gall 2004), and the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) has similarly abandoned partnership in the Inland Revenue since electing a new left leadership (Beale 2005).

This combination of opposition to both public service reform and attempted ideological revision of Britain's traditional adversarial ethos pervades the government's difficulties in its efforts to reshape the institutional framework of industrial relations.

Degradation of Modell Deutschland

While New Labor in Britain has run into ground in terms of redefining a new consensus-based ideology, in Germany the state has attempted to *abandon* key aspects of the consensus-based Modell Deutschland. After the defeat of Kohl's Christian Democratic Union (CDU)–led government in 1998, the SPD leader Schröder promised to "see consensus reinstitutionalized" through a program of demand-led investment and the vehicle of the Employment Alliance (Bündnis für Arbeit) brokered by the government between the employers' organizations and trade unions.² However, the framework for the alliance was that of the perceived need to restore German business competitiveness and in so doing to pressurize the unions into concession bargaining. This "competitive corporatism" was a marked change from the "welfare" corporatism of the West German "golden age." The failure of the initiative was in large

part due to employers’ intransigence and their insistence on labor market reform, leading to a paralysis in state–capital–labor relations within the newly unified Germany (Upchurch 2000). The SPD-led coalition, under continuing pressure from business, then returned to the “reform” agenda with the 2003 launch of Agenda 2010.³ The rationale for the program was to combat high unemployment by shifting responsibility for job seeking from the state to the individual. The reforms have since been described as “the largest social reform project in the history of the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany]” (Lohse 2005, 1), which “embraced most of the economic and social policy reforms proposed by the opposition” (Streeck 2005, 163). The program represented an attack on the “first resort” welfare philosophy of the German social democratic model and the parallel adoption of the “third way” by the SPD (Hombach 2000; Arestis and Sawyer 2003). The affirmation of supply-side economics by Schröder was not without casualty within the SPD. Under the leadership of Oskar Lafontaine, the SPD had begun to resist emerging neoliberal orthodoxies. Lafontaine argued that the European Central Bank and Bundesbank should adjust monetary policy to favor employment growth alongside European-wide corporate tax harmonization to prevent downward drift in corporate tax levels. Lafontaine lost the backing of Schröder in this challenge and subsequently resigned from office under substantial business pressure (Upchurch 2000; Ryner, 2003, 213–19). The contemporaneous application of restrictive wage policy and monetary constraint was framed by the need to meet European Monetary Union convergence criteria. This in turn spurred a decline of wages and salaries as a proportion of GDP (Schmidt and Dworschak 2006), causing further tension with the unions. The erosion has been a gradual process and an expression of the tendency of both business and political elites to place the external performance of the German economy before the German “social model” (Grahl and Teague 2004). The gradual nature of dilution poses a strategic dilemma for the unions and their relationship with the SPD. Under neocorporatist structures, the unions were able to operate with “insider” status and attempt to moderate reform agendas (Offe 1985; Streeck 1992). Neoliberal restructuring created severe limits to the possibilities of union moderation. Unions were given little choice but to consider militant opposition as an alternative strategy and in the process risk the employers and state’s diluting the social model even more at labor’s expense. The formation of the Grand Coalition between the CDU and SPD in 2006 exacerbated this dilemma, since the price paid by the SPD within the coalition was to continue to endorse labor market reform. The scene was thus set for a fracture in the ranks of both the SPD and the unions over the future of the “labor-friendly” aspects of the social model.

France: Social Polarization, Social Unrest, and Union Division

The crisis of “state-led capitalism” (Bieler 2006, 8) in France has been manifested in increasing social polarization and social unrest. Indeed, France has experienced “a decade of revolt against social inequality” beginning with the strike wave in 1995

and ending in 2005 with three weeks of rioting in the Paris suburbs (Wolfreys 2006, 3). These visible expressions of discontent in “the street” have been partially successful in blocking some elements of economic and social reform, such as the youth employment contract (CPE, *Contrat de première embauche*). Nevertheless, liberalization has continued, although the pace of change has been slow and piecemeal due to its political unpopularity, contributing to governments of both the center-right and the center-left failing to retain office. In relation to the unions, the social consequences of liberalization have generated a greater capacity among workers to mobilize industrially and politically, but disunity among increasingly fragmented union confederations has limited its effectiveness (Jefferys 2003).

While formally united in opposition to the public sector reforms introduced by the center-right government, the strike wave of 1995 exacerbated already existing divisions among the unions (Jefferys 1996). CFDT support for some of the reforms provoked a major confrontation with the newly combative FO, which developed a closer proximity to the CGT as fierce and uncompromising critics of welfare reform. The strikes also produced tensions within unions, such as the CFDT, where the leadership was accused by its left-wing opponents of “seeking to become the privileged partner of government and employers” (Goestchy 1998, 389). The strike wave contributed to developing a “different ideological atmosphere” (Moschonas 2002, 358) in French politics that was critical of neoliberal globalization, and this was expressed in the election of the Plural Left government in 1997. Despite being discursively to the left of New Labour, the governmental practice of the Plural Left was more akin to the British experience in that it combined economic liberalism with limited social intervention to tackle social polarization (Moschonas 2002). It privatized more companies than any government of the Right and achieved a marked reduction in the public deficit in order to achieve European Monetary Union convergence criteria (Levy 2001). The unions were courted by legislation to shorten working time that, although popular, also enabled greater work flexibility to be introduced at the company level. This localization of industrial relations met with opposition from FO but gained support from the CFDT. Other social reforms also met with a mixed response, with, for example, the CGT refusing to sign *le plan d'aide au retour à l'emploi* (PARE), which was also opposed by unemployed associations. This was an indication that the Plural Left governed at the expense of its traditional supporters among the lower social strata who became the victims of its policies (Bachet and Durand 2001), and this contributed to electoral disaster in 2002.

This defeat made the divisions in the Left and the unions even more apparent. These were manifested most visibly in the referendum over the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, which epitomized the question of whether France would adopt the social market model of capitalism. Therefore, a statist outlook in the nationalist “Right” also contributed to the *no* vote, which, however, was strongest on the “Left.” The strength of the *no* varied from 98 percent (Parti Communiste Français [PCF]) and 94 percent (“extreme left”) to 60 percent (Greens) and 56 percent Parti

Socialiste (PS). The unions too were divided, but the majority declared themselves against the treaty. Union sympathizers largely followed the respective lines and voted no in widely varying proportions: CGT (78 percent), FO (75 percent), SUD (79 percent), CFDT (43 percent), Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (35 percent), and Confédération Générale des Cadres–Confédération Française de l’Encadrement (15 percent) (Grunberg 2005). The issue of Europe demonstrates most starkly the different and contradictory union and political perspectives on alternatives to neoliberal globalization, divisions that also contributed to the electoral victory of the Right under Sarkozy in 2007.

Political Alternatives

We now proceed to examine the political consequences of these strains and tensions on the social democratic model. In particular, we focus on the development of alternative political configurations between unions and party.

Britain

While the distancing between New Labour and the unions can be clearly identified, the effects of this distancing on union strategy are complex. Previous studies of Britain focus on the continuing *strength* of the alliance between unions and the Labour Party. Minkin (1992, 647–49) argues that the alliance is unlikely to be broken due to the class-based character of the Labour Party; its “broad tent” nature, which can accommodate radicals; and the binding glue between unions and party encapsulated in the popular concept of TIGMOO (“This Great Movement of Ours”). McIlroy (1998) refers to an *enduring* alliance and points to the failure of the challenge of rank-and-file movements in the unions to build a political alternative to Labour. In more recent commentary, Charlwood (2004) would appear to endorse such views on the alliance and downplays emerging divisions by depicting the awkward squad in terms of traditional Left–Right divisions within the labor movement. We would suggest that there has emerged a deeper political differentiation premised on the future form of the party–union nexus. We detect two broad responses from union leaderships: first, a majority position that remains loyal to Labour but that seeks to attempt to influence New Labour policy by open criticism and internal lobbying, the withholding of funding, and a challenge to the Labour Party leadership to be more sympathetic to the trade union agenda (*reform*); and second, a minority position reflecting a fundamental questioning of the future of the Labour–union link (*rejection*).

A campaign for internal party reform is evidenced by motions criticizing the government’s position at Labour and TUC conferences and by attempts to coordinate protest among unions on a factional basis (Ludlam and Taylor 2003). As with any

factional campaign, the logical outcome is to reconstruct Labour with a new leadership, in this case, openly sympathetic to the positions held by these unions. Derek Simpson, for example, argues,

The *biggest* threat to New Labour is the trade union movement. If it kicks into gear it can mobilize its troops, its finances, its block votes to *bring down New Labour* internally, that is within the Party. (quoted in Murray 2003, 126; italics added)

However, New Labour's abandonment of formal sponsorship of MPs by the unions has left the unions with less authority over MPs, and it does not follow that all union members who are MPs will follow the union line. An example of MPs' "indiscipline" came with the parliamentary vote in March 2007 to replace the nuclear-armed Trident submarine, whereby forty-three of the sixty-four Labour MPs who are Unison members voted with the government despite Unison's official opposition to replacement. Thirty-nine of fifty-four Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) MPs voted for Trident replacement despite General Secretary Tony Woodley's writing them all personal letters reminding them of the TGWU's "long record of supporting the removal of Britain's nuclear weapons, stretching back to the 1950."⁴ Unions have resorted to withholding expected monies to the party as part of their protest at individual policies. The CWU withheld £500,000 after the 2001 general election and spent the money instead on campaigns against specific government policies, while the GMB (Britain's General Union) withheld £2 million for similar reasons (Ludlam and Taylor 2003). In 2004, the GMB withheld a further £750,000 from a proposed £5 million special election fund and used the money to fund the union's campaign against creeping privatization of the National Health Service (NHS) (Leopold 2006). The strategy of internal confrontation and bargaining within Labour has been further pursued by the "big four" Labour affiliated unions—Unison, Amicus, GMB, and the TGWU—which met Labour MPs in early summer 2004 to discuss an alternative election manifesto, made necessary in the unions' view because Labour now needed to "reconnect the party activists and the public" (Tempest 2004). The "accord," struck at a weekend forum in Warwick University with the then-industry secretary Patricia Hewitt, was in the best traditions of TIG-MOO. Unions were promised manifesto commitments to guaranteed leave entitlements, enhanced rights to strike without fear of dismissal, and extra rights of transferred workers in the public sector. A future review was also promised to examine unequal pay. Tony Woodley of the TGWU described the commitments as "serious movement" and said that a "united trade union movement is now being treated again with respect and dignity."⁵ Although some "movement" was achieved, the talks failed to win extra protection against unfair dismissal or compulsory pensions contributions from employers. Many of the promised reforms (on pensions and the two-tier workforce) were also already under progress from the government. Fear that the government would not fulfill its promises on pensions later led to threatened strike

action by public sector unions in 2005, reemphasizing the "fragility" of the agreement (Heery 2005, 12). Local authority workers were excluded from key aspects of the pensions deal, leading to a series of one-day strikes in 2006. Unison then announced in March 2006 that it would "refuse to finance, canvass or pay for printing leaflets for the council elections until a deal is reached on the pensions dispute" (Mulholland 2006). In a parallel development, and despite the public service unions' willingness to work in partnership with the government over the future of public services, the unions were forced to call a one-day protest under the aegis of the TUC's NHS Together campaign over the fate of the NHS in March 2007. The day of action interplayed with the Keep Our NHS Public campaign organized by activists at the grassroots level and produced an interesting mix of officially led union action combined with unofficial political and community initiative.

A minority position among the awkward squad, however, has been held by those unions and union leaders who have been prepared to abandon the link with the Labour Party altogether, either by openly declaring support for alternative parties and being expelled from the Labour Party (the Rail, Maritime, and Transport Union [RMT]) or by voting to disaffiliate (the Fire Brigades Union [FBU]).⁶ Within this grouping can also be included Mark Serwotka, the leader of the PCS, which is not affiliated with the Labour Party. The evidence of trade union leaders' willingness to support parties other than Labour remains slight, and where the specter has occurred, it has been met with a strong response by the Labour Party leadership. The Party executive took the decision early in 2004 to expel the RMT after six of its Scottish branches voted to affiliate and donate money to the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). The majority FBU leadership appeared committed to the possibility of reforming Labour from without when it gave its backing to the (failed) campaign of left Labour MP John McDonnell in his bid for the leadership of the Labour Party. Subsequent membership debates about the Labour link have taken place in the CWU, the FBU, the media workers' union (BECTU [Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph, and Theatre Union]), and the transport staffs' union (TSSA [Transport Salaried Staffs' Association]) (Leopold 2006). The RMT held a one-day conference early in 2006 to review possible alternatives for political affiliation and followed its initiative with a call to establish a National Shop Stewards Network.⁷ The CWU leadership appear committed to the Labour link, but despite this, the CWU representative on the Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC) stood down from his position in April 2007 citing "a growing conflict of interests between my role in representing and defending the views of CWU members and continuing to spend time on the Labour Party NEC."⁸ General secretaries of four unions (FBU, RMT, PCS, and the college lecturers' NATFHE [National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education]) have since sponsored the Respect-organized Fighting Unions Conference in November 2006. Such discontent within the dominant party-union nexus has material roots. The RMT has consistently rejected the privatization ethos on the railways and London Underground (Darlington 2007), while the FBU was

embroiled in a two-year long dispute over modernization and pay in the Fire Service, in which the government played a key role in blocking the FBU's aspirations (Seifert and Sibley 2005, 68–126). As such, the break with Labour was founded on real concerns of union members rather than a simple Left–Right political disagreement of the union leadership with New Labour. Three years after the industrial dispute with the New Labour Government, for example, the 2007 FBU Conference returned to the affiliation debate but decisively rejected reaffiliation.

Germany

Opposition to the Hartz reforms embraced substantial sections of the trade union movement, with the locus of opposition seemingly centered at rank-and-file and junior *funktionäre* level. A loose coalition of activist networks from the trade unions organized the first large demonstration against Agenda 2010 in November 2003, when an estimated one hundred thousand marched in Berlin led by the banners of the public service union, Ver.di and IG Metall. Core to the antireform protest was an ethos of anti-neoliberalism. This had begun to emerge earlier in Germany, with numerous trade union affiliations to the growing global justice organization ATTAC.⁹ This network was subsequently consolidated in a five hundred–strong fringe meeting of German trade union activists at the European Social Forum in Paris in November 2003 (Bornost 2005). In March 2004, Ver.di called for a national day of action against the reforms, and an estimated half a million people demonstrated in Berlin, Cologne, and Stuttgart.¹⁰ During 2004, further “Monday” demonstrations took place against the reforms, mainly in eastern Germany. The Montagdemonstrationen in Leipzig during August 2004 were particularly notable, with an estimated sixty thousand protestors and Oskar Lafontaine denouncing Schröder's plans “to dismantle the social welfare system.”¹¹ The official position of the DeutscheGewerkschaftsbund (DGB) is that the social state is a cornerstone of social order, and it vehemently opposes notions of a minimalist state.¹² However, following a summit meeting between union leaders and Schröder in August 2004, an uneasy truce was formed, after which the DGB refused to support the eastern-based protests against the state reform program. Similarly, when workers at the Opel factory in Bochum struck for a week in October 2004 against redundancies, they were refused support by the leadership of IG Metall. Despite the unevenness between east and west, the anti-Hartz demonstrations, combined with industrial developments, have created a crisis of loyalty to both the SPD and the trade union leaders.

Declining union membership, neoliberal state policies, and the failure of the 2003 working hours dispute in the east have compounded the crisis of the unions. The political manifestation of the crisis was symbolized by moves by dissident trade unionists, including some regional full-time officials, to participate in the creation of a new left-wing group named the Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit—Die Wahlalternative (WASG; Labor and Social Justice—The Electoral Alternative). The

new grouping adopted an explicit anti-neoliberal program, including opposition to the Hartz reforms and backing for the protests. Its economic program included demands for more progressive taxation and demand management policies. In June 2005, the WASG agreed to an electoral alliance with the eastern-based Linkspartei (Left Party), resulting in joint lists in the September 2005 federal elections. Die Linkspartei was formed from the Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS), which itself originated out of the remnants of the old East German ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party. As such, the PDS still contained in its ranks many ex-Communist activists, many of whom still have elected positions as local councillors within the east. Its leadership, under the triad of Gregor Gysi, Lotha Bisky, and Michael Brie, have been anxious to break out of the party's eastern ghetto by downgrading its Stalinist inheritance and engaging in western-based politics (Thompson 2005). Unity with the western-based WASG offered a distinct opportunity to broaden appeal. Put to the test in the 2005 general election, the alliance received 8.7 percent of the national poll (25 percent in the east and 4.7 percent in the west), and support in the west was twice the level compared to when the PDS stood alone in the previous election. The new alliance now has fifty-four members in the national parliament (twelve of whom who are members of the WASG) and has broken the dominance of the SPD in terms of labor-oriented parliamentary representation. A two-year process of talks to explore a full merger of the Linkspartei and the WASG was completed in June 2007, when the new party was formed with an estimated seventy-two thousand members. The newly elected deputy leader of the party, Oskar Lafontaine, was at pains to place the party in a social justice camp when he told the founding conference's eight hundred delegates, "We are the party of the social state. We need a new force, The Left, which says, 'yes, we want to restore the social state.'"¹³ During the discussions leading to fusion, the fault line between anti-neoliberalism and anticapitalism manifested itself in some tensions within the WASG/Linkspartei debates over future policy (Jünke 2007).¹⁴ Despite these tensions, the new party felt confident enough for Dietmar Bartsch, its managing director, to offer talks to the SPD "if conditions were right."¹⁵

France

Unions in France are heavily reliant on the public sector for membership and influence. The slow pace of liberalization has meant that levels of union density have remained relatively stable for the last decade (at 14 percent for the public sector and 5 percent for the private sector), as has the share of support for union confederations (Andolfatto 2004a; Dufour 2003, 2005a, 2005b). This stability, however, masks a dynamic situation in which episodes of union mobilization against liberalization have opened up divisions within and between union confederations. These divisions have resulted in "organizational flux" (Jefferys 2003, 225) in unions most pronounced in those most engaged in a process of "repositioning" (Andolfatto 2004b, 14).

Of all the main confederations, FO has been threatened the most by the liberalization agenda in that its membership is highly concentrated in the public sector and its influence is most dependent on state recognition. Among its leadership, there prevails a sense that its very existence is in jeopardy (Jefferys 2003), which has produced a defensive and insular outlook. FO has declared itself in absolute opposition to each of the main reforms of employment relations (*ibid*), even calling for the mobilization of general strikes, which expresses its confirmation of its identity of “rebellious” trade unionism (Andolfatto and Sabot 2004).

After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the CGT distanced itself from its past of an overtly political trade unionism, which culminated in its breaking its links with the PCF. This expressed the shift within the CGT away from a “unionism of refusal” toward a “unionism of proposals and negotiations” (Andolfatto and Sabot 2004, 39). The CGT also developed closer relations with the CFDT, trading a lack of support for its radical dissidents (see below) for endorsing its entry to the European Trade Union Congress (Jefferys 2003). However, outright opposition to neoliberal globalization has also touched the CGT, which has been prominent in mobilizations of the unemployed and insecure workers as well as providing some limited backing for ATTAC.

The CFDT has also moved from its close association with the political Left toward an apolitical, pragmatic, and realistic trade unionism that enables it to play its self-designated role as the “shock absorber” of the modernization of France. This process of change has been achieved through a strategy of *recentrage* based on a rejection of ideological politics and reorientation as a civil society actor seeking a consensus with business (Aparicio, Pernet, and Torquéo 1999, 5). The CFDT therefore epitomizes the kind of trade unionism appropriate to the social market alternative to neoliberalism, which is evident in its vociferous support for European integration. The corollary of this new strategy has been an increasingly centralized, bureaucratic, and authoritarian organization, resulting in important defections and loss of members (Dufour 2004) that have formed an important element of the SUD and G10, which have been at the forefront of developing social movement unionism (see below).

Conclusions: Toward Alternative Strategies?

We have posited that the crisis of social democratic trade unionism can be measured and assessed by an examination of three factors—the politicization of unions, the opening up of bureaucratic procedures, and the willingness and opportunity to mobilize “beyond the workplace.” We have indicated the extent to which unions in our three chosen countries have begun to look for alternative political formations and to seek alliances with other agents in civil society that challenge bureaucratic control of the union. We turn now to a final assessment of the development of alternative strategic orientations and identities of unions. In undertaking this task, we are

cognizant that national institutional differences, as well as the conscious action of key actors, may have shaped outcomes.

In assessing prospects in the United Kingdom, Heery, Kelly, and Waddington (2003, 88) focus on the "significant constraints" on the development on social movement unionism and imply that it may be unnecessary as a renewal strategy following the election of New Labour in 1997. Heery and Adler (2004, 60) further suggest that while union movements are faced with state policies of exclusion, they are likely to invest in organizing activity based on the U.S. model. While the practical reorientation of trade unions around a social movement unionism strategy is undeniably weak and patchy, there is, however, some evidence that trade union leaders are beginning to articulate this approach as a key element of strategic reorientation. Evidence of new social reorientation also comes from unions (and indeed the TUC), which remain strongly committed to the Labour link as well as those in the rejectionist camp. The TUC, for example, has undertaken a review of unions' internal practices under the "new unionism" approach. Evidence has been found of the informality and personal testimony elements of the women's movement being incorporated into the TUC's campaigning structures (Heery 1998). Hyman (1999) also notes that the TUC appears to have relaxed bureaucratic practices in its encouragement of antiracist campaigns. The TUC has also actively courted alliances with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and convened a conference for trade unions and NGOs early in 2007, gathering support from established NGOs, such as Oxfam, as well as smaller and newer ones, such as Labour Behind the Label. However, it is in the public sector, in the maelstrom of neoliberal marketization, that most evidence can be found. The leaders of public service unions have been keen to frame workers' discontent in terms of undervaluation or the low esteem in public service work and to link the defense of public services to demands for universal citizenship rights. This view has been articulated clearly by Mark Serwotka:

What the government don't seem to understand is that public sector workers have a pride in being public servants. This is an issue about civil society, workers don't want fragmentation, they believe in basic decent services.¹⁶

The PCS launched a new Coalition for Better Civil and Public Services in March 2006, attracting support from London Citizens, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, and the Howard League for Penal Reform.¹⁷ The union followed this up with a Make Your Vote Count initiative for the May 2007 elections whereby council election candidates were questioned by activists on their attitudes to civil service job cuts and privatization. In a parallel initiative, Unison and Amicus activists have been central to the launch of the national campaign group Keep Our NHS Public, also supported by the National Pensioners' Convention as well as academics, health service professionals, artists, and journalists.¹⁸ Unions have often utilized the "vanguard coalition" in the past (such as in the 1984–85 miners' strike), but as Frege, Kelly, and Turner

(2004) note, the newer coalitions would appear to be more open to nonunion authority, representing the “common cause” or “integrative” type. An example of common cause coalition has been the support given by Unison to the Defend Council Housing campaign against the handover of public housing to social landlords in areas such as Birmingham (Frege, Kelly, and Turner 2004, 141–42). Beyond the defense of public services, there is emerging evidence that many campaigns and coalitions of protest against contentious government policies have resonated deeply within trade unions. Bill Morris, a Labour loyalist and former general secretary of the TGWU, was joined by a further eleven trade union general secretaries and presidents in backing five open letters criticizing government treatment of asylum seekers organized by the national Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers. However, it is the question of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that has met with most official trade union opposition. The Stop the War Coalition now has a total of thirteen national union affiliations and over three hundred union branch affiliations.

Analysis of the German case must be framed within an understanding of the debates that took place within the SPD and trade unions in the 1970s over the relationship between the labor movement and the gathering new social movements (NSM). In particular, the ecological and peace movements inspired the formation of the Green Party in 1980 and created division in the SPD between traditionalists of the Volkspartei approach opposed to collusion with the NSM and radicals who wished to reform SPD policy to accommodate the “new mood of post-materialism” (Padgett and Paterson 1991, 53). As such, the tension between parliamentary reform and extra-parliamentary radicalism has framed the repertoires of action within (west) Germany (see Rucht 2003 for an overview). Within the old east, the opposition movements also contained a strong peace and environmentalist content, adding to the chemistry of protest after unification in 1990 (Dale 2005). However, the German umbrella federation, the DGB, and affiliated unions have always claimed a more nonpartisan approach toward political parties than their British counterparts (Christian Democrats and Liberals have also been prominent in the union movement), and the affinity between unions and the SPD had already been weakening due to the increased diversity of SPD membership and its “catch-all” voting strategy. Indeed, this was already recognized in 1973, when the SPD felt it necessary to try to strengthen its connections with the unions through the establishment of an internal working group (Kastendiek 1984, 431). However, the propensity for unions to develop new strategies in the past always appeared constrained by the bureaucratic “embeddedness” of German unions in the institutions of social partnership (Behrens, Fichter, and Frege 2003, 39). Despite such constraints Behrens, Fichter, and Frege (2003) and Turner (2007) have recorded modest evidence of revitalization strategies being undertaken as neoliberal reform of the social model has gathered pace, including both widening and broadening of agendas within the organizing approach as well as mergers, coalition building, and international cooperation. Annesley (2006), in a study of Ver.di, also records some

innovative activity in the public sector, with the establishment of "blank spot" projects to recruit in greenfield areas and city center one-stop shops. The German unions have also shown recent evidence of new engagement with social movements. As well as union involvement with ATTAC, the DGB and individual unions have allied themselves with environmental campaigns, such as Greenpeace and Deutscher Natur Ring, and some antifascist organizations (Behrens, Fichter, and Frege 2003, 34–35). As such, the new Linkspartei/WASG has been given the political opportunity to develop within the context of workers' fears of neoliberal restructuring and an associated rise of industrial disputes concentrated in the public sector (such as the 2007 rail workers' dispute). This industrial activity is combined with global justice movement concerns and general antiwar sentiment, creating a milieu whereby unions are adopting a more politicized stance. Indeed, there is evidence of trade union involvement with the new party, which would confirm a more fundamental break with the dominance of the SPD (Nachtwey and Spier 2007). Regional officials of both IG Metall and Ver.di were both active in the formation of the WASG, even to the extent that the economic program of the new party was drafted by staff from the economics department of Ver.di. (Bornost 2005).

The fractured nature of the party–union nexus in France has tempered the development of alternative union strategies. The opportunity to develop protest against state attempts to roll back public services and welfare has also dominated the political scene. As a result, social movement unionism in France is based mainly in the public sector and around its defense. It is expressed, however, as a renewed belief in, and commitment to, militant strike action organized through grassroots coordinations and general assemblies. This approach has developed new political capacity through alliances between unions and organizations such as ATTAC. This suggests that unions moving toward a social movement identity are doing so as part of a broader sociopolitical movement against neoliberalism. The degree to which the confederal unions have adopted a social movement identity and practices is varied. FO speaks the language of mobilizing a social movement to defend social rights and is outspoken against the liberal direction of the EU. However, it is hampered in developing social movement practices by its hierarchical structure. Having broken its official link with the PCF, the CGT seems to be at a crossroads and has been looking along both paths. On the one hand, it has downplayed militant trade unionism in favor of seeking common ground with the CFDT. On the other hand, it has led the way in developing links with associations and NGOs. It is, however, autonomous unions that have led the development of a social movement identity among French unions (Milner 2005). At the forefront of developments is SUD, which organizes the most militant sections of public sector workers around the defense of the public service ideal and opposition to liberalization and company and job restructuring. The G10, of which SUD is a major component, also represents itself as part of a wider social movement, and this has led it to make organizational alliances with associations of the unemployed and homeless and to advocate new social rights, such as a guaranteed basic income.

New Labor Internationalism: The Social Forums?

Our final test of unions' willingness to open up by external engagement is that of internationalism. A useful proxy measure for unions' willingness to engage internationally not only with other unions but also with NGOs and campaigns can be judged by participation in the World and European Social Forums (ESF). Indeed, the emergence of unions as a central force within the forums is an indicator of potential willingness of the unions to move beyond the workplace and appeal to actors in wider civil society. For example, eight U.K. unions supported the London ESF as well as the TUC and the Scottish TUC.¹⁹ Speaking at the European Assembly in March 2004, the representative from the TUC linked explicitly the themes of opposition to war on Iraq, the rise of racism and fascism, and labor exploitation in the Third World to the possibility of a different world. He also stated that for trade unions,

our purpose includes economic and social justice for all in the workplace and in the community, our purpose includes respect for all in the workplace and community, our purpose includes employment rights for all, in the UK, in Europe and across the globe. And we are for peace in a framework of international law.²⁰

By the time of the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi, the involvement of unions was considerably greater. Unison, for example, sent an official delegation of thirty from Britain, and IG Metall organized two key workshops on union/NGO cooperation and union organizing in multinational corporations. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) launched its Decent Work initiative at the forum. Such expressions of labor internationalism and working within civil society are not without their problems. As Bieler (2007) noted in his report on the forums, two distinct strands of internationalism can be detected. The decent work approach, while hostile to neoliberalism, wishes for trade unions to socially organize its impacts in the form of a global welfare state. The second strand, represented by grassroots activists in which the French SUD is prominent, is more hostile to the capitalist dynamic in general and wishes to create a transnational labor network of activists on a clear anti-capitalist basis (see Waterman 2007). However, we would suggest that despite these potential divisions, the developments described above mark a limited but significant shift in strategy toward an attempt to reorient trade unions as social actors and also highlight the changing terrain on which trade unions are operating.

In summary, our brief review of evidence from the three countries records some change in political orientations of unions as well as changes in ways of working to include less bureaucratic approaches and more willingness to work in wider civil society. Faced with declining membership, influence, and societal power, this strategic response of sections of the unions and their members can be defined as an attempt to redefine union identity in the light of social democratic accommodation to neoliberal restructuring. Such political accommodation has nevertheless upset the

traditional social democratic party–union nexus, as unions have been driven into a position of internal lobbyists as opposed to powerful insiders within the dominant parties of labor. The differences between the countries, as we have attempted to illustrate, can be explained by a combination of institutional variety and actor preference. However, the old certainties of Crouch's (1993) European state traditions have proved increasingly less able to constrain the development of alternatives. Changes have been more advanced in Germany than in Britain, reflecting both the more enduring nature of the party–union link in Britain, the different electoral systems (which are more favorable to smaller parties in Germany), and the more focused debate on the potential collapse of the social state in Germany. In this respect, we can detect a greater tension within Hyman's (2001) axis of market and society in Germany than between market and class in Britain. The French example appears to consolidate the country's traditional fragmentation of politics and the associated labor movement regime. The evident social polarization over neoliberal restructuring in France is reflected in further union fragmentation to the left combined with vacillation of the mainstream union federations.

While fractures of varying significance have continued to occur within the social democratic party–union nexus, we also find evidence of union willingness to engage in new practices beyond the workplace. Again, we argue that such responses can be explained as a function of union activists', and some union leaders', preparedness to engage with a more openly politicized form of trade unionism. Such politicized trade unionism includes both a willingness to engage more openly with NGOs and single-issue campaigns in collective opposition to social democratic governments and parties and a willingness to embrace aspects of the new labor internationalism. We would contend that developments in all three countries mark a marginal but nevertheless important reconfiguration of party–union relationships outside of the traditional social democratic model of trade unionism.

Notes

1. Amicus has recently merged with the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) to form UNITE.

2. "Schröder Begins Search for Jobs Consensus," *Financial Times*, December 7, 1998.

3. Agenda 2010 is so named to achieve the 2010 targets for labor market deregulation and supply-side initiatives of the European Union's Lisbon strategy.

4. Reported in *Socialist Worker*, issue 2043, March 24, 2007.

5. Patrick Wintour and Tania Branigan, "Labour Promises Extra Holiday," *Guardian*, July 26, 2004.

6. The Wrexham branch of the Rail, Maritime, and Transport Union (RMT) has since voted to support the minority Welsh left party Forward Wales, and nine RMT branches in England now support the newly formed left-wing antiwar party Respect. This new party had one member of parliament (MP) in east London and has embraced some Muslim organizations as well as the Socialist Workers Party and other left-wing organizations within its membership before splitting into two in December 2007: one Communication Workers' Union (CWU) branch in Scotland affiliated to the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP)

and one in southeast Wales to Respect. The London region of the Fire Brigades Union backed Respect in the Greater London Authority and European elections, while the eastern region has given financial support.

7. www.shopstewards.net.

8. CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward, in a statement reported in *Socialist Worker*, May 5, 2007.

9. ATTAC Germany currently has sixteen thousand individual members and is supported by Ver.di, DGB Saar, and numerous other trade union branches. <http://www.attac.de/ueber-attac/was-ist-attac/mitglieder/> (accessed March 10, 2006).

10. <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2004/05/inbrief/de0405201n.html>.

11. Norman Brewer, "Germany: Monday Demonstrations continue to grow," *Green Left Weekly* (online edition), September 8, 2004.

12. DGB Basic Programme. <http://www.dgb.de/sprachen/englisch/sozialstaat.htm> (accessed March 8, 2006).

13. *Irish Times*, June 18, 2007.

14. This has already manifested itself in the Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit—Die Wahlalternative standing against the Linkspartei/Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS) in the Berlin local elections, where the PDS have participated as a governing coalition partner in a program of spending cuts.

15. *Financial Times*, June 19, 2007, p. 9.

16. "New Trade Unions in the Making?" *Red Pepper TUC Special*, 2005.

17. <http://www.pcs.org.uk/Templates/Internal.asp?NodeID=897125> (accessed March 17, 2006).

18. <http://www.keepourhspublic.com/index.php> (accessed March 17, 2006).

19. Affiliated national unions were TGWU, Unison, GMB (Britain's General Union), Association of University Teachers, University and College Union, Amicus, Transport Salaried Staffs' Association, and the RMT.

20. Authors' notes.

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