The International Labour Movement on the Threshold of Two Centuries
Agitation, Organisation, Bureaucracy, Diplomacy

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Introduction

The years around the beginning of the twentieth century and its end were periods of key historical importance, in the first for the founding, in the second for the restructuring, of international trade unionism. In this contribution, my aim is to compare and contrast the two periods. I do so as a sometime labour historian, now primarily preoccupied with contemporary trade unionism but concerned to understand the present through a familiarity with the past.

Any study of labour internationalism has to address a variety of issues. Given that international trade unionism, as understood today, is essentially a construct of *national* trade union organisations, underlying all of these is the question whether internationalism is essentially an extension of national experience, or whether in key respects it can be regarded as a distinctive social phenomenon. More specifically, we may consider: first, what are the *motives* which lead to international organisation; are these the same as have inspired national trade union organisation, or is there some kind of quantum shift? And has the balance between national and international altered significantly over a century and more? Second, are the *forms of action* simply borrowed from national experience, or has international solidarity engendered new methods? Third, are *organisational structures* distinctive, and how far has such distinctiveness changed over time? Finally, does internationalism develop from an *ideology and a discourse* not necessarily rooted in national trade union practice, and does international organisation reciprocally sustain and refine its own mobilising resonances?

In this paper I tackle none of these questions systematically. Space is limited; more to the point, I have undertaken very little original research and rely very heavily on theoretical speculation supported to some extent by the work of others. My central theme is indicated by my subtitle: agitation, organisation, bureaucracy, diplomacy. The early phase of labour internationalism was marked by a tension between the agitator and the bureaucrat: both attempting to spread and consolidate union organisation, both nationally and internationally, but with very different conceptions ('bottom-up' and 'top-down') as to how this might best be achieved. This phase gave way to one in which the new, but weak and largely tokenistic machinery of intergovernmental regulation seemed to offer unions a privileged position as international 'social partners'. Within this framework, international trade unionism became predominantly an instrument of international diplomacy, and has remained so. Yet discordant visions have always existed, first in political challenges to the dominant mode of internationalism, second in the more bread-and-butter concerns of the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs). The rise of 'globalisation' – a new concept of the late twentieth century, but involving processes some of which had spurred the earliest moves towards internationalism – has entailed growing attacks on nationally established

industrial relations regimes and has undermined complacency among the national trade unionisms on which international unionism is founded, as well as encouraging doubts whether current international quasi-regulation is adequate to the new challenges. Thus the question arises: where next?

A (very) simple historical narrative

While there can be debates over the point at which international trade unionism first emerged, it is common to identify this (logically indeed) with the rise and decline of the First International or IWMA. Its brief history revealed many of the dilemmas and tensions which beset subsequent experience of labour internationalism. The IWMA was an uneasy coalition between socialist idealism (itself, of course, irrevocably divided between social-democratic and anarchist wings) and trade union pragmatism, characterised by the British craft union leaders who provided many of its initial members. In consequence, there was a complex dialectic of nationalism and internationalism. Those who were primarily trade unionists – and who, in the British case, had often been in the forefront of efforts to develop local unionism into national organisation to match the expansion of product and labour markets – approached internationalism as a means of defending national conditions of employment against challenges of cross-national labour mobility, particularly during strikes. Those whose approach was primarily political and theoretical (and in many cases had no positive connection to or sympathy for the socio-political system of their nation of origin) viewed internationalism as an end in itself. Such differences fed into the controversies over the logistics of international organisation: should affiliates be subject to the collective will (a debate uncannily resonant of the conflicts over 'democratic centralism' many decades later), or was it for the national members to define and possibly delimit the authority of the centre? Such questions have never been decisively resolved.

After intermittent efforts to revive international trade union collaboration (Lorwin 1929; Schevenels 1956), the creation of the Second (Socialist) International in 1889 provided a framework for more sustained transnational organisation. Given the substantial overlap between the growing cadres of trade union and social-democrat activists, many of the participants at its (usually biennial or triennial) congresses were national trade union leaders. Initial informal interchanges among those representing similar groups of workers in different countries provided a basis for formal meetings in parallel with the SI congresses and the creation of a growing number of what became known as ITSs. These developments were followed by the collaboration of national trade union confederations in forming the International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres (ITUS), later the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU).

One may note a number of issues arising in this period which were to constitute persistent obstacles to effective international trade unionism. At the level of officials and activists there was lack of mutual comprehension – in the most basic sense of language, but also in terms of organisational traditions and conceptions of trade union purpose (Leich and Kruse 1991; Milner 1988, 1990). At the level of the rank and file, interest in internationalism was at best intermittent, and commonly overridden by competitive nationalism (Harrod 1972; Howorth 1985; Logue 1980). Frequently noted is the remarkable hegemony of German trade unionists at international level: the ITUS/IFTU was led throughout by Carl Legien as an adjunct to his role as head of the *Generalkomission*; by 1914 all but four of the ITSs were also based in Germany (Lorwin 1929). At times (as with

the transfer of the headquarters of the Transportworkers (ITF) and Metalworkers (IMF) from London in 1904 and 1905) this growing dominance could be highly contentious (Opel 1968; Simon 1993); but commonly the explanation, as a British commentator conceded, was 'the apathy of other nationalities' (*Labour Year Book* 1916: 432). Almost certainly relevant, in addition, was the fact that the centralised and bureaucratic German unions with their exceptional numbers of paid staff possessed organisational resources which no other national movement could rival. Furthermore, differences of national economic circumstance were of key importance. 'The German trade unions did most to promote international trade unionism and had most to gain from it. As a rapidly developing industrial country during this period, Germany drew labor from all sides. Migratory craftsmen from Scandinavia, France, Italy, Switzerland, Austria and Holland streamed into Germany in search of training and seasonal work, while unskilled and unorganized laborers came from the hinterland of Southern and Eastern Europe' (Lorwin 1929: 112-3). If most British trade unionists were insular, this was in part because Britain was indeed an island, with a largely self-contained labour market; while the first-mover advantage in the international economy was not yet manifestly exhausted.

The wartime split in international trade unionism, when national identities assumed overriding precedence, was followed by the end of this hegemony. IFTU was reconstituted in Amsterdam (though ironically, it returned to Berlin just two years before the Nazi seizure of power). Only eight ITSs retained their seats in Germany, and of these only one (Building Workers) was a substantial organisation. Three important features of the inter-war period, again of long-standing relevance, may be noted. One was the confrontation between Amsterdam and Moscow: for most of the twentieth century, ideological cleavage was to be a decisive characteristic of international trade unionism. A second was the importance of the ILO, founded in 1919, as an arena and interlocutor for IFTU. A third was the pivotal role of officials from smaller countries, often perceived as neutrals between the larger affiliates (Van Goethem 2000: 113). While some, such as Edo Fimmen, might be charismatic personalities, often the new generation of international union representatives were administrators rather than leaders (Windmuller 1967: 98). As Lorwin (1929: 474) commented acidly, 'only a few [secretaries of ITSs] may be said to be fit for international leadership, have a command of several languages, a wide knowledge of their industry and of world affairs in general, are capable of addressing large audiences, and have the tact for adjusting international differences'.

For most of its history, 'international' trade unionism has been overwhelmingly European in composition. The split in international trade unionism between the wars and more particularly after 1949, with a confrontation between ideologies aspiring to global impact, brought changes. Claims to global representativeness in the second half of the twentieth century were nevertheless problematic: establishing 'internationality' (Rütters 1989: 264) was an objective never fully realised. In the ICFTU, for example, coverage extended far beyond the industrialised world; but resources (and control?) remained primarily European (Gumbrell-McCormick 2000). WFTU was resourced and dominated from Moscow. In similar ways, the CISC/WCL displayed a tension between its European affiliates and the rest.

The end of the cold war has been ambiguous in its effects. The old ideological polarisation has been abolished, creating a potential capacity for united international action but resulting in uncertainties as to the international trade union 'mission'. Indeed the new

global economic (dis)order creates urgent need for a coordinated union response; defining this has resulted in new tensions.

Why trade union internationalism?

Both participants and academic analysts have offered contradictory accounts of the reasons why trade unions organise internationally. One interpretation stresses economic interests. Thus Logue's attempt to sketch a general theory of trade union internationalism (1980) starts from the premise (one perhaps more self-evident to an American than to most Europeans) that unions are primarily organisations pursuing the short-term economic interests of their members. In consequence, significant internationalism is possible only where (on the principle familiar today as 'subsidiarity') unions are unable to achieve their economic goals at national level. This certainly matches the arguments of many trade unionists themselves: the internationalisation of trade, labour markets and capital renders purely national union action inadequate. 'It was not a theoretical discovery that brought various national movements to international combination, but very practical and urgent facts of economic development', wrote Gottfurcht (1962: 21) of the earliest initiatives in labour internationalism. Over a century ago, Tom Mann wrote (1897b: 6) that 'the owner of capital is already cosmopolitan as regards the use of that capital for the purposes of exploitation. No need to complain of this. We don't want any walls built round cities or nations for fear of invasion; what we do now stand in urgent need of, is, an international working alliance among the workers of the whole world'. (If only trade unionists today were so forthright in dismissing the 'fortress' response to internationalisation!) In more recent times, the growing impact of multinational companies has been widely regarded as making internationalism a practical necessity. As Fimmen (1924: 104) already argued presciently, employers were becoming international combines; they 'do not pass pious resolutions about international class solidarity. Nevertheless, they think and act internationally.' The reverse, he regretted, was true of labour movements. Almost half a century later, Levinson (1972) argued very similarly: the size, strategic capacity and policy coordination of transnational companies made purely national trade unionism outdated. Similarly, Windmuller (1969: 66-7) had suggested a few years earlier that 'the operations of multinational companies are bound to create sooner or later a demand for a corresponding form of counter-organization on the part of unions'.

Others however have stressed the political underpinnings of international trade unionism. Busch (1980: 1) insists that 'on the whole international labour activities are political in nature and are designed to achieve ends that are not normally included in the confines of a collective agreement; international trade unionism is the expression of political rather than economic power'. Evidently the creation of the First International largely reflected the efforts of political activists, socialist or anarchist, and their internecine disputes dominated much of its life. The formation of the Second International provided the framework for the revival of international trade unionism: most of those involved were socialists for whom internationalism was as much a question of principle as of pragmatism. Over a century later, political contexts and political identities may have changed radically. Harrod (1972: 399) writes – in relation to the overseas activities of the British TUC – of 'the absorption of the trade union foreign policy decision-makers into a foreign policy-making elite at the national level.... They did *not* act as trade unionists but rather as quasi-government policy-makers.' And Silverman has commented (2000: 19) that 'the realm of

international labor was for the most part a realm of bureaucrats and politicians'. In the terms used by Windmuller, an important aspect of international trade unionism has been a 'missionary function': the global propagation of a particular, ideologically driven conception of the nature of trade unionism, its role within the broader society, and the desired characteristics of that society itself.

To a certain degree, these two interpretations may be addressing different realities. For example, Busch focuses on national confederations and the international organisations based on these, arguing that even at national level such bodies are not generally involved in collective bargaining (a point indeed true of many, but certainly not all countries). By contrast, writers on ITSs commonly stress a rationale which is more narrowly pragmatic and economic (Koch-Baumgarten 1999; Lefranc 1952; van der Linden 2000). For example MacShane (1990: 272-3), writing of the IMF, stresses the differences between affiliates on broad issues of socio-economic policy (for instance, support for nationalisation as against board-level employee representation as a route to economic democracy). Cross-national support was possible only for relatively modest objectives: exchange of information, support for weaker national organisations, assistance to national affiliates during major disputes. Precisely because of the (relative) occupational homogeneity of their membership, and hence more clearly perceived common needs, it is also easier for ITSs to perform what Windmuller terms 'service tasks' for their affiliates.

Such modesty has in practice been characteristic of international trade unionism in general, irrespective of time or of level. This was the basis for Losovsky's dismissive comment (1925: 23) that the ITUS 'was not an international organisation in the sense understood by Communists. It was not an organisation for struggle, but an international organisation for the exchange of information. The International Secretariat might be rather termed an international information bureau, statistical bureau, an international post-box, what you will'; while the ITSs 'could be better called symbols of international federations rather than real internationals'. (This was consistent with the opinion of one delegate to the IMF congress in 1924 (Kugler 1978: 113): 'up till now our whole International has been nothing but a speech machine'.) This might be seen as a tension or contradiction between ambition and reality apparent in all trade unionism but particularly evident at international level. Equally it could indicate the inadequacy of any simple dichotomy between economic and political functions. As Wedin comments (1974: 14), 'an organisation that lives and operates in a society influences and is influenced by it, and it is not apolitical'. This ambiguity of the political can be seen in Legien's conception of trade unionism, at national and international levels alike. A leading social-democrat, he could in no way be described as apolitical; but he insisted on the bounded nature of trade union politics, and rejected the subordination of union policy to the party. This conception, which shaped the character of IFTU and most ITSs, contrasted with the French syndicalist and later communist perspective of the unity of the industrial and political struggle, and also with the efforts of many British (and even more, American) craft unionists to avoid any entanglement with the sphere of the state (Lorwin 1929; Milner 1990).

A sceptic might also add that disentangling the objectives of international trade unionism is problematic because rhetoric can override reality, and because organisationally embedded interests can acquire their own dynamic. Logue (1980: 29) attributes labour internationalism, in the absence of a direct economic pay-off to members, as a 'parasitic elite activity', but also writes of a 'culturally transmitted' belief that international trade

unionism is necessary, possible and effective. Not surprisingly, one would expect those whose careers are rooted in cross-national union activities to be persuaded themselves, and seek to convince others, that such activities are highly valuable.

Models of organisation and action

The title of this paper evokes a complex of organisational dilemmas and conflicts in the evolution of international labour action. One may note, for example, the issue of the priority of national as against international organisational consolidation. One perspective – on the threshold of both centuries – was that it was artificial and premature to attempt to build international union action except on the foundations of already solid national movements. Another was that international organisation could itself kick-start unionisation at national level. 'In no country have we anything like perfect national organisation as yet, but we cannot wait to perfect ourselves nationally in this respect before taking action internationally,' wrote Tom Mann (1897b: 7); 'indeed it is next to impossible to effectively organise nationally unless international effort be made concurrently'. Mann may exemplify what I term the agitator model: 'I am at this time an agitator, and intend to remain one,' he wrote (White 1991: 98).

Agitation was fundamental to the creation of trade unionism at sea and on the waterfront, where employment was usually short-term and often casual, and most labour easily replaceable in circumstances where supply greatly exceeded demand. Organisation was typically built against the odds, and required the mobilisation of mass activism in ways which might be none too gentle. The British unionists who took the lead in establishing the forerunner of the ITF were schooled in the practice of agitation, and carried this model of trade unionism into their international activities. Leaders such as Mann and Tillett could regard imprisonment and deportation as a natural concomitant of trade union internationalism. Implicit in this model was often a short-term perspective, since organisation was only as enduring as the current mobilising struggle. Grassroots activism was the essence of collectivism.

The bureaucratic model implied a longer-term strategic perspective, the centralised determination of policy, a disciplined observance of authoritative decisions. Such a model could be justified in terms of the needs of an effective fighting organisation. 'When a unit goes into battle it is impossible for each individual to follow their own judgment, everyone must be subordinated to a predetermined plan,' wrote Hermann Jochade, the newly appointed president of the ITF in 1904 (MRC 159/3/B/15). Michels (1915: 53) commented on the significance of 'militarist ideas and methods' within labour movements (he also referred to 'the influence of the Prussian drill-sergeant, with all its advantages and all its disadvantages'). Certainly the principle of industrial unionism was commonly counterposed as a recipe for serious class struggle, as against the fragmented sectionalism and class collaboration often attributed to craft unionism. The 'one big union' of syndicalist dreams could be seen as the ultimate in centralisation and in militancy. Yet here the need for qualification is obvious. If centralisation is one defining element of bureaucracy, it is a particular form of centralisation: one in which decisions at the top have priority. By contrast the syndicalist, or pre-syndicalist models of centralisation were ones in which reciprocal support and solidarity – or even the call for a general strike – coexisted with scope for spontaneous action from below. The military metaphor was a guerilla campaign, rather than a war of manoeuvre. The familiar irony, evident in the experience of national

trade unionisms, was that effective bureaucratic centralism acquired resources too valuable to risk in frontal class confrontation; caution and conservatism tended to follow. At international level the issues have been rather different: powerful national affiliates are unlikely to allow significant positive discretion to a supranational decision-making authority: bureaucratic international centralism becomes linked to modest routine functions and a lowest common denominator in more substantial initiatives. And at both levels, there is the familiar tension between 'movement' and 'organisation': effective impact depends ultimately on members' 'willingness to act' (Offe and Wiesenthal 1985), but hierarchical disciplines can cause such willingness to atrophy. Internationalism from above can thus marry efficiency to impotence.

It is important however to resist any simple polarity between agitation and bureaucracy, and certainly any assimilation of such a contrast to national stereotypes. Of course distinctive national organisational traditions could be of great importance: Michels' remark had some foundation. Herrmann (1994: 11-12) comments that 'the Germans regarded the organisational principle of their unions, centralism, as a universal recipe for trade union success.... Thus German trade unionists at times acted didactically at international level and displayed little understanding of regionalist or localist traditions.' He notes that in the specific case of coalmining, the tradition of local or regional autonomy was deeply embedded in trade union practice in many countries. In this industry, certainly, British suspicion of centralisation was more widely shared, thus partly explaining why in this case (as also in textiles) the ITS remained based in England. Yet differences in national perspectives were not necessarily clear-cut. Tom Mann's own account (1897a: 8) of the early days of international organisation among dockers and sailors insisted on the futility of fragmented, sectional action: there should be an overall authority which would 'exercise supervision and control on the best scientific lines'.

How is it that the agitator/bureaucrat dichotomy has been seen – and was, to some extent, a century ago – as an Anglo-German conflict (once the French challenge was marginalised)? Perhaps because of its exceptional richness of surviving archives, the ITF provides much evidence of such an antagonism: we have little basis to judge how far it was typical or atypical. (Possibly an important factor, even here, was that the formation of the ITF encompassed not only dockers and sailors but also railway workers, who had a far more stable employment relationship; the affiliated railway unions were mainly in German-speaking countries where the Germanic trade union model prevailed.) The Amsterdam congress of the ITF displayed a remarkable antipathy between British and German delegates (since only typescript minutes exist, there was no opportunity to massage these for the public record), with mutual accusations of bad faith. English opposition to the decision to move the ITF headquarters from London to Hamburg was backed only by Charles Lindley of Sweden (though Dutch and French dockers were soon to rebel against German control) (MRC 159/3/A/14, B/15, 19).

At a mundane but important level, bureaucracy was necessary for basic communication and coordination to occur. Sassenbach (1926: 3) commented that 'the great obstacle in the way of an international gathering was the language difficulty. It not only prohibited direct communication, but it also made it difficult for the workers to reach mutual understanding or to become well-informed on the situation in other countries.... The absence of information left a kind of mental barrier between the nations, and the differences of language retarded the growth of the necessary enlightenment.' Mann describes in his

memoirs (1923) the hit-and-miss character of his initial international work: for example, arriving unannounced in Bilbao with no knowledge of Spanish and no idea where to locate partner trade unionists. His close links with Lindley probably owed much to the latter's fluency in English. Soon after Jochade took over the administration of the ITF, he found himself unable to read and reply to a letter from a Spanish affiliate until happening to meet someone who had lived in South America; it was immediately decided to organise a translation system and to write to all affiliates in their own language. The records are testimony to his administrative efficiency: 'one can't help but admiring the thoroughness of your methods and the voluminous information given to members,' wrote one New Zealand official (MRC 159/3/ B/1, 2). Likewise, a commentator on IFTU in its early days noted (with an ironic reference to Losovsky) its development from a mailbox to a 'well organised post office' (Max Zwalf, quoted in Reinalda 1997: 12).

The diplomat model of trade union internationalism (a term which I imagined I had invented, though as noted above it was used by Lorwin long ago) was a by-product of intergovernmental regulation in the field of employment. The establishment of the ILO in 1919 appeared to offer the opportunity for the internationalisation of the traditional social-democratic vision of the planned direction of economy and society. Yet its limited powers and its mission of humanising and hence stabilising capitalist production relations entailed that the IFTU would function primarily as an actor in 'a consultative type of global corporatism' (Stevis 1998: 59). This role has continued. As Waterman (2001: 313) comments, 'the ideology, institutions and procedures of "social partnership" have become hegemonic. The ICFTU internalised the tripartism of the ILO.' Wishful thinking could be complemented by a powerful organisational logic. Here Windmuller's analysis (1967: 92-3) is relevant: the effectiveness of international trade union organisations is conditioned by 'their ability to achieve recognition and legitimacy,... their internal cohesion, and... access to certain essential instruments of action'; and there could be a trade-off between strength on one dimension and weakness on others. The ILO, with its tripartite structure, conferred recognition and legitimacy (and some resources) on the IFTU and its successors, to some extent compensating for other deficiencies. As Windmuller commented, 'it does not require a charismatic general secretary, a wealth of resources, or a vast array of enticing rewards to prepare position papers, draft telegrams of protest, urge more speed in upward social harmonization, speak up in support of a new ILO convention, and so forth'. With the advent of labour diplomacy, a distinctive model of international trade union bureaucratisation became the line of least resistance. We may note, in this context, that the double-edged certification of labour as a 'social partner' within the institutions of the European Union has had analogous effects: providing recognition and material resources, but incorporating the ETUC within an elite policy community largely detached from those it claims to represent (Gobin 1997; Imig and Tarrow 2001).

As noted earlier, for the first half of the twentieth century 'international' trade unionism was essentially a European phenomenon, though with intermittent US participation; in the second half the coverage became more global, but the centre of gravity less obviously so. Van der Linden (2001:310-3) has written of a transition, around the end of the nineteenth century, from 'pre-national' to 'national internationalism', with a second transition a century later towards 'transnational internationalism'. At least if we consider the official institutions, this seems over-optimistic. Arguably, European unions – international trade unionism's main paymasters – have become more, not less Eurocentric in their

concerns during this latter period; in many cases, international departments have become primarily an apparatus for coordinating work at EU level. Symbolically, the 'International Trade Union House' in Brussels is usually perceived simply as the home of the ETUC; few identify it as the ICFTU headquarters. And if the ITSs (or as they have recently been re-styled, Global Union Federations) have always been based in Europe, their current locations reflect the primacy of contemporary labour diplomacy. With the exception of the ITF, all have their headquarters in Brussels or in, or on the outskirts of, Geneva (home of the ILO). Interestingly too, the general secretaries of the ICFTU and of five of the ten ITSs (or GUFs) are now British (as will be the case from 2003 for the ETUC). In line with the consolidation of (Eurocentric, if not Anglocentric) labour diplomacy, a distinctive career pattern seems set to become the norm. Increasingly, it would seem, the typical professional international trade unionist is a graduate with language skills, who having spent a few years as a researcher in a national labour movement has pursued a career at international level. Rarely does an international union leader today have a background, however distant, as an agitator; nor much more frequently as a front-line negotiator. The model of Schevenels, relatively exceptional in 1931 when appointed to head the IFTU with a background as 'a bureaucrat rather than an activist' (Van Goethem 2000: 112), has become the norm.

The beginning of the end or the end of the beginning?

International trade unionism emerged in a formative period for most national organisations, when confidence in the regulatory effectiveness of purely national action was limited and when the interconnectedness of politics and economics was largely taken for granted. Much of its subsequent history involved, first, a search to define a role for actually existing institutions of transnational unionism when self-confidence in national union strength had increased; second, a division of labour between labour representation in the political-diplomatic and industrial-economic arenas.

Today the wheel has turned full circle, although (since the world itself does not stand still) the contrasts with circumstances a century and more ago are obvious. Across most of the world (certainly in those countries which have always predominated in international unionism) trade unions have for a decade or more been on the defensive, generally reflected in loss of membership, regulatory effectiveness and political legitimacy. In part this reflects the ways in which the old interconnections between politics and economics have been reconfigured. Unions confront the paradox that the global intensification of market forces – the increasing detachment of product, finance and labour markets from regulation at the level of the nation-state – is itself a politically driven project, and with one nation-state the hegemonic driver.

This puts in question the traditional identification of strategic alternatives for international trade unionism. The first was the pursuit of regulation via the quasi-international state: primarily the ILO, to a lesser extent other UN agencies. As indicated above, this strategic option appeared to engender a vicious circle: a lack of mobilising capacity, modest objectives, equally modest achievements, limited recognition by and relevance for rank-and-file trade unionists on the ground. Nevertheless, the ICFTU clings to the ideal of 'social partnership' with its implication of 'responsible' (compliant?) trade unionism (Ashwin 2000: 112). The second strategic alternative has involved the attempt to internationalise the conventional forms of national trade unionism – collective bargaining and collective action – through the mobilisation of workers' economic interests at sectoral,

and later company level. The first level was the traditional focus of the ITS; the second, the individual multinational company, of some of their number in the 1970s. Within the increasingly dominant European arena, these choices are replicated in the role of the European Industry Federations and European Works Councils (which unlike the earlier World Company Councils possess some, albeit limited, legal foundation). This can be a recipe for results in buoyant sectors and companies, but in adverse circumstances spells concession bargaining and/or exclusion.

Either alternative seems to imply the obsolescence of international trade unionism as an elite specialism. As noted earlier, one of Windmuller's criteria for the effectiveness of trade union internationals (in times rather more favourable than today's) was 'access to... instruments for action'. These were defined primarily as 'a well-functioning apparatus under authoritative leadership, adequate human and material resources, and certain devices for inducing or compelling adherence to their policies'. This is par excellence an elitist, top-down vision of internationalism. Ordinary workers – rank-and-file union members – do not figure, except perhaps by implication as those whose adherence is induced or compelled.

This is an upside-down conception of trade unionism at any level, encouraging a divorce between rhetoric and reality, between 'leaders' and 'led'. It inspires the obfuscation identified by Leich and Kruse (1991): 'behind the booming pathos of international solidarity [is] the mainly hidden problem of cooperation between national trade union movements shaped in extremely different ways and with diverse programmes, forms of action and not least interests'. If members on the ground are biased towards parochial concerns, it is often easier for international enthusiasts to operate over their heads and often without their knowledge. This links in turn to the shrewd comment of Neuhaus (1981: 149) regarding ITSs, but relevant to the whole repertoire of official trade union internationalism: they 'have only very little power in their own right. Theirs is a proxy power: in implementing their decisions, especially in international actions, they depend on the voluntary backing of their affiliates, who jealously guard their autonomy. The ITSs cannot order their members to do anything, they can only appeal for support of international meaningfull (sic) action. This is why – despite some indisputably spectacular successes – the ITSs have on the whole remained relatively ineffective vis a vis transnational big business.'

Is there an alternative? Logue (1980: 7) writes of an 'apparent paradox that working class political and economic organizations have been the outstanding champions of internationalism' whereas the workers they represent have been largely uninterested in international issues or actually hostile to internationalism. Both elements of this paradox require qualification. Official internationalism, as already seen, has often been more rhetorical than real. Conversely, practical expressions of rank-and-file international solidarity have been manifold: as for example in the case of dockers in struggle, whether in the 1880s or the 1990s (Waterman 1998).

Yet all too often, official trade union practice seems implicitly to accept that internationalism is an elite concern, that it is safer if the membership does not learn too much of policies which they might perhaps oppose. In some unions, certainly, international issues are given reasonable prominence in internal communications and education; I fear that this is far from typical, though openness may be increasing as unions struggle to find a response to 'globalisation'. In any event, since effective international solidarity is impossible without a 'willingness to act' on the part of grassroots trade unionists, it is

unattainable without an active strategy by union leaders and activists to enhance knowledge, understanding and identification of common interests cross-nationally.

National and international trade union apparatuses, with their deeply rooted traditions, long-established political and industrial bargaining relationships, and complex internal power dynamics, are both repelled and attracted by the flexibility and spontaneity of alternative modes of intervention in an arena in which unions once claimed exclusive jurisdiction. What were once known as 'new social movements' – though by now many have become middle-aged and institutionalised – have been able to engage effectively in forms of 'contentious politics' (Tarrow 1998) which most trade union leaders until very recently considered signs of immaturity. Three factors seem to be of key importance.

First, the world of work matches less and less that familiar when most national trade union movements became consolidated: a world of male manual workers in factory, mine or waterfront, demarcated for purposes of collective action from social relations and aspirations outside the workplace. If the actual composition of trade union membership in too many countries reflects the composition of the working class half a century ago, this is today generally recognised as a serious problem. As a corollary, unions have increasingly accepted that they must identify their demands with the interests of those typically neglected in the past (women, ethnic minorities, those on the margins of 'normal' employment), must adopt more imaginative methods of representation and recruitment, and must seek alliances with other collective agencies once treated primarily with distrust and disdain (Munck 2002).

Second, national and transnational cross-class compromises have been unravelling. Unions' role has been widely transformed from the negotiation of improvement to the co-management of retrenchment; or else they are no longer regarded by governments and employers as reliable partners, even for concession bargaining. To the extent that the powerful are no longer as willing as in the past to underwrite unions' legitimacy and representativeness – whether at national or at international level – the only option is to mobilise support from the relatively weak (which was indeed how unions in the main originated). What has by now become a cliché, civil society, is increasingly accepted by trade unions as a necessary terrain of engagement. Even participation in shaping an 'international civil society', in the past usually derided as fanciful as concept and as objective, is now regarded seriously.

Third, the electronic age has revolutionised the terrain of internationalism. The painful struggles a century ago to establish contacts and compile and disseminate information seem part of another world – as indeed they were. The at least partial success of the resistance by the Australian dockers to a powerful and ruthless employer would have been inconceivable without their imaginative use of the potential of instantaneous worldwide communication. It would be premature to celebrate the equalising impact of modern information and communication technologies: there are still serious regional imbalances in access to computing (indeed in much of the world, reliable telephone systems are still a luxury); and even within richer countries there are major differences in the extent to which access to, and competence in, ICT has been democratised. Nevertheless, the capacity of trade union activists to communicate directly across national borders (though language remains a problem, the quality of electronic translation systems is improving rapidly) means that many of the traditional hierarchical channels of official interchange have become obsolete. If the institutions of international labour do not become less like

bureaucracies and more like network organisations, welcoming the opportunities for increased transparency and internal democracy, they are likely to be consigned to increasing irrelevance. There are many signs that this message is understood.

In one of his last publications, Harvie Ramsay (1999: 215) wrote that 'the success of international unionism remains a contradictory and contingent matter'. This is a fitting conclusion. In the third century of trade union internationalism, the challenges which are faced are perhaps greater than ever, but there is growing awareness that old recipes for action are inadequate and that new possibilities can be grasped. Thoughtful trade unionists have come to recognise that playing safe is the most risky strategy. The present is either the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end.

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