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# Democracy in trade unions, democracy through trade unions?

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## Abstract

Since the Webbs published *Industrial Democracy* at the end of the nineteenth century, the principle that workers have a legitimate voice in decision-making in the world of work – in some versions through trade unions, in others at least formally through separate representative structures – has become widely accepted in most west European countries. There is now a vast literature on the strengths and weaknesses of such mechanisms, and we review briefly some of the key interpretations of the rise (and fall) of policies and structures for workplace and board-level representation. We also discuss the mainly failed attempts to establish broader processes of economic democracy, which the eclipse of nationally specific mechanisms of class compromise makes again a salient demand. Economic globalization also highlights the need for transnational mechanisms to achieve worker voice (or more radically, control) in the dynamics of capital-labour relations. We therefore examine the role of trade unions in coordinating pressure for a countervailing force at European and global levels, and in the construction of (emergent?) supranational industrial relations. However, many would argue that unions cannot win legitimacy as democratizing force unless manifestly democratic internally. We therefore revisit debates on and dilemmas of democracy within trade unions, and examine recent initiatives to enhance democratization.

## Keywords

industrial democracy, trade unions, capitalism, globalization, Europe

## Introduction

When Sidney and Beatrice Webb published their ‘scientific analysis’ of British trade unionism, they gave it the title *Industrial Democracy* (Webb and Webb 1897). They insisted (1897: xix) that ‘Trade Unions are democracies: that is to say, their internal constitutions are all based on the principle of “government of the people by the people for the people”’; and they also defined unions as ‘a necessary element in the democratic state’ (1897: 825), regarding political democracy as incompatible with ‘unrestrained capitalist enterprise.... The very conception of democracy will have to be widened, so as to include economic as well as political relations’ (1897: 840). They regarded unions as key vehicles for this democratization of economy and society. In their Fabian vision, industrial democracy meant ‘a system of industrial relations in which arbitrary and irresponsible power’ was ‘replaced by the continual adjustment of interests between the leaders accountable to the workers on the one hand, and the public servants accountable to the community as a whole on the other’ (Harrison 2000: 237). Subsequent writers in the field of industrial relations have tended to separate the Webbs’ analysis of trade unions’ internal democracy from that of the democratization of industry. In this contribution we attempt to reconnect the two themes, but also distance ourselves from their hierarchical and bureaucratic understanding of democracy.

We first survey some of the diverse understandings of industrial democracy, and how these have been shaped by competing currents within trade union movements as well as by employers and governments (in the process dissipating much of their initial radical-democratic content). We then consider ideas of broader economic democracy, and how these have been given new relevance by economic globalization; in this context we discuss some of the initiatives by international trade union organizations. Yet it is questionable whether trade unions credibly press for industrial and economic democracy, unless they themselves are patently democratic; we therefore go on to discuss debates on

the meaning and possibility of union democracy. Finally we link some of these themes together and argue their relevance in an era when trade unions, and progressive movements more generally, are very much on the defensive.

## The precarious pursuit of industrial democracy

There is an inherent contradiction between capitalist wage-labour and democracy. At least in Anglophone common-law regimes, the employment contract provides the employer with a licence to command and imposes on the employee an obligation to obey. Yet if autocracy in the workplace negates democracy in the polity, how can this contradiction be overcome? From the late nineteenth century, several different and not necessarily compatible solutions were widely propagated. One involved institutionalized collective representation at workplace level through councils or similar bodies, to provide a collective voice in management decisions, or more ambitiously to enable codetermination or even self-management. A second envisaged employee representation on the decision-making boards of companies, with more ambitious versions providing parity between employee and shareholder representatives. A third set of solutions focused on 'direct participation' at the workplace, with the most radical versions envisaging workers' control of production, displacing the employer. A fourth approach aimed to democratize the broader economy, not necessarily through state ownership but through (possibly complementary) initiatives such as 'municipal socialism' or cooperative production.

In all cases, very different understandings of the meanings of democratization informed the perspectives of labour movements, employers and governments. Mainstream social democracy regarded industrial democracy primarily in top-down terms, to be achieved (as the Webbs envisaged) through state management of the economy: *for* the workers but not *by* them. Many strands of Marxism shared this conception: thus Engels insisted in 1872 that 'the automatic machinery of the big factory is much more despotic than the small capitalists who employ workers ever have been' and that this technological despotism was inescapable even under socialism. By contrast, anarcho-sindicalist currents pursued democratization from below, through the agency of what Marx long before had called the 'associated producers'. The first world war saw bottom-up initiatives in most belligerent countries: workers' councils in Germany, factory councils in Italy (given powerful theoretical underpinnings by Gramsci), *soviets* in Russia, the shop stewards' movement in Britain.... But despite the brief influence of 'council communism' in the 1920s, orthodox communism consolidated a vision of party and state as the mechanisms of democratization, in effect replicating the social-democratic conception of bureaucratic nationalization as the remedy for the 'arbitrary and irresponsible power' of the capitalist employer.

While the majority of employers in most countries strongly resisted any idea of democratization, some were willing to embrace the notion of 'employee participation'. This concept was inherently ambiguous, often intended to legitimize managerial authority by offering employees the illusion of influence ('pseudo-participation') through mechanisms such as team-working (Pateman 1970). Likewise, ideas of economic democratization could be diluted into management-controlled schemes for profit-sharing or employee share options. As Ramsay argued (1977: 485), the main objectives of such initiatives were 'to combat labour organization, improve labour productivity and overcome resistance to change'. The interest in allowing workers a 'voice', he showed, tended to ebb and flow according to the tightness of labour markets and the strength and assertiveness of trade unionism.

There are significant parallels in government policy. In his classic historical study, Sorge (1976) explained cross-national differences in the character and strength of institutions of employee voice primarily in terms of a mutually reinforcing cycle of labour militancy and state repression, particularly when exacerbated by crises such as wars. This combination seemed to indicate why some countries developed legally based representation systems with significant powers, most notably German codetermination. One should add that such systems were often attempts to contain more radical initiatives: in Germany, the *workers'* councils (*Arbeiterräte*) of 1918 became transmuted into the *works* councils (*Betriebsräte*) of the Weimar Republic. More recently, in many European

countries there have been government efforts to institutionalize employee voice, less to counteract (diminishing) collective militancy than to overcome more passive resistance to change, and hence to enhance productivity. The *lois Auroux* in France in the 1980s were a clear example, primarily intended to assist in ‘modernizing’ the French economy and the system of industrial relations.

After 1945, systems of collective representation through works councils were institutionalized in much of Europe, but their rights did not usually extend beyond information and consultation rather than enabling real joint decision-making (codetermination). In France, their main functions covered the organization of social facilities rather than production issues (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2010). However, the ‘resurgence of class conflict’ in the late 1960s (Crouch and Pizzorno 1978) brought demands for more substantial democratization. The Italian ‘hot autumn’, with the upsurge in militant factory committees largely unconstrained by the national unions, led to the 1970 *Statuto* which institutionalized many of the workers’ advances by extending trade union rights within the workplace and significantly restricting employers’ authority to impose discipline and dismissals. In France, the near-insurrectionary militancy of May 1968 seemed to presage similar advances in worker rights, and certainly inspired innovative notions of workers’ self-management (*autogestion*) among some union activists, but had few analogous consequences for subsequent industrial relations. In countries where collective bargaining was more firmly established, there were shop-floor protests against the remoteness of centralized union-employer agreements and against the dehumanizing effects of ‘degraded’ mass production. This informed trade union demands for the ‘humanization’ of work, involving an explicit worker (or union) role in the organization of production, workloads and working time.

In Germany, another key issue was the demand for parity representation on supervisory boards. The 1952 legislation was a clear defeat for the trade unions, since it did not bring genuine parity – though even minority representation can strengthen workers’ voice in corporate decision-making (unless of course it is co-opted by management). In most other countries where board-level representation was enacted, only a symbolic presence was provided. Shop-floor militancy also provided one impetus for the strengthening of the rights of German works councils in 1972 as well as the extension of board-level codetermination in 1976; in Sweden it resulted in the Codetermination Act (*Medbestämmandelagen*) of 1976 – initiatives which in both countries were bitterly opposed by employers’ organizations. In Britain the rapid growth of shop steward organization from the 1960s, particularly in manufacturing, encouraged a renaissance of the debates on workers’ control which had flourished half a century before. Consistent with the banalization of industrial democracy in many countries, the main policy outcome was the 1977 Bullock Report which proposed minority employee representation on boards of large companies, but was never implemented.

As Sassoon was to argue (1976: 375), ‘to demand some form of industrial democracy became a common reaction to the high level of unofficial strikes in countries with a centralized trade union movement.... In this context, the call for industrial democracy was a way of re-establishing some order in industrial relations so as to reassert the authority of the trade unions.’ For this reason, many on the left, both within and outside the unions, viewed the whole notion of industrial democracy (let alone managerial conceptions of participation) with scepticism if not outright hostility. Those less critical were often ambivalent about actually existing institutions of employee voice. Even the strongest systems – with Germany the exemplary case – had primary jurisdiction over employment issues arising only *after* key decisions on investment and product strategy had already been taken. As Briefs (1989), a key trade union figure in works council research, noted: the more strategic the issue for management, the weaker the powers of the councils; at best they could ameliorate the effects of strategic decisions already taken. Sceptics in some countries – Britain is an obvious example – argued that there was a major risk that employee representatives would share the blame for management decisions that they could not fundamentally influence.

The changed politico-economic environment of the 1980s, with a shift from Keynesianism towards neoliberalism, had two important consequences. On the one hand, trade unionism in most countries struggles to protect previous gains, and aspirations for enhanced democratization were largely abandoned. On the other, erstwhile critics (like many German analysts) came to embrace more positive assessments of existing institutions. When unions across Europe were on the defensive, the institutions of codetermination inhibited employer strategies of union exclusion, and the fact that

changes in employment conditions had to be negotiated was an important protection for established standards – as Streeck (1988a) – never himself a critic of codetermination – was to argue.

Yet assessments were to change once more: two decades later, Streeck (2009) showed how works councils were no longer an agency supporting encompassing union strategies, but were now either forced into company-level concession bargaining or else by-passed by multinational capital. Codetermination in one company was always precarious; now, establishment-based mechanisms had to accommodate to the externally imposed requirements of intensified global competition. Moreover, strategic decision-making was increasingly removed from the sphere of employee influence: ‘employers can’t keep their side of the bargain’ (Thompson 2003). Many German writers have concluded that although formally intact, the machinery of codetermination no longer provides an effective mechanism for asserting and defending workers’ interests, giving way to a phase of post-industrial democracy (Urban 2011). ‘Today, *Mitbestimmung* has become a governing principle for enterprise modernization, using limited employee participation, information and cooperation to win competitive advantage’ (Schumann and Detje 2011: 79).

## **Globalization and the debate on economic democracy**

Advocates of broader economic democracy go beyond workers’ representation within workplace and company decision-making; insisting –as noted above – that decisions affecting day-to-day work arrangements are largely conditioned by prior policies regarding investment, product strategy and marketing. They are also shaped by the broader macroeconomic context within which the individual enterprise is located; democracy within one factory is impossible. The most comprehensive analysis of the case for economic democracy, and of strategies to achieve this goal, can be found in the ideas developed for the Weimar-era German trade unions by Fritz Naphtali (1928): socialization of the economy was essential, but should be achieved, not necessarily and not exclusively through state ownership but through more diverse forms of popular control. His wide-ranging ideas for democratization proved influential in the German and Austrian trade union movements for a time after 1945, but in the main were subsequently forgotten.

In France, Italy and Britain, among other European countries, extensive programmes of public ownership were implemented after 1945; but though nationalization provided a favourable environment for trade union activity, its bureaucratic character did little to enhance democratic control. Most social democrats soon abandoned, explicitly or implicitly, the idea of comprehensive public ownership.

The ‘postwar compromises’ which institutionalized primarily collaborative relations between labour and capital – or as they became known, the ‘social partners’ – assumed different forms cross-nationally, but in all cases involved an accommodation between national labour movements, employers who were primarily national in terms of corporate ownership and production strategies, and governments which were to a large degree autonomous in social and economic policy (Ruggie 1982). These preconditions were precarious. The expansion of multinational corporations (MNCs) weakened the attachment of key employers – and their investment decisions – to individual national economies; while moves towards ‘free’ trade, particularly at European level with the creation of the common market in 1957, made the ‘competitiveness’ of national economies and individual production units increasingly salient. The aspirations of the EEC (later the EU) to create a ‘level playing field’ for competition across the European space presented challenges to nationally specific models of employee representation. This obliged trade union movements to consider new strategies, and their international organizations to examine the options for employee voice and influence at cross-national level.

Unions in Sweden and Denmark, both small countries with a long tradition of social-democratic government and with highly developed welfare states, were challenged by intensified economic internationalization and took the lead in a renewed struggle for democratization of the economy. In Sweden in particular, the union bargaining strategy developed in the 1950s embraced the principle of ‘solidarity wages’: pay should be relatively equal across firms in the same sector, irrespective of company profitability. The rate should be high enough to force struggling firms to

rationalize (or go under); more profitable firms would be able to expand, increasing overall productivity and hence competitiveness in export markets. But as the leading Swedish firms internationalized, profits were increasingly invested in overseas operations rather than in upgrading Swedish production. The main union confederation, LO (*Landsorganisationen i Sverige*) set up a working group under Rudolf Meidner, one of its key economists, who as an exile from Nazi Germany in the 1930s was very familiar with the theories of Naphtali. The recommendations involved payment of a share of company profits to wage-earner funds (*Löntagarfonder*) so as to establish *collective* employee ownership of part of the outcome of corporate success, in the form of shares held under trade union control. This, it was envisaged, could provide increasing control over strategic decisions in the dominant private companies. Strenuous opposition from employers, lack of support from white-collar unions and the ambivalence of the Social Democrats meant that the initiative was defeated and disappeared from the political agenda (Meidner 1993).

In Denmark, the main union confederation LO (*Landsorganisationen i Danmark*) undertook a massive campaign in the 1970s in favour of economic democracy (*økonomisk demokrati*). The policies, worked out jointly with the social-democratic party, were similar to those proposed in Sweden: a portion of either profits or of collectively agreed wage settlements would be placed in funds under the control of the unions (Laubjerg 1983). The plans gave scant attention to democratization at the shop-floor level, participation on management boards or similar measures; the unions preferred decisions reached through collective bargaining (much like the British) and were suspicious of some aspects of the German system of *Mitbestimmung*. Danish and Swedish unions both favoured worker representatives on supervisory boards, but wanted these to be nominated by the unions rather than works councils.

There were certain parallels in Britain in the mid-1970s, with policies embraced by the left of the Labour Party, spearheaded by the Institute for Workers' Control and supported by Tony Benn as Secretary of State for Industry. Benn 'eschewed the use of conventional nationalization and sought methods to intervene that were quicker, more flexible and democratic' (Medhurst 2014: 38). As government minister he tried to work closely with shop stewards, provided support for workforces who took over their factories as cooperatives in order to avoid closure, and collaborated with heterodox economists in drafting an 'Alternative Economic Strategy' (AES) to challenge the right-wing, monetarist drift of government policy. The AES – never accepted by the party leadership – would have included 'compulsory planning agreements to force big firms, especially MNCs, to pursue different production, employment and investment policies; nationalization of key industrial firms to provide the public sector with the skill and knowledge required to control the private sector...; public ownership of the major financial institutions to give the state control over the investment policies of pension funds and other sources of industrial finance; new powers for workers and their trade unions to bargain with big companies and monitor their activities' (Rowthorn 1981: 4).

## International campaigns

Campaigns around industrial and economic democracy have long been closely linked to work at the international level, through the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and its predecessors, the Global Union Federations (GUFs, formerly International Trade Secretariats, ITSS) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). The national and international levels of the debate have interacted, with important initiatives starting at one level and taken up at another. We review here the main initiatives.

The international trade union movements, in line with several of their main affiliates, became concerned with industrial and economic democracy in the 1960s and 1970s, at least in part in response to the growing integration of the world economy and the increased power of MNCs. It was clear that failure to develop stronger international cooperation between unions and to build stronger international regulation of the world economy would undermine labour's gains at national level. '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' (Windmuller 1969: 66-67) A pioneer was Charles Levinson, general secretary of the International Chemical, Energy and General

Workers' Federation (ICEF, now part of industriAll), who argued that the size, strategic capacity and policy coordination of transnational companies made purely national trade unionism outdated, and called for 'international action to develop a new countervailing union response' (1972: 106).

Leading ITSs pursued workers' representation at international level as a means of combatting the power of multinationals while avoiding the 'protectionist' route of import controls. They sought the gradual standardization of wages and working conditions to remove incentives for employers to shift production to low-wage countries. This required organization at the international level, at first purely on the union side, to be followed by joint bodies with management (Gumbrell-McCormick 2000). Levinson conceived this countervailing power primarily in terms of international collective bargaining, by strengthening cross-national union coordination and developing cross-national strike capacity; other trade unionists stressed the need for new international structures of employee representation. The International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF, now also part of industriAll) took the initiative in the mid-1960s, setting up World Company Councils (WCCs) within leading MNCs such as Ford and General Electric. The ICEF followed this strategy, setting up a WCC at the chemical giant Saint-Gobain in 1969 (Telljohann et al. 2009). With few exceptions, WCCs were primarily information and consultation bodies, and did not achieve international collective bargaining, let alone codetermination. But they were the first international initiatives to create cross-national structures for employee representation, and while some of these bodies did not long remain effective or even survive, they paved the way for the next wave of initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s: international framework agreements.

Most practical initiatives were developed by the (largely autonomous) ITSs; but the main predecessor of the ITUC, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) adopted a Multinational Charter at its 1975 congress, calling for governments to establish guidelines and machinery for intergovernmental cooperation, to promote coordinated national legislation and to adopt international conventions with 'enforceable standards'. At the same congress, a Green Paper on industrial democracy was presented, but revealed strong differences of opinion among the national trade union movements. Partly these reflected terminological differences across countries: the four official language versions used the terms *industrial democracy*, *démocratie industrielle*, *democracia industrial* and *Demokratie im Arbeitsleben*; but these possess significantly different connotations, and none encompasses the broader conception of 'economic and industrial democracy' embraced in the Nordic countries.

During the same period, many unions were pursuing similar goals at the European level through the ETUC (created in 1973) and the European Industry Federations (EIFs, now European Trade Union Federations, ETUFs). One motive was defensive: soon after the creation of the EEC there were discussions on creating a 'European Company' (*Societas Europaea*, SE) as an optional alternative to company registration under national law. The German unions were alarmed, fearing that firms would be able to escape national codetermination requirements. The German government was also anxious, and when a draft directive was published in 1970 it contained provisions for one-third representation of employees on SE supervisory boards; the creation of European Works Councils (EWCs) with information, consultation and some codetermination rights; and the possibility of concluding cross-national collective agreements between the SE and its trade unions. While this did not go far enough to reassure the German unions, it was strenuously resisted by employers' organizations and caused different concerns for unions from a number of other European countries. Of the six initial EEC member states, unions in Luxembourg and the Netherlands adopted similar perspectives to their German counterparts; those in France, Belgium and Italy, by contrast, were suspicious of the notion of 'social partnership' underlying the German model, which they considered a form of co-option into management. The initial proposals for a European Company Statute (ECS) based primarily on the German model were unattainable, given the incompatible national systems of employee representation.

By the time the ETUC was created, the EEC (now known simply as the European Community, EC) had three new member states, amplifying the diversity of approaches. Ireland and the UK had no statutory systems of works councils or board-level representation; Danish unions, as noted above, had a distinctive approach to industrial and economic democracy. The ETUC inherited from one of its predecessors a working party on *Demokratisierung von Arbeitsleben*; and this continued its attempts to reconcile the differences. However, 'the ETUC was unable to agree on an

action programme for industrial democracy' (Degryse and Tilly 2013: 145). These divisions were to persist until the late 1980s, and the fact that the EEC institutions clearly lacked the capacity to achieve agreement on any comprehensive legislation reduced the incentive to seek consensus on the trade union side (Abbott 1998: 614). Nevertheless, two more specific advances were achieved in the early years of the ETUC: the 1975 directive requiring consultation of employees over collective redundancies, and that of 1977 requiring companies to inform and consult with employee representatives in cases of mergers and acquisitions.

Circumstances gradually made consensus on institutions of worker representation more attainable. The 'single market' project launched in the 1980s strengthened the regulatory powers of the EC; and to win trade union assent to the moves to economic liberalization, Jacques Delors as president of the European Commission proclaimed the 'social dimension', promising stronger worker rights. In the 1991 Maastricht Treaty (which established the European Union), the 'social chapter' extended EU competence on employment issues and made decisions on many of these possible by qualified majority voting in the Council, removing the veto powers of individual member states. On the trade union side, a process of mutual learning and understanding occurred, whereby key individuals and groups of national leaders helped shape a consensus at both European and global levels (Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick 2012).

The most important issue throughout this period was the creation of EWCs in European multinationals, a proposal originally contained in the draft ECS. In 1980 the EC Commissioner for social affairs, Henk Vredeling, issued a draft directive prescribing regular information and consultation between management and employees in MNCs, particularly concerning closures and restructuring (Danis and Hoffmann 1995). As before, employers' organizations strenuously opposed the plans; and though the ETUC was now far more united in its support, it 'did not mobilise... its members to put pressure on the Member State governments' (Degryse and Tilly 2013: 147).

After the lapse of another decade, in 1990 the Commission issued a new directive on EWCs. Maastricht shifted the political balance of forces, and a directive (albeit weaker than the original proposals) was adopted in 1994. It was somewhat strengthened in 2009. The ECS was also finally adopted in 2001, providing a menu of options for employee involvement in decision-making, consistent with the diversity of national practices.

What do EWCs mean in practice? Lecher et al. (1999) distinguish four types: many are purely symbolic; others provide a servicing function, primarily through information exchange; some develop their own autonomous initiatives; a few exert a significant influence on company policy. Problems of language and different national industrial relations backgrounds inhibit cross-national unity among employee representatives, and in times of restructuring and redundancy they are often preoccupied with protecting their own 'national interests'. Nevertheless, in a minority of cases EWCs have developed into genuine transnational actors with a quasi-bargaining role (Fitzgerald and Stirling 2004; Hertwig et al. 2009; Whittall et al. 2007). A few have also extended their focus and composition beyond Europe, developing into a form of WCC.

The global role of MNCs, with their capacity to deploy abusive practices outside Europe and thus to undermine conditions and institutions within Europe, has also encouraged efforts to use employee representation to shape minimum standards through transnational company agreements. In these, EWCs often play a key role despite their lack of formal collective bargaining capacity. 'By early 2012, 224 such agreements were known in 144 companies employing over 10 million people' (European Commission 2012: 4). These are typically 'framework' agreements, less binding or detailed than collective bargaining agreements but more formal than any agreements that preceded them. The first was between the International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) and the French multinational BSN-Danone in 1988 (Hammer 2005: 515), but most have been agreed since 2000.

It is common to distinguish between international (or global) and European framework agreements (IFAs and EFAs): the former with global scope, the latter covering only Europe (Telljohann et al. 2009); it is estimated that roughly equal numbers of each type exist. Almost all companies signing IFAs have European headquarters, primarily in France or Germany; these 'typically focus on fundamental rights or address the different aspects of corporate social responsibility' (CSR) and are primarily designed to regulate employment in non-European subsidiaries. EFAs 'tend to have as their core aim the establishment of partnerships to deal with



restructuring' and also 'address specific subjects such as health and safety at work, equality in employment, training and mobility, planning of employment and skills needs'; they mainly regulate conditions for the 'core' European workforce (European Commission 2012: 4). Early IFAs stemmed from efforts to regulate the overseas practices of MNCs based in industrialized countries, with the aim of establishing more mandatory norms than purely voluntary exercises in CSR. They almost always included references to ILO core labour standards, and often provided for independent monitoring by NGOs or by the unions themselves. Hence in their origins, IFAs were top-down initiatives. But 'second-generation' IFAs, and almost all EFAs, have been bottom-up initiatives by well-established EWCs (Schömann et al. 2012).

For our analysis, the important question is the extent to which such agreements provide a vehicle for industrial democracy. Many IFAs did not even establish representative bodies, and pursued only modest international bargaining on limited objectives (such as health and safety, training, equality and other 'soft' issues); but such agreements paved the way for the expansion of safeguards for labour rights at subsidiaries of MNCs that had long been hostile to union recognition and bargaining. The most comprehensive IFAs have also included requirements to provide information to the workforce and monitor implementation, and prescribe sanctions for breaches by individual subsidiaries (Telljohann 2009). Thus in the most successful cases they have increased workers' 'voice', but are not measures of industrial democracy in themselves; and indeed, Niforou (2012, 2014) writes of a 'democratic deficit' in their implementation. Yet they create the conditions under which industrial democracy can be pursued by the major actors and, at the same time, protect achievements towards industrial democracy in the home countries of the signatory MNCs (almost always in western and northern Europe).

## **Democracy in trade unions, a precondition for effective mobilization?**

As we argued in the introduction, it is difficult for trade unions to press credibly for industrial and economic democracy unless they themselves are patently democratic. What does this mean? To be effective, trade unions must be able to mobilize collective action. This implies, first, a 'willingness to act' among the members (Offe and Wiesental 1985). But second, effective action requires some degree of overall coordination together with the definition of strategic priorities which unite the membership, so that energies are not dissipated in a multiplicity of disparate and perhaps mutually contradictory initiatives. Union effectiveness requires 'the capacity to interpret, decipher, sustain, and redefine the demands of the represented, so as to evoke the broadest possible consensus and approval' (Regalia 1988: 351). Thus unions need both membership involvement and strategic leadership. The tension between these two requirements creates an enduring dilemma for trade union democracy.

Most trade unions insist, with reason, that they are democratic organizations. However, there is great diversity in their formal decision-making structures, both within and between countries. 'The meaning of "trade union democracy" is different in different countries and indeed within countries' (Edwards 2005: 265). The prevailing constitutional arrangements differ greatly between countries; these differences are linked to historical traditions, which also shape variations in the practical understanding of union democracy and the structures adopted to achieve it, across and often also within countries. The relative powers of national officers, executive committees and conferences, the degree to which middle-range officials are elected from below or appointed from above and the balance of authority between confederations and their affiliated unions all vary. In most unions, organizational structures exist at workplace level, but patterns of authority between such structures and the national, regional or local union are complex and shifting; an added complexity in most European countries is the relationship between workplace union representation and works councils. Declining membership participation is a widespread problem.

Turner (1962) argued that active rank-and-file involvement tended to be greatest in unions with a relatively skilled and homogeneous membership. In more heterogeneous unions there were often serious problems of interest aggregation, and stronger centralized leadership was necessary to sustain internal cohesion; Turner characterized such unions as 'popular bossdoms', with strong and at times authoritarian leaders retaining control through the largely passive consent of their members. The more recent trend in many countries to create conglomerate 'super-unions' through merger can thus

generate ‘crises of interest aggregation and representation’ and a weakening of internal democracy (Thomas 2017).

While cross-national differences reflect diverse understandings of the meaning of union democracy, they also derive from relatively contingent decisions made a century or more ago (for example, unions subject to state repression often adopted highly centralized, almost military methods) which have persisted despite changed circumstances. Unions in some countries (such as Germany) have a high ratio of paid officials to members, others depend heavily on ‘lay’ activists (as in Britain and France); such differences have evident implications for the internal distribution of power. There is also a problematic relationship between formal decision-making structures and the complex and elusive dynamics of real intra-union politics. Famously (or notoriously), Michels (1915) argued that trade unions and socialist parties were subject to an ‘iron law of oligarchy’. Most members lacked the knowledge or motivation to engage actively in the democratic processes of policy-making; officials had the skills and the personal interests to dominate the decision-making and electoral processes; creating a vicious circle. For similar reasons, the Webbs used the dismissive term ‘primitive democracy’ to describe the arrangements in those British trade unions which stressed the active participation of all members and resisted the development of a special hierarchy of leaders.

Subsequent scholarship (and debate among trade unionists themselves) has tended to focus on differences of power and interests within unions, but with two contrasting types of emphasis. One is hierarchical, giving primary attention to the roles and influence of leaders and other paid officials, as against rank-and-file activists and members more generally. This approach has often led to rather polemical arguments concerning the distorting effects of the ‘trade union bureaucracy’. A second approach, particularly associated with feminist analyses, focuses on horizontal differences (occupation, sector, gender, age, ethnicity). From this perspective, trade unions not only redistribute power and resources between workers and capitalists but also *within* the working class. Since both paid officials and lay representatives typically derive disproportionately from relatively skilled, male, native-born sections of the workforce, their distinctive interests may distort the policies of the union as a whole. In recent years, unions in many countries have attempted to implement some form of ‘proportionality’ in order to address this problem (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013).

A related debate concerns centralization as against decentralization in union policy-making. Are decentralized structures more democratic, in that they provide greater scope for membership involvement in decision-making? Such an argument is consistent with participative theories of democracy. But a counter-argument is that (at least beyond a certain point) decentralization precludes overall strategic direction, a particular problem when key employer strategies are increasingly centralized (Streeck 1988b). Other approaches investigate how the democratic vitality of decentralization and the strategic coherence of centralization might be reconciled; for example, Kjellberg (1983) has argued that Swedish unions combine both authoritative national decision-making *and* workplace-level autonomy over key issues, with close articulation between the two levels providing a source of strength *and* democracy.

For some analysts, efficiency and democracy in trade unions are incompatible. In the mid-twentieth century, Allen (1954: 15) insisted (in an argument he later disavowed) that ‘trade-union organization is not based on theoretical concepts prior to it, that is on some concept of democracy, but on the end it serves. In other words, the end of trade-union activity is to protect and improve the general living standards of its members and not to provide workers with an exercise in self-government.’ Similarly, Child et al. (1973) wrote of a conflict within trade unions between ‘administrative rationality’ and ‘representative rationality’: The corollary was that undue membership involvement in, let alone influence on, union policy-making would undermine effectiveness. In the USA, Fraser (1998) ridiculed ‘allegorical depictions of the struggle for union democracy’ as resting on ‘a fanciful and ahistorical polarity between a virginal rank and file and a venal bureaucracy’, argued that union democracy was often advocated because ‘it might weaken the internal unity and resolve of trade unions’, before offering the more nuanced conclusion that ‘the relationship between power and democracy has never been a straightforward one. It may be morally consoling, but nothing more, to cling to the illusion of their easy reconciliation.’

Writing two decades ago – just before the idea of an ‘organizing model’ came into widespread currency in debates on the future of trade unionism – Heery and Kelly (1994) identified the rise in the UK of a form of unionism according to which ‘union bureaucracy must become more

managerial in its functioning, researching and monitoring employee needs, designing and promoting union services to match and planning the organization, training and deployment of its own human resources to support service delivery'. Their thesis – that in order to survive, modern unions would necessarily focus on actual and potential members as calculating individualistic consumers – now appears strangely one-sided: even unions which offer a comprehensive package of individual services also stress their role as representatives of *collective* interests.

The counter-argument to the 'efficiency trumps democracy' thesis was indicated at the outset of this section. Certainly any large, complex trade union requires professional leadership competences. But in any context, the ethos of 'managerial unionism' contradicts the appeal of trade unionism as 'sword of justice' (Flanders 1970) directed to the self-emancipation of the weak, vulnerable and oppressed. When the traditional structural and associational power resources of trade unions are almost everywhere diminished, and their institutional power resources are increasingly precarious, effectiveness requires active commitment and openness to mobilization among the members (and potential members), together with a capacity to inspire broader societal support through a social vision. 'The managerial emphasis on administrative rationality risks diminishing the representative rationality of trade unionism, which is grounded in multiple spaces of representation and participation, as well as in exchange opportunities between different organizational levels' (Thomas 2013: 33). Hence 'the redefinition of union democracy around centralized decision making conceived as answers to the decline of activist participation and membership losses, in turn, may feed these very phenomena' (Thomas 2017: 667). In Britain, Flynn et al. (2004: 328) note a similar trend towards centralization, meaning that 'union branch, group and regional committees have become dependent on the centre for resources, significantly curtailing their autonomy'.

Two case studies of US unions have concluded that active participation and deliberation can be a source of strength. The analysis of the Longshoremen by Levi et al. concluded (2009: 223) that 'democracy may sustain and facilitate hard bargaining [and] it may even facilitate organizing'; while in his account of the successful strike by the Teamsters against UPS, Parker (1998: 57) insisted that 'democracy, it turned out, was not just the icing on the cake, but the very foundation of union power in a critical struggle against a corporation'.

Yet how can unions be actively democratic, not only relying on the passive consent of members who have other priorities? One potential answer is that computerization and internet technologies have brought a virtual revolution in trade union communications, though the degree of impact varies cross-nationally. 'Communication power is at the heart of the structure and dynamics of society' (Castells 2009: 3), and today communication power is increasingly electronic. After a late start in many countries, the use of such technologies by trade unions has extended dramatically. Freeman (2005: 182) noted that 'unions may have adapted less rapidly than firms to the Internet, but even so unions are innovating and experimenting at unparalleled rates'. Today the scale of *qualitative* improvement is as striking as quantitative increase: union web sites are now generally user-friendly, even though differing in professionalism (which is indeed resource-intensive). Writing just over a decade ago, Greene et al. (2003: 284) argued that information technology offered scope for 'much more innovative, inclusive and potentially effective forms of organizing' that unions had as yet barely exploited. Certainly it is necessary to avoid uncritical techno-optimism. On the one hand, elites with power and resources can exploit electronic media for their own ends; on the other, vocal minorities with the time and energy can crowd out other voices from below. Nevertheless, as Lévesque and Murray insist (2003: 16), organizational power also requires effective processes of internal democracy, together with 'a culture favouring discussion between rank and file and officials and educational work to ensure that policies are well understood and reflect the conditions experienced on the ground'; and we may regard modern information and communications technologies as potentially valuable instruments to this end – even if this potential is often unfulfilled (Geelan and Hodder 2017).

Political theorists commonly argue that a prerequisite for genuine democracy is the existence of a *demos*: a constituency with a sense of shared identity and interests in common, and such a consciousness has to be socially constructed. Hence the absence of a European *demos* may be regarded as an irrevocable obstacle to democracy at European level (Innerarity 2014). In this context, Scharpf (1999: 6) distinguishes between 'output-oriented legitimacy' ('government *for* the people'), whereby leaders are judged primarily by the results they deliver; and 'input-oriented legitimacy' ('government *by* the people'), where the key criterion is the opportunity provided for involvement in

policy-making. These two conceptions map closely with the competing understandings of union democracy, and also with the contrast between ‘servicing’ and ‘organizing’ models of trade unionism. Schmidt proposes a third conception, ‘throughput legitimacy’, or ‘government *with* the people’. This ‘requires not just accountable, transparent and accessible institutional processes.... It additionally requires productive deliberative interrelationships among actors in the wide variety of throughput governance processes that make up the coordinative discourse of the policy sphere’ (2013: 17). In the trade union context, by a similar logic, effective ‘input’ requires a sense of collective identity among the membership – maintaining a ‘demos’ within the union constituency – and adequate ‘social capital’ of members to facilitate their effective participation. Coherent ‘throughput’, in turn, requires a sophisticated structure of internal union institutions, procedures and networks to facilitate a multi-directional, interactive relationship among leaders, local officials, activists and ordinary members.

It is also important to consider how collectivity is formed. Richards argues (2001: 35-6) that ‘labour solidarity has always been a constructed and contingent phenomenon built on local foundations’; while Dufour and Hege (2002) show that ‘representative capacity’ within union organizations depends to an important degree on the quality of the interrelationships between representatives and their constituents, on the responsiveness of representatives to the often individualized everyday concerns of workers, indeed their readiness to act as a kind of social worker in dealing with issues arising outside of work itself. Since networks of sociability precede formal collective organization, they can provide the springboard for unionization and the resource for effective intra-union dialogue. This was demonstrated in the study by Batstone et al. (1978) of a British engineering factory: the workplace union leadership was able to shape the constituents’ willingness to act by orchestrating debate and discussion through the network of first-line shop stewards down to informal groups of workers who ate lunch together, played cards during rest breaks or debated the previous Saturday’s football match. In the USA, Fantasia (1988) has described a similar articulation between informal social groupings and union solidarity. Such networks facilitate a dialogical approach (Flynn et al. 2004; Offe and Wessenthal 1985) whereby discussion and debate enlarge collective identity and capacity.

This may be related to what Jarley (2005) calls ‘social-capital unionism’ whereby trade unions should become facilitators of mutuality among workers. He suggests that the ‘servicing model’ of unionism, by making members dependent on the full-time officials, actually weakens networks of collective mutual support among workers and thus reduces their social capital. The ‘organizing model’ in some respects devolves collectivism back to the workplace, but tends to replace dependence on officials with dependence on a core of committed activists who are themselves liable to victimization or to ‘burn-out’. His alternative model creates a more diversified social network, with no clear demarcation between mutual support on issues which are ‘union-relevant’ as traditionally understood and those which are less obviously so; linkages built up over one type of issue can subsequently facilitate collective action over others. Interestingly, though Jarley does not develop this point, there are analogies both with the principle of ‘mutual insurance’ which the Webbs saw as the core of solidarity within early craft unions, and the efforts of early socialist (and also catholic) trade unions to organize a wide array of social activities to increase the cohesion and loyalty of their members.

Aronowitz (1998: 92), responding to the arguments of Fraser noted above, has insisted that ‘means and ends are not separate’. Their relationship ‘goes to the core of whether the labor movement should be an advocate of organizational change, and questions whether the labor movement can survive, let alone prosper, without transforming itself into a broadly democratic movement that prefigures the kind of society it seeks’. This clearly connects very closely to the whole issue of industrial democracy. If it is impossible to involve and empower workers within their own trade unions, it is scarcely plausible to suggest that work itself can be democratized, and the legitimacy of unions as a voice for democratization is itself undermined.

## **Concluding remarks**

We commenced this article by noting that the Webbs, in their *Industrial Democracy*, discussed trade unions both as organizations with elaborate systems of internal democracy and as potential agents for the democratization of work and employment. We then surveyed different understandings of economic and industrial democracy, and the ways in which they have been pursued over the past century. We considered how economic internationalization has motivated trade union pressure for transnational mechanisms to empower employees collectively. Finally we returned to our initial argument that to be agents of democratization, unions must themselves sustain internal democracy. Where does this leave us?

Sisyphus was condemned to push a boulder uphill each day, only for it to roll down again upon him. As Rosa Luxemburg reminded us, trade union action is ‘a sort of labour of Sisyphus, which is, nevertheless, indispensable’. The fight for democracy in and through trade unions is always an uphill struggle, and even more so in the present economic and political environment. McMurtry (1998) has argued that we are now confronted by the ‘cancer stage of capitalism’. Polanyi (1944: 73) described labour, land and money as ‘fictitious commodities’ because while they were all subject to market forces, unlike real commodities they were not produced for sale on the market. The postwar compromises imposed firm limits on the commodification of labour, land and money; but the process which McMurtry describes is the systematic weakening and removal of the social constraints on the destructive dynamic of commodification: a ‘carcinogenic mutation’ which has released the pathological potential which capitalist economies always contained.

Keynesian macroeconomic management, one of the key foundations of the postwar settlement, presupposed the economic governance capacity of the nation-state; this has now been subordinated to the assumed inevitability of national ‘competitiveness’. Where significant productive and infrastructural assets were in public hands, in many countries these have now been largely privatized. Trade union membership, as a proportion of the labour force, is almost universally in decline: a trend which Peters (2011) shows can be attributed to the impact of the global financialization of capitalism. In most of western Europe, collective bargaining coverage remains stable – though this is certainly not true of Britain – but its content has been hollowed out through diverse forms of decentralization and concession bargaining. For two or three decades, the wage share in national income has declined, and inequality has increased. Even before the recent (and current) crisis, government budgets had been squeezed, to an important extent through a competitive reduction in corporation tax in an attempt to avoid capital flight. In consequence, the welfare state has been transformed increasingly into a minimal safety net.

The cancer stage of capitalism undermines the elements of industrial and economic democracy achieved in earlier decades. Codetermination in one company was always precarious; now, the toxic combination of financialization, globalization and neoliberalism means that primarily enterprise- or establishment-based mechanisms must accommodate to the externally imposed requirements of intensified global competition. ‘The institutions [of employee representation] have not only lost their decommodifying impact on labour, they themselves are gradually commodified’ (Holst 2014: 5), as the threat of capital exit can make it imperative to accept managerial priorities. Moreover, strategic decision-making is increasingly removed from the sphere of codetermination. More seriously still, the very identity of the employer becomes increasingly elusive, with companies themselves treated primarily as commodities to be bought and sold in the interests of share-price maximization. With the diminishing autonomy of local managements, ‘employers can’t keep their side of the bargain’ (Thompson 2003).

The cancer stage of capitalism has ugly socio-political effects. There is a growing sense of popular disempowerment and alienation. Among those whose previous understandings of security and community have been brutally disrupted, this translates into unfocused anger, fuelling the advance of the far right: the Brexit vote in the UK, the election of Trump in the USA, the growth of the *Front National* in France, the *AfD* in Germany, the *FPÖ* in Austria, the *LeGa* in Italy and similar parties across Europe.

Does industrial and economic democracy offer a progressive antidote? It would be a more credible means to ‘take back control’ than the xenophobic nationalism peddled by right-wing demagogues. But a struggle for the democratization of the economy requires a new, imaginative – indeed utopian – counter-offensive: a persuasive vision of a different and better society and economy, a convincing alternative to the mantra of greed, commodification, competitiveness and austerity, a set

of values which connects with everyday experience at the workplace and in the community. This is necessarily an international struggle, and requires international solidarity in the face of nationalism and xenophobia. Such a struggle could also redefine the relevance of trade unions. But to change the world, unions must change themselves. They cannot credibly campaign for the democratization of the economy unless they themselves are patently democratic. By struggling to strengthen and renew their own democratic processes and culture, unions can provide a model and win a legitimacy for a wider campaign for social and economic democracy. Do unions, at both national and international levels, dare to abandon old rules and routines in order to create new strategies for industrial and economic democracy?

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