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Union Revitalization Strategies in Comparative Perspective

ABSTRACT ■ This introductory article provides a preliminary explanation of the cross-national similarities and differences of union revitalization strategies discussed in this special issue. Differences in the institutional context of industrial relations as well as state policies and employer strategies explain some major differences in how national unions are responding to the current socio-economic challenges. However, our findings reveal that union responses are also influenced by their own internal structures. In particular, we use insights of the social movement literature to highlight the importance of the cognitive or 'framing' processes through which unions as actors translate and act upon changes in the environment.

Over the past two decades there has been an extensive debate on how far economic, political and societal changes are responsible for trade union decline (Martin and Ross, 1999; Mückenberger et al., 1996; Regini, 1992; Waddington and Hoffmann, 2000). We would like to take this debate a step further by focusing on actors' responses rather than their external circumstances (Hyman, 2001a). We start from the premise that unions have some discretion in how to react to their changing environments. We are, therefore, interested in the following questions. First, what types of action are unions taking in different countries in order to deal with the problems they face? Second, how can we explain cross-country differences? And, third, how effective are these actions in helping to revitalize the labour movements of those countries?

The programme on which our analysis is based involves five countries (Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK and the USA), thus providing a wide range of institutional settings, union structures and identities and union responses. In terms of the varieties-of-capitalism literature, two of our countries are liberal market economies (the UK and the USA), one is a coordinated market economy (Germany) and two have been less reliably classified as 'Mediterranean' economies (Italy and Spain). Some of these countries possess strongly institutionalized settings with constitutional

and statutory rights, well-organized employers' organizations and (often) highly centralized bargaining (as in the social market economies of Germany and Italy), while others comprise weakly institutionalized settings with more decentralized bargaining structures, such as the liberal market economies of the UK and the USA (Soskice, 1999).

Union structures and identities vary from the more or less unitary peak confederations and market-oriented unions of the UK and the USA to the competing class-oriented union confederations of Italy and Spain and the society-oriented unionism of the unified German movement (Hyman, 2001b). All five union movements have faced a series of major challenges, albeit to varying degrees and in different forms: European economic integration; intensified internationalization of financial and product markets; decentralization of neo-corporatist and industry-level collective bargaining; and changing structures of employment (individualization, feminization and tertiarization). They have all experienced some form of 'crisis': membership loss, declining effectiveness in terms of collective bargaining coverage, problems of interest definition as a result of increasing membership heterogeneity, declining mobilizing capacity (because of restrictive legislation in the case of Britain), or more constrained opportunity structures. It should be noted that there are substantial differences in the actual degree of union decline between these countries. However, what is more important for our analysis is an awareness of crisis among all union movements.

Union Revitalization

Union decline and revitalization are notoriously difficult to define, especially from a comparative perspective. The literature has usually focused on quantitative measures such as membership density or bargaining coverage, without acknowledging their potentially different meanings in different industrial relations contexts. The loss of membership, for example, might be a strong indicator of union decline in Anglo-Saxon countries, but not necessarily in France or even Germany. We, therefore, broaden the concept and focus on a variety of *problems* facing all union movements in the industrialized world, without classifying these necessarily as indicators of union decline. Some are more easily quantifiable than others and are partly drawn from empirical evidence and partly from mobilization theory (Tilly, 1978, further discussed in Kelly, 1998: Chs 3 and 4): loss of membership, either in aggregate or among particular segments of the labour market, such as young workers; problems of interest definition and aggregation; the erosion of structures of interest representation, such as workplace unionism or works councils; declining capacity for mobilization, based on members' reluctance to

participate in union activities; institutional change, such as a reduction in bargaining coverage or weakening of links to political parties; and, lastly, diminished power resources, for example, because of high unemployment.

Union revitalization is then defined as a variety of attempts to tackle and potentially to reverse these problems. What types of action might comprise union revitalization and how might they assist unions? We identify six major strategies.

Organizing focuses primarily on the acquisition of membership, but, in addition, could create and strengthen workplace representation. This in turn might increase the union's mobilizing capacity and its labour market power. *Organizational restructuring*, for example, mergers and internal reorganization, could have a positive impact in three areas: it could strengthen union organization through economies of scale and rationalization; could increase union labour market or political power, or both, by eliminating interunion competition and division; and, lastly, the combination of additional resources and increased power could encourage more workers to join unions and boost membership. *Coalition building* with other social movements, such as the anti-globalization or environmental movement, could help unions acquire power resources, such as access to key individuals and networks within specific communities who could assist with organizing campaigns. Such links might also serve to broaden the range of interests and the agendas that unions seek to represent and thus broaden their appeal to poorly represented segments of the labour force (Hyman, 1997). *Partnerships with employers* at national, industrial or workplace level may allow unions to protect or develop bargaining institutions and allow them to pursue new kinds of interests. If they improve workers' terms and conditions of employment, they could increase perceptions of union instrumentality among non-union employees (Clark, 2000). In so far as they embody a union desire to cooperate with employers, they may erode the negative image that unions are associated with militancy and conflict (Cohen and Hurd, 1998). This in turn could reduce both employee and employer antagonism to unions. *Political action* may provide access to power resources, resulting in more favourable labour legislation or in corporatist labour market regulation. Lastly, *international links* could improve the exchange of information about multinational corporations, enhancing unions' bargaining power and also facilitating the mobilization of members in campaigns. Such links could also enhance union political power through the lobbying efforts of international union bodies at the European political level (Ross and Martin, 1999).

The main findings from our country case studies can be summed up as follows. The UK has seen modest union growth and some political influence after many years of decline and political exclusion. This has largely

been the result of increased organizing activity, sometimes framed in the language of partnership, and undertaken by individual unions with TUC support. New legislation after the change of government in 1997 has also assisted. In the *USA*, there have been sporadic increases in membership resulting from increased organizing. Political activity and influence have also increased through local and international alliances with social movements and through voter turnout (rather than corporatist interest group representation). Increased organizing activity has resulted from the articulation of top-down innovation and resources and rank-and-file participation. *German* union activity has centred on the use of collective bargaining and works councils to protect terms and conditions of employment in cooperation with employers and despite pressures toward decentralization of bargaining and declining coverage. There has also been political action (notably to achieve new works council legislation) and substantial merger activity. In *Spain*, political action has formed a key part of union activity with both left- and right-wing governments. There have been some attempts to deepen collective bargaining, but these have encountered employer resistance. In *Italy*, confederal political activity has comprised a major component of successful union revitalization, facilitated by inter-confederal unity, internal restructuring and increasing rank-and-file support.

Explaining Union Choices

How do we explain the different ways in which union movements choose among these strategies? Why, for example, is the organizing approach dominant in the two Anglo-Saxon countries, but not in the other three countries? We start with an overview of what the literature tells us about the strategic choices unions can make in responding to crisis, and on this basis we develop a more comprehensive framework for analysis.

It is surprising that although Kochan, Katz and McKersie (1986) introduced the concept of 'strategic choice' to the industrial relations literature in the mid-1980s, there is hardly any research on the different strategic choices made by unions. Moreover, although multi-country studies of industrial relations are increasingly popular, there has been little truly comparative research on union strategies in different countries (Hyman, 2001a). Most comparative studies have focused on one of two issues: the explanation of cross-country variation in quantitative indices such as union density or strike rates (Bean and Holden, 1992; Blanchflower and Freeman, 1992; Price, 1991; Shalev, 1992; Western, 1997) or the classification and explanation of different union types, structures or identities (Edwards et al., 1986; Hyman, 2001b; Martin, 1989; Maurice and Sellier, 1979; Poole, 1986; Visser, 1994; Windmuller, 1974). For example, Maurice

and Sellier (1979) drew comparisons between what they term the charismatic character of French unionism, appealing to elements of 'emotional commonality' with the accent on class struggle, and the more functional (bureaucratic and professionalized) nature of unions in Germany. Poole (1986) observed that the role of employers, management and the state had been decisive in the genesis of labour strategies. For example, militant employer strategies which precluded trade union recognition often promoted labour radicalism, and a powerful role of the state in the industrial relations system almost invariably promoted a politically active labour movement. In similar vein, Geary (1981) argued that state and employer repression was associated with greater political and industrial militancy on the part of labour. This viewpoint is clearly rooted in the classic understanding of the trade union as the less powerful labour market actor, largely responding to employer initiatives rather than becoming proactive and exercising strategic choice.

Clegg (1976), on the other hand, tried to establish a link between union organizations and industrial relations institutions in different countries. He argued that key features of unions, such as membership density, structural form, internal distribution of power and strike behaviour, were determined by the collective bargaining system in each country. For example, low union density in France was explained by the limited depth of collective bargaining, whereas high density in Sweden was due to the strength of collective bargaining at all levels. His approach has been criticized by some as almost tautological; moreover, the direction of causality is not always clear. For example, does widespread collective bargaining lead to high union density or does unionization encourage collective bargaining, or are the two processes reciprocally connected (Hyman, 1994: 174; Shalev, 1980)? Moreover, Clegg's emphasis on collective bargaining seems too embedded in an Anglo-American understanding of industrial relations to be able to account for cross-country differences. Nonetheless, his study alerts us to the powerful argument that industrial relations institutions shape the structures and behaviours of the actors — in other words, 'institutions matter'. In similar vein, Martin and Ross (1999) refer to the national industrial relations system as an explanation of differences in union structures and policies; unfortunately, they do not show a clear link between these variables. Another example is Ebbinghaus and Visser (2000), who emphasize the historical embeddedness of labour institutions. They argue that the character and context of national union movements can be traced back to the patterns of cleavages (discussed several decades ago by Rokkan), generating 'cross-national variation and historical contingency' which are important in mediating the impact of cyclical and structural changes. Lastly, Western (1997) provides convincing evidence that labour movements have survived best when they have been involved in 'Ghent' systems of unemployment insurance.

Despite the obvious analytical importance of 'institutions', we argue that explaining actors' strategies by their institutional context alone is too simplistic and deterministic, downplaying the mutual dependency and the interrelationships between actors and institutions. Actors both influence and are influenced by institutions; what is important is to trace out the reciprocal interconnections between the two. In addition, the structure and character of institutions themselves needs to be explained.

Lastly, Hyman (1994, 2001b) introduces union identities as another potential determinant of union strategies. 'Identities may be viewed as inherited traditions which shape current choices, which in normal circumstances in turn reinforce and confirm identities.' Unions in different countries have different identities which shape their behaviour, although this link can be 'disturbed' by outside factors:

Yet in a period of crisis, trade unions . . . may be driven to choices (redefinition of interests, new systems of internal relations, broadening or narrowing of agenda, altered power tactics) at least partly at odds with traditional identities. . . . To the extent that old beliefs, slogans and commitments — the ideological supports of union self-conceptions — are undermined, an explicit and plausible redefinition of trade union purpose is essential if 'the capacity itself of labour movements to pursue the social and political construction of solidarity' (Regini, 1992: 13) is to be salvaged. (Hyman, 1994: 132)

A potential problem with the identity concept is the need to make a convincing argument that union identities are independent, and not entirely shaped by the institutional setting of industrial relations, including the actions of employers and the state. There is also room for debate about what constitutes a 'crisis' for trade unionism.

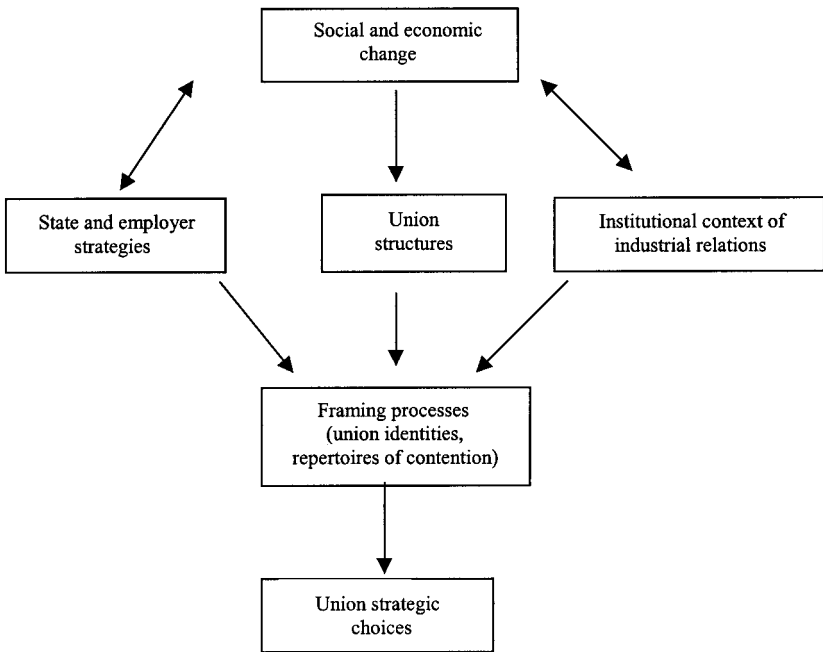
In summary, our reading of the comparative literature on union strategic choices has produced three possible determining factors: institutional differences, identity differences, and differences in employer, political party or state strategies. Rather than treating these as alternative explanations, it seems more sensible to develop an encompassing framework which allows us to explore the interrelations between them. Moreover, we argue that it is not sufficient to explain variation between national union movements in terms of these three factors alone. We will show that unions' choices are also influenced by their internal structures and by framing processes. In other words, we argue that structural variables (though useful in providing a primary explanation of cross-country variation) are insufficient to explore the deeper dynamics of union revitalization. By looking at the 'cognitive' processes of how the union as an actor translates and acts upon changes in the environment we hope to achieve a better understanding of these dynamics.

We should note that these are very preliminary attempts to build a

theoretical framework explaining cross-country variation in union strategies. Although there is a large comparative literature on national industrial relations systems, much less has been written on comparative labour movements (Hyman, 2001a and Martin and Ross, 1999 are exceptions). Our analytical model is based on a classic framework used in the social movement literature (McAdam et al., 2001: 17). Research on social movements has often focused on weakly institutionalized organizations and campaigning bodies, and has emphasized the importance of internal debates around organizational aims and methods and the ways in which issues are ‘framed’ by different actors. Recent challenges to the institutional stability and legitimacy of unions have drawn our attention to the similarities between unions and social movements and reinforced the potential value of ideas and concepts from the social movement literature.

The model (see Figure 1) consists of four independent variables (social and economic change, institutional context, state and employer strategies, and union structures), a process variable (framing processes) and the dependent variable (union strategic choices). Social and economic change denotes trends in the structure of the economy and of labour and product markets. Short- and long-term economic changes as well as broader

FIGURE 1. A social movement model of union strategic choice



trends in the labour market, such as growing feminization, have an impact on industrial relations institutions and actors' strategies. The institutional context of industrial relations comprises collective bargaining structures, legal and arbitration procedures and the political system, including corporatist institutions (Peters, 1999); but in contrast to labour economists, we define unions and employers as actors rather than as institutions.

Although institutions can be changed they often persist for long periods (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000), and thus in the short term, influence actors' strategies to a greater degree than vice versa. State and employer strategies derive from the other key actors within the industrial relations system. As the political economy literature convincingly shows, employers and governments have different strategies over time and across different countries, and these help shape union responses (Crouch and Streeck, 1997; Kitschelt et al., 1999).

Union structures comprise the horizontal and hierarchical organization of the union movement (centralized or decentralized union organization, unitary or multiple-peak federations) as well as contacts among unions and with other social movements. Also included are national union leaderships and their relations with other union officials and rank-and-file union members, relations that are likely to vary across countries. Union leadership is differently organized in different countries and this will have an impact on how unions frame their opportunities and threats and their choices of action. For example, compared to their German counterparts, US and British unions tend to have an individualistic leadership structure in which the general secretary's power is akin to that of a CEO. By contrast most leaders of German unions are *primus inter pares* and rely more on collective decision-making. We wish to highlight the impact that different union structures and leadership forms have on the framing process (see below). Lastly, this variable also refers to the collective identity of the union movement, defined as the shared definition among its members of what the organization stands for. In Hyman's (2001b) terms, union identity is oriented to class, market or society and it can have an impact on how unions perceive opportunities and threats (Hunt et al., 1994).

Framing processes, the procedural variable, are the ways in which unionists perceive and think about changes in their external context as threats or opportunities. Framing processes often express elements of a union's identity and draw from familiar ideas about union action, so-called 'repertoires of contention' (McAdam et al., 2001). One interesting issue concerns the conditions under which unions are likely to repeat well-worn behavioural patterns in responding to new challenges, rather than risking new strategies. Rigid organizational structures, weak leaders and outdated collective identities may all play a part in predisposing

unions toward a conservative rather than an innovative response. Lastly, union strategic choices are our main dependent variable.

Before proceeding further we should clarify a number of features of this model. Its form reflects our interest in explaining variations in union strategies. We have used the language of dependent and independent variables because our prime interest lies in examining those factors which impinge on union strategies. If our concern had been to explain variations in institutional contexts, then union strategies may have featured as an independent variable, since union strategic choices will themselves shape the behaviour of governments and employers. Clearly, the relative explanatory power of these variables will differ over time and from one country to another. In the following sections, we discuss each of the five explanatory variables in turn in the context of our findings. In doing so, we are aware that there are interconnections between, say, state policy and institutional context, and that there are dangers in discussing each of these in isolation. Where possible we draw attention to these interactions, while bearing in mind the need to keep our account clear and concise. In general, we argue that although the institutional context, employers' and state strategies are crucial in the explanation of cross-country variation, they are not sufficient. What we want to stress, therefore, is the importance of the internal union variables (union structures and framing processes) in explaining union strategies.

Findings

Social and Economic Change

All of our union movements faced both common and distinctive issues under the rubric of social and economic change. The former include: an employment shift from manufacturing to services; growing feminization of the labour force, coupled with a growth in part-time working; an expansion of the small-firm sector, often hostile to unions and hard to organize; and increased competitive pressures in product markets both internationally and nationally. The scale of these trends has varied between countries. The UK had one of the highest levels of unemployment in the OECD in the 1980s (though not in the 1990s) and a rate of manufacturing job loss above the OECD average. The US labour market, by contrast, had relatively low unemployment and a small industrial workforce relative to the service sector. The Italian movement faced a level of unemployment above the OECD average, but an unusually low level of part-time working, while in Spain, very high unemployment was accompanied by an exceptionally high proportion of employees on temporary contracts. German unions seemed to face the least turbulent

environment, at least in the 1980s, with low unemployment and a large and strong manufacturing base, although unemployment rose to very high levels in the 1990s.

In all five countries, these processes were associated in complex ways with union strength, particularly as expressed in declining union density. The UK recorded a relatively severe loss of membership, by almost 40 percent between 1980 and 1997. US union density had already declined to 20 percent by 1980 and by the late 1990s had fallen to around 15 percent. In Italy, overall density (including both 'active' members and pensioners) fell steeply from around 45 percent in 1980 to a little in excess of 30 percent by the mid-1990s. German union density remained fairly stable throughout the 1980s at approximately one-third, but following unification and a subsequent sharp rise in unemployment, it began to fall toward one-quarter of the workforce. Only in Spain did membership show a significant upward trend, but from a very low base. Even by the late 1990s Spanish density (at around 18 percent) was still some way below the EU average.

Union action has been heavily influenced by the contours of collective bargaining. High bargaining coverage (which is often associated with industry-wide bargaining) reduces the incentive to organize free-riding non-unionists as in Germany, Italy and Spain. By contrast, in the more decentralized systems of the UK and the USA, where bargaining coverage and union membership are more tightly linked, unions must organize non-union workplaces if they are to maintain, let alone expand, the coverage of collective agreements. Consequently, we find that organizing activity is a far more prominent component of union action in the 'liberal market economies' of the USA and the UK than in the three Continental European countries. Strong bargaining institutions also facilitate union efforts to expand the agenda of negotiations in order to increase their influence and appeal to a wider range of worker interests. Such activity was most obvious in the case of Germany, where legal support for union rights enabled unions to pursue partnership arrangements from a position of strength and to place new issues on the bargaining agenda, reflecting new interests and constituencies. There was also evidence in the UK, and to a lesser degree in Italy and Spain, that in well-organized (and mostly larger) companies, unions were endeavouring to expand the agenda of negotiations.

Second, structural features of the state and the political system play a key role in accounting for variation in the use of political action as a means of union revitalization. The Italian peak union confederations were able to enter negotiations with governments at various points in the 1980s. However, the implosion of the Italian political system in the early 1990s created a crisis of legitimacy which the unions were able to exploit through their position as key actors in civil society, with links to the

newly emerging political forces of the centre-left. By contrast, there were fewer channels of political influence open to the British labour movement; political activity was, therefore, a less substantial option than in Spain and Italy, and primarily took the form of electoral support for the Labour Party.

It is important to note that institutions can have contradictory effects on union activity. For example, in the case of Germany, it can be argued that the protections emanating from bargaining structures, works councils and legal rights have produced a much weaker sense of crisis among union leaders than in other countries (despite the evidence of declining membership and employer opt-outs). Consequently, there have been fewer initiatives, such as organizing activity, to restore membership and increase the proportion of women and minorities belonging to unions. Likewise, the political influence channels available to Italian and Spanish unions in the 1990s have allowed both movements to exert influence over a number of state reforms without necessarily having to organize and expand their membership in the fast-growing, but largely non-union, private service sector.

To conclude, institutional context helps account for some of the major differences in union strategies between countries. Nevertheless, there are significant questions left unanswered. Although British and American unions have long had powerful incentives to organize new members, we need to explain why substantial organizing activity began only in the 1990s. The formation of 'social pacts' between unions and states has been a marked feature of Italian and Spanish union activity and also in Germany, but the incidence of such pacts has varied significantly over time in ways that are only partly accounted for by changing institutions. There is also variation in the incidence and character of attempts to engage employers in new bargaining issues that is only partly explained by institutions.

State and Employer Strategies

All five union movements engaged in political action, albeit in different forms and to differing degrees, and variations in state strategies go some way to explain these cross-national differences. The British and American union movements had to contend in the 1980s with governments notorious for their pioneering implementation of neo-liberal economic policies and for their resistance to any kind of union influence. Not until 1997 were British unions able to resume a consultative relationship with government. Although some contacts had begun to be re-established with Conservative ministers in the mid-1990s, they yielded little influence over government policy. By contrast state resistance to Spanish union demands in the late 1980s led to the demise of national social pacts as unions

reverted to worker mobilization as a means of influencing government. Paradoxically, it was the desire of the minority right-wing Aznar government to include unions in the process of labour market reforms that helped revive union political action from the mid-1990s. The German experience perhaps falls somewhere between Spain on the one hand, and the UK and USA on the other. Although the DGB and its affiliates faced a centre-right government committed to some degree of labour market deregulation (at least until its replacement in 1998 by the SPD), even the Kohl government remained broadly committed to German-style 'social partnership' based around industry-wide bargaining, works councils and government consultation with unions. Political action was certainly an element in German union strategy, especially with regard to the Alliance for Jobs or pressure for reform of works council legislation, but did not figure to the same degree as in Italy or Spain.

The strategies of employers have also had a significant impact on the choices made by unions. The high level of organization of German employers and their continued receptivity to collective bargaining ensured that unions devoted considerable efforts toward collective bargaining reform and expansion. Despite the increasing pressure by some employers to escape joint regulation or to decentralize bargaining structures, unions have enjoyed some success in placing new demands on the bargaining table, reflecting new interests and constituencies. By contrast, bargaining reform has figured to a lesser degree in the profile of US, UK and Spanish unions because of employer strategies. The anti-union hostility of many US employers has heavily constrained the role of bargaining reform as a means of union revitalization. In the UK, many unions ran up against the increasing desire of employers to contract, not expand, the bargaining agenda, while Spanish unions also encountered serious employer resistance to any significant expansion of local bargaining activity.

Both state and employer strategies help account for major differences among our five countries in the degree and form of union political action, but as with institutional context, there are still questions left unanswered. It does not follow from the existence of a political crisis, as in Italy in the 1990s, either that union leaders will recognize this fact or that unions will possess the organizational capacity to engage in the political process. The union 'choice', for example, to engage in the political process is itself dependent on other factors.

Union Structures

Union structures influence a number of different types of union action. Most forms of political action are facilitated by the presence of peak confederations that are encompassing (they represent a diverse membership)

and centralized (with power to represent their affiliates and commit them to a course of action). The confederations of all five countries meet the first criterion, but the second is far more problematic. The British and American confederations are relatively weak in comparison with their national affiliates; the German DGB may be losing influence in the wake of union mergers; while the Italian and Spanish confederations appear to have acquired sufficient authority over their members (perhaps through their success in workplace elections) to act as representatives of organized labour vis-a-vis central government. Consequently, political action through social pacts has played a more prominent part in union action in Italy and Spain than elsewhere. Political action in divided union movements may still be possible where there is inter-confederal unity, as in Spain in the mid-1990s and in Italy from the early 1990s. By the same token, it has been hindered by the disunity which re-emerged in both countries in the late 1990s. Equally critical to the pursuit of political action has been the degree of unity *within* the confederations, particularly where highly contentious issues have been on the agenda, as in Italy in the 1990s.

The depth and coverage of workplace organization is a second facet of union structures that sheds light on differences in union activity. Spanish, Italian and German unions operate in collective bargaining structures with high levels of coverage and with nationally prescribed systems of workplace representation. German unions, however, are much better placed than their Spanish or Italian counterparts to engage employers in new bargaining initiatives because of their denser networks of local representatives, both through the legally mandated works councils and through the *Vertrauensleute* system. Although both Italy and Spain have systems of elected workplace representatives, their coverage is patchy and associated union activity has often tended to be sporadic, waxing and waning with the workplace electoral cycle.

Union strategic choices have been shaped by each of these three variables: institutions, employer and state strategies, and mobilizing structures. Yet within this framework of constraints and incentives, union leaderships can still exercise choices because issues and problems can be 'framed' in different ways.

Framing Processes

The role of framing processes can be illustrated in relation to union membership. US and UK union leaders have long regarded membership loss as an indicator of union weakness and decline. By contrast, union leaders in Germany have been less concerned with membership decline because of the institutional protections enjoyed by unions, which to some degree insulate union power from membership fluctuations. For Italian and Spanish union leaders, it is the membership of their own confedera-

tion in relation to its rivals that has generally proved more salient than the absolute dues-paying level. In addition, union leaders in these two countries have been more concerned with the mobilizing potential of the workforce than with membership levels, for example, around workplace elections and through political demonstrations. Membership loss thus has different meanings in different national systems, and the 'problems' of loss and how to respond it have therefore been framed in different ways across our five countries (compare Locke and Thelen, 1995). A critical role in framing issues is played by national union leaders; consequently, leadership change has played a key role in shaping union choices, particularly in the less strongly institutionalized industrial relations systems of the USA and the UK, where leaders have a more powerful position within the union organization. Newly elected AFL-CIO President John Sweeney was instrumental in both identifying and promoting union organizing as the requisite strategic response for the US labour movement, and did so in the face of internal opposition. Likewise, John Monks in Britain played a key role in promoting the TUC's twin-track strategy of organizing and partnership under the rubric of the 'new unionism'. National leaders can also play a key role in mobilizing support and resources behind a particular strategy, as happened in Italy when union officials successfully secured membership support for the controversial pension reforms of 1995 and 1997. Lastly, union leaders can also be influential, especially at a time of crisis, through their assertion of a new union identity. In the USA, Sweeney has sought to mobilize support for organizing by framing it as the expression of a new 'social movement' identity, counterposed to the old 'business unionism'. In the UK, Monks and other general secretaries have counterposed a responsible 'societal' identity for British trade unionism as against an older tradition of militancy.

Institutions also affect framing processes, and again membership loss provides a good example. Where union influence rests on comprehensive, industry-wide collective agreements (as in Germany, Italy and Spain) then so long as employer defection is rare union leaders have little incentive to recruit the substantial number of free-riders who benefit from union agreements without having union membership. Declining membership is, therefore, less likely to be framed as a priority issue to which organizing is the appropriate response. In the UK and the USA by contrast, where bargaining mostly occurs at the level of the company and where most companies are non-union, then the perceived decline in union influence is more likely to be framed as an organizing issue.

Lastly, the ways in which issues are framed by union organizations will also be influenced by union identities. For example, more class-oriented unions, as in Spain or Italy, are more likely to interpret employers' anti-union strategies as a political rather than a labour market issue. Whereas,

'society-oriented' unions, as in Germany, will perceive opportunities to achieve a compromise between the social partners as a more valuable 'collective good' than antagonistic 'class struggles'. Union identities are closely related to a similar, but somewhat independent, concept which McAdam et al. (2001) describe as 'repertoires of contention': available and familiar methods of collective action, which also influence the framing processes. Union political action in Italy, a key component in union revitalization efforts, was a familiar mode of contention, dating from the corporatist arrangements of the early 1970s (themselves a response to the strike wave of the late 1960s). In Spain, the pervasive and repressive role of the fascist state helped create a highly politicized union movement whose leadership continued to regard the state as a major focus of its own actions after the 1976 transition. Although the American and British union movements devoted substantial resources to 'political action', the absence of a labour party (in the USA) or corporatist institutions (in both countries) meant that such action took the form of electoral lobbying and voter mobilization. Repertoires of contention do change, however, especially in situations of crisis. The mass political demonstration against government policy, successfully deployed by British unions in the 1960s and 1970s, fell into disuse in the 1980s after its repeated failure to influence the Thatcher government.

Conclusions

This article has set out our preliminary explanation of cross-national similarities and differences in the mechanisms of union revitalization. Our analytical model, based on insights from the social movement literature, provides a first attempt to conceptualize the most important influences on unions' strategic choices while, at the same time, incorporating the interrelations between actors, structures and framing processes.

We have argued that the properties of industrial relations institutions, in particular collective bargaining and corporatist arrangements, explain some of the major differences between our union movements, particularly in the importance of organizing and of political action. Within these institutions the strategies pursued by governments and employers also make a difference: state strategies of labour inclusion (as against exclusion) explain some of the striking differences in the significance and character of political action among our five labour movements. Moreover, variations in state strategy also throw light on important differences in the timing of political action, and in particular, shed light on the rise of 'social pacts' in Italy and Spain in the 1990s.

However, our findings highlight the fact that unions' responses to social and economic changes are also influenced by their own mobilizing

structures: political action in the form of social pacts has been facilitated by unity between competing union federations, while collective bargaining initiatives have figured more prominently in the profile of union activity where there are local representative structures. Lastly, we argued that the adoption of particular initiatives, such as organizing in the USA and the UK in the 1990s or political action in Italy and Spain in the same period, may reflect the emergence of new union leaderships able to frame issues and solutions in ways that command the support of union activists and members. It does not necessarily follow that these leaders should be located only at national levels of the union movement. In factionalized unions, new ways of framing issues such as privatization or partnership have first emerged among dissident groupings at lower levels of trade unions as they have sought to challenge incumbent rivals.

There are several issues raised by our framework which remain unresolved, and which we will pursue in the next stage of our research programme. In particular, we will explore the role of internal dynamics and framing processes in union revitalization. We believe that the social movement theory emphasis on framing processes offers an especially fruitful and innovative way of examining the mechanisms and outcomes of union activities. The interactions between structural and framing variables still need further investigation, and the degree to which unions are constrained by institutions is still unclear. The interaction between state and employer strategies is an important issue for investigation and one we shall be able to explore in those settings where there have been significant changes in state policy in recent years. In particular, we are interested in exploring further the different forms of internal decision-making and leadership styles; and their impact on framing issues and mobilizing membership support is another issue that we believe to be significant. Allied to this issue is the question of how existing 'union identities' and 'repertoires of contention' are utilized and modified in order to maintain or shift union strategic choices. Further research will explore these questions and also refine and possibly modify our existing theoretical framework, by allowing us to derive and test predictions from it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Carola Frege thanks Sid Tarrow and Charles Tilly for useful references in the social movement literature. We also thank Rich Block, Ed Heery and David Marsden for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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