Gumbrell-McCormick, Rebecca and Hyman, Richard:
Trade unions in Western Europe: Hard times, hard choices
Oxford, Oxford University Press 2013, 242 pp

Trade unions remain relevant socio-economic actors for today's economic, political and social battles. Although being on the defensive, the current *hard times* have stimulated new thinking among unionists in their identification of new opportunities. Many unions have "*embraced alternatives to their time-honored traditions"* and have made *hard choices* but they will need to continuously reinvent themselves if they "*are to survive as effective ´continuous associations* " (p. 205). This is, in short, the optimistic key message presented and commented in this book.

Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman explore the challenges facing trade unions and their responses in ten west European countries: Britain, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Italy. Although common trends across the different countries have lead to a situation in which trade unions influence is losing ground, the authors explore in more detail how trade unionism has evolved in each country, the recent key challenges the unions have faced, and their responses.

The first two introductory chapters of the book map the trade union landscape: key features of trade union organization and its context in each of the ten countries are outlined. The countries are grouped according to the four commonly identified varieties of capitalism in Western Europe already indicating the ways in which traditional models have been changing. The authors then move on to survey the key challenges and transformations within each of these national models, and present an preliminary overview of different efforts for trade union revitalization. This illuminating presentation paves the way for the content of the remaining book chapters.

The authors engage with the debates of the past two decades on union modernization and revitalization by singling out five common themes: renewing power resources: recruitment, representation and mobilization (chapter 3); restructuring trade unionism: mergers and organizational redesign (chapter 4); bargaining in adversity: decentralization, social partnership and the crisis (chapter 5); unions and politics: parties, alliances, and the battle of ideas (chapter 6) and beyond national boundaries; unions, Europe and the world (chapter 7). As part of the discussion the authors show that trade unions in these countries are not satisfied to handle their own decline but, on the contrary, that many of them had the courage to abandon old rules and routines in order to craft new strategies. Throughout these five chapters Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman give details that although traditional power resources declined trade unionists searched for alternatives. Complementary power resources that were not necessarily new but which had not been valued sufficiently by trade unionists in the past were now utilized by them, including discursive/communicative, collaborative/coalitional and strategic/logistical power resources. By ways of example the authors are able to demonstrate that the search for and the usage of alternative power resources is not only confined by path dependency, reflecting traditional trade union

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identities and their array of actions but also by the degree of hardship faced by unions in the different socio-economic contexts.

The optimistic tone of much of the content adopted by the authors may not be shared by all academics in the field but the book´s rich analysis points well to the obstacles under which strategic innovation and revitalization by unions is likely to succeed. The comparative analysis in each of these chapters provides for the first time a systematic and ample record on which to draw and raise several key issues for industrial relations researchers, policymakers and trade union members. In fact, choosing among the priorities is essential for the hard choices trade unions have, argue the authors. The book helps in this regard: the empirical insights from the different countries commented on and interpreted by the influential scholars combined with the book's practical approach make it an essential read.

The concluding chapter, in which the authors analyze the persisting themes ´strategy´ and ´democracy´ and the question of their synthesis, reminds the reader that there is no simple answer for trade unionists. "*Strategic capacity seems to vary substantially across (but also within) countries, and the prospects of unions regaining the initiative differ likewise*" (p. 192). The authors emphasize that even though there are innovative responses by unions it will need to take a more systematic and generalized effort at national and international level in order to be effective. Moving away from tactics and adopting a more strategic approach is seen essential for their revitalization. Moreover, Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman argue that unions must permit more effective learning based in internal democratic processes that incorporate interests and aspirations of a wider constituency than that of the traditional union membership. Throughout the book the authors show that tentatively trade unions have learned how to integrate the growing diversity within today´s workforce and adopted mechanisms for self-organization and separate interest representation for formerly underrepresented and overlooked employee groups.

The authors took the compelling data for their analysis from interviews with key union representatives, academic experts and informed observers in each country and supplemented their comparative analysis through documents provided by unions and secondary background material. Incorporating theories of institutional change and the literature on varieties of capitalism the authors provide a potent account of why trade unions are still important. Although many of the arguments presented by the two leading authorities on trade unions might be known by regular readers of their previous publications the book is an extensive gathering of knowledge on the European union movement and I agree with Guillermo Meardi who recons that this reference may well become a pioneering explanation of how trade unions survived the current hard time and reinvented themselves. Hence it is an important book, which will pay a crucial role in the socio-political discussions of the years to come.

Madrid, January 2014 Sylvia Rohlfer*

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