Changing Patterns of Union Organisation, Representation and Participation: What is happening in Anglo-American Trade Union Movements?

By

Peter Fairbrother
Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University

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One of the features of the current period is that in many of the advanced economies unions appear to be in crisis and disarray. At a general level, it has been argued that the source of these problems stem from the uneven but nevertheless universal slowing down of the post-war boom which has increased international competition, resulting in a restructuring of work and employment relations. As a consequence, a series of national social settlements forged in the early post-war period have come under strain, particularly as the influence of neo-liberal models on government policy has become more general, deregulating economies, decentralising bargaining and weakening the strength and influence of unions industrially and politically. The extent of neo-liberal influence has been pervasive in North America, Britain, and Australasia (Bernstein and Adler 1994; Kelsey 1995 and Fairbrother et al 1997). It is in these circumstances that trade union movements in these countries have begun to review and reconsider the basis of trade unionism.

The aim of the paper is to focus on the developments in the Anglo-American countries and examine the changing patterns of union organisation and activity in Australia, Canada, USA, New Zealand and United Kingdom. The trade union movements in each of these countries faced acute difficulties and uncertainties in the 1980s and 1990s, giving rise to arguments of crisis and the sclerosis of these trade union movements (Pocock, 1998). There have been moves within each trade union movement to re-examine the basis of representation and organisation, in the course of which there have been exchanges and a transfer of experience from one movement to another.

In the 1980s, after decades of falling membership density, unions in the USA began to renew themselves in uneven and often highly contested ways. These developments occurred against the background of relatively ineffective organising and declining political influence. Beginning in the late 1980s, a few unions began advocating new forms of unionism, designated ‘social movement’ unionism (Johnston, 1994). Faced with traditions of bureaucratic and undemocratic business unionism, unable to effectively represent labour in changed conditions, there has been in America, from the late 1980s, a growth of influence of the organising model of trade unionism (Grabelsky and Hurd 1994; Delaney et al., 1996). These developments involved the rejection of business unionism, with its emphasis on servicing union members and partnership with employers, and replacing this with an emphasis on organizing the unorganized, active rank and file participation in union affairs, and the pursuit of a broad agenda of social change. A further fillip was given to these initiatives with the election of a reforming AFL-CIO leadership in 1995. These developments have led commentators to argue that the US movement represents the
forces of greatest change and the potential for greatest transformation (Bronfenbrenner et al 1998). As the crisis of trade unionism internationally has intensified, so has the influence of the model spread, first to Australia and New Zealand and then to Britain (Pocock and Wishart, 1999). Its impact has, however, been uneven, both between countries and within them.

Despite the recent prominence of neo-liberalism, Britain in some ways stands at the centre of contrary influences. Its political economy has been influenced by the twin pressures of a highly internationalised economy, which resembles that of America, on the one hand, and a political union with the EU, exerting a very different legislative and political perspective, on the other. While Conservative governments of the 1980s and early 1990s looked unashamedly to the neo-liberal model of the US, and were visibly irritated by the social legislation of Europe giving labour greater protection and a louder voice, New Labour (1997 onwards) has been much more ambivalent. A parallel ambivalence appears to inform current TUC policies and its New Unionism project, which equally face influences from both the US and European models of trade union practice (Heery, 1998). However, these developments also have to be placed in the context of the on-going dilemmas and uncertainties faced by British trade unions as they attempt to deal with the continuing economic and political restructuring in process, particularly on questions relating to both recruitment and representation (Waddinton, 1999). It is within this cluster of issues that the TUC has embarked on an experiment with strategies for organising and a promotion of policies of partnership (Heery, 1998). At the same time individual unions have begun to look to the ways they organise and operate, although the direction and significance of this change is sharply contested (McIlroy, 1997; Fairbrother 1996, 1999).

The Australian union movement as a whole has faced an on-going crisis of declining membership for the last two decades, from 51% in 1976 to 30% in 1997, with private sector coverage falling to 23% (Peetz 1998). This crisis is driven by the fading relevance of a union organising model that developed as part of a wider social settlement, institutionalised in the first half of this century, under the aegis of legally backed arbitration and conciliation. During the 1980s and into the 1990s, the trade union movement has been restructured, via an extensive merger programme, transforming the institutional face of trade unions, with possibly the most dramatic and large-scale series of union mergers anywhere in the world. The result has been the creation of large multi-sector and occupational unions, beset by uneasy internal political alliances and class compromises. With the election of governments committed to neo-liberal economic policies, increasingly restrictive legislation was introduced, changing the terrain of industrial relations away from long-standing arbitral arrangements (Fairbrother et al., 1997). In this context the ACTU looked to the USA for models of unionism, developing a programme of reform and development under the label ‘Organising Works’. For unions, these developments raise important questions relating to the debates about the processes of union adaptation and renewal (Pocock, 1998).

In the face of extensive economic deregulation and hostile legislation, New Zealand unions have looked to Australia and particularly the USA for models of renewal (on the scale of
change, Kelsey, 1995). The passage of the Employment Contracts Act 1991 ended nearly a century of state support for trade union organisation and had an immediate and dramatic effect on union membership. The consequences for unions, including the trade union confederation were dramatic (Walsh et al., 1998). There were massive membership losses in almost all unions and financial insolvency in a number. Most unions have put their energies into securing membership, although there have also been attempts to engage employers and the state so as to secure an institutional role for unions. The prevailing response has been to focus union policies of recruitment around servicing approaches, and to promote union amalgamations. Less common has been an attempt to rebuild an organising culture and to develop unions around an active membership base, although there are some notable examples of such developments (Oxenbridge, 1997). It is for these reasons, that this case raises the question of legislation and managerial approaches to unions in a particularly sharp form.

In contrast, in Canada there has been a sceptical and cautious examination of the USA model, with an attempt to develop a distinctive approach. It would appear that trade unions in Canada have coped with the developments of the last two decades in a more resilient way than elsewhere. Nonetheless, there have been important struggles taking place within unions, particularly over patterns and forms of representation (Briskin and McDermot, 1993). As part of this renewal, it is argued that there has been a move away from the traditional business union focus common to many trade unions in Canada, in part in the context of the restructuring of work and employment that is taking place (Kumar et al., 1998). The refocus of trade unionism has involved renewed attention to recruitment strategies and equally important organisational questions, including a focus on labour markets, work organisation and social identities. While such development do not necessarily involve all unions, nor have they been implemented in uniform ways, they do mean that there has been a degree of renewal and resilience that is novel.

Critical to these developments is the way trade unions have learnt from international example. While this has stimulated some debate, there has been little sustained examination of these issues, with the result that it is not clear what is learnt or how. Two partial exceptions are Pocock and Wishart (1999) and Oxenbridge (1997), although in both cases the question is what can be learnt from the USA. A more general observation was made by Heery (1998) who recognised that these developments are part of a process of the internationalisation of unionism that is in process. By internationalisation he meant:

…the emergence of international networks which can provide for the diffusion of strategy, techniques and organizational forms (1998: 356)

Such networks clearly are a critical and new development, concerned with the possible transfer of skills and techniques, from one union movement to another. However, the detail of these processes and a careful assessment of what is happening in each country is still at an early stage of development. There is a need for a wider appreciation of the political and economic contexts of reorganisation elsewhere as well as an examination of the detail of patterns of renewal and their impediments. Only by understanding the
specificity of each programme can the conditions for the general applicability of these models be identified.

The argument advanced here is that the lessons from other countries are contradictory, and there has been only a limited attempt by union confederations to evaluate them or synthesise them (Bronfenbrenner, 1998, Leisink, 1996, Pocock, 1998). One of the tasks facing union leaderships and commentators is to critically assess these different developments and in the process lay the foundation for arguments about the conditions for union renewal in these diverse countries. The argument is based on original research in the United Kingdom and Australia and detailed cross-national comparison with the USA, Canada and New Zealand. By focusing on the specific proposals and plans in each of these countries for ‘reform’ and reconstruction of unions a detailed picture is developed of the current position and prospects for unions in these types of polities. In the paper a brief history of these developments will be presented, followed by an examination of the specific policies and practices that these union movements have attempted to introduce. On the basis of this examination and review tentative conclusions will be drawn about the prospects for union revival and renewal in these types of economies.

**Bibliography**


