Solidaires, unitaires et démocratiques: social movement unionism and beyond?

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Introduction

As I write this article, in spring 2016, French workers are once again striking and taking to the streets in their thousands to challenge the reform of labour laws. This suggests that the period of 'nearly continuous rebellion' against the subordination of the French economy and society to the 'requirements and values of contemporary global capitalism' (Jefferys, 2003: 355), which began with the strike wave in the public sector in 1995 has now lasted for over 20 years. It is also an indication that while the mobilization capacity of French trade unionism has undergone a process of resurgence, this has not yet been translated into effective political influence. The pace of neoliberal globalization processes has been slowed but not halted and an alternative project remains fragmented and marginal. The unrealized promise of trade union renewal in France is evident in the relatively new union federation Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques (SUD, Common Cause, United, Democratic).

SUD came to prominence through the events of the winter of 1995 as it seemed to be most attuned to the grass-roots, militant and political character of the strikes framed as a defence of the established model of public service that was under attack from the neoliberal project. SUD quickly became the focus of academic analysis and particularly so in relation to the debate over trade union renewal. Sainsaulieu (1999: 814) suggested that the increasingly reformist orientation of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT, General Workers Confederation) opened up a space for a more grass-roots, radical and societally oriented trade unionism and that with SUD we might be 'witnessing the emergence of a new model of militancy'. The conclusion, based on an ethnographic study of SUD-Rail, was that this was a model that indicated a 'sign of a capacity for renewal' in French trade unionism, but that this had not been translated into any significant rises in membership or into increased political influence (Connolly, 2011: 120). In practice, SUD-Rail was

assessed as representing a partial renewal based around its militant action repertoire, participatory structures, and movement identity (Connolly, 2010a; Connolly, 2011). The significance of SUD is also not to be found in its membership levels (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010: 512). It rather represents 'a significant radical pole, in qualitative terms'. Its specific quality seems to lie in its close relationship to the social struggles that developed out of the revival of social contention and, in this sense, it represents the kind of 'matrix' required to connect disparate social struggles into a social movement. In spite of SUD representing the more general 'revival of social movement unionism' in France, however, it is understood as the product of the 'disjointed logics of militancy and representation' (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010: 516). SUD thus expresses, rather than transcends, the stalemate in the wider labour movement, which is impeding its broader revitalization. Drawing on this insight, this article argues that SUD has not managed to bridge the gap between the social movement of which it is a constituent and the political institutions through which an alternative politics could be realized. The characterizations of SUD as oriented towards 'radical political unionism' (Connolly and Darlington, 2012; Gordon and Upchurch, 2012) may overstate its development in that the potential and limits of its political dimension have yet to be fully recognized and realized.

This analysis of SUD is developed through setting its development within the context of broader developments of trade unionism in France understood in terms of how the processes of neoliberal capitalist globalization have generated a general crisis of social democratic trade unionism as the dominant type of trade unionism in western Europe (Upchurch et al., 2009). The emergence of SUD as a new alternative future strategic union identity is outlined in broader terms before identifying some examples of specific mobilizations and campaigning activities undertaken by SUD. These activities have been selected as they relate to each of the dimensions of the crisis of trade unionism: a crisis of membership and mobilization capacity, a crisis of identity and legitimacy, and a crisis of political representation and project (Mathers et al., in press).

The crisis of (social democratic) trade unionism in France and the emergence of alternatives

Due to the historical development of the labour movement in France, the three dimensions of this general crisis of trade unionism identified above are of a specific nature and degree. Trade unionism in France can be characterized as a 'unionism without members' (Groux and Mouriaux, 1992) or a 'virtual unionism' (Howell, 1998) based less on membership density and more on mobilizing capacity and social and political influence. This suggests that the crisis of membership is not as significant in France as that experienced in some other western European states. Union membership fell in France by around 70 per cent in 25 years and by 1994 density stood at just 8 per cent located mainly in the public sector, thereby calling into question its social representativeness and legitimacy. More significantly, mobilizing capacity had also declined seriously with increasingly institutionalized and bureaucratized unions becoming distant from workers' concerns and increasingly incapable of mobilizing effectively: evidenced in terms of declining levels of strike action, increasingly deployed defensively for sectional interests. SUD's strategy to address the crisis of mobilization capacity aimed for a return to mobilizing structures that, by being close to the grass-roots, could successfully translate a militant oppositional sentiment and stance into a capacity to generate and generalize strike action and thereby turn mass mobilization into mass membership (Connolly, 2010a; Milner and Mathers, 2013; Sainsaulieu, 1999).

Friedman (2008: 12) argues that the labour movement 'has lost its spirit, its élan, social legitimacy, and moral status even faster than it has members'. Such a crisis of identity and legitimacy is particularly acute in France where societal legitimacy forms a vital basis for engagement with the state (Milner and Mathers, 2013). Processes associated with neoliberal globalization have undermined existing bases for unions as encompassing class-based organizations advancing the general good and have underpinned the reformulation of them as sectional interest groups. In France, unions lost social legitimacy (Rosavallon, 1988) as they became regarded as defenders of the insider rights of public sector employees. Unions also lost legitimacy as they adopted defensive strategies of concession bargaining and increasingly performed a function of social control (Sainsaulieu, 1999). The crisis of identity is associated with the loss of an 'alternative mobilising belief system' (Gamson et al., 1982: 15) which can generate anti-systemic discourses and projects. In France, this has been explained in terms of a shift from a 'class-society' to a 'class-market' orientation expressed as the *recentrage* of the Confédération

Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT, French Democratic Federation of Labour) and the rejection of class struggle by the CGT (Connolly, 2011). SUD addressed this crisis by seeking to revive the discourse as well as practices of class struggle trade unionism. SUD activists generated an 'identity around the defence of wider working class interests' (Connolly, 2011: 128) which translated into attempts to organize marginalized groups of workers and support mobilizations of marginalized social groups beyond the workplace. In opposition to the dominant productivity paradigm and its associated moral basis that equates worker protection with company efficiency (Groux, 2009), SUD developed an alternative moral economy that echoed the humanist tradition (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010) and counterpoised the defence of the fundamental rights of citizens to the generalized insecurity produced by neoliberalism.

The birth of SUD can be traced back to the late 1980s when section after section of workers broke away from the CFDT during strikes, which challenged the new social partnership and politically moderate orientation of the CFDT (Sainsaulieu, 1999; Ubbialli, 2004). This reorientation is known as the *recentrage* of the CFDT (Mouriaux, 2004) which describes a decisive break from its more radical past in the 1970s, rooted in the events of 1968. Many of the subsequent leaders of SUD had taken the events of 1968 as their ideological reference point (Sainsaulieu, 1999). *Recentrage* was part of a general strengthening of social democratic trade unionism in France in the 1980s and 1990s, which historically had been weak due to various factors. The collapse of communism hastened the shift in the CGT towards the social democratic centre where it increasingly found common ground with the CFDT. The relative failure of the new social democracy in office in the early 1990s to deliver successfully an alternative project in the face of pressures arising from globalization produced a shared enthusiasm for the project of a 'social Europe'. This project has also stalled, however, with the consequence that the dominant union orientation towards 'cosmopolitan social democracy' has opened up space on the left which the radicals in SUD have attempted to exploit (Upchurch et al., 2009; Parsons, 2015; Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010).

This space on the left is developing in relation to the wave of protest which has engulfed France in the last two decades and can be understood as consisting of a series of four (or now five) phases, the first of which was triggered by the strike wave in 1995 (Milner and Mathers, 2013). These events were considered by leading

sociologists as a decisive moment for trade unionism in that they either marked the last gasp of a dying movement that was thoroughly institutionalized and reactionary – *Alain Touraine* – or the first breath of a reborn socially progressive labour movement recomposed increasingly at the European level – *Pierre Bourdieu* – (Mathers, 2007). SUD appears somewhat paradoxically as a political union without being political (Sainsaulieu, 1999). This is explicable by the fact that although clearly on the left, SUD has tended to eschew an overly dogmatic ideological dimension to its relationship to the wider social movement. This means that in terms of an alternative project, its acceptance of the autonomy of the social movement from political domination translates into an emerging common critique of neoliberal capitalism out of the interactions between various social movement organizations, and a common set of demands that has an anti-systemic dynamic. Each of these elements of how SUD relates to the three main crises of trade unionism are now examined in relation to specific examples of the mobilizations and campaigning activities in which it has been engaged.

Crisis of membership and mobilization capacity: public service mobilizations caught between movement and institution?

SUD unions are the products and producers of strike action. They have emerged largely out of splits, with strike actions being pivotal events which have exposed the limitations of other unions and have triggered blocks of members to set up or join a SUD union. SUD has been characterized as 'the most combative, contestation-driven advocate of strike action' (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010: 514) and a union which favours strikes as the main form of a broader repertoire of collective , direct action through which to contest managerial power and challenge established political projects (Connolly, 2011). Moreover, SUD has been portrayed as very much a grass-roots form of trade unionism which favours democratic, participatory forms of organization with decision-making power residing with local activists (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010; Damesin and Denis, 2005), and this suggests a bottom-up approach to collective action in which unions are very much to be considered as structures for combative mobilization unionism (Ubbialli, 2004).

In terms of specific episodes of collective action, strikes in the health care sector in 2000–2001 were triggered by cuts to rest days and to staffing and became protracted affairs in which rolling strikes were renewed by daily votes. They were

also the catalysts for militant actions such as overnight occupations of managers'
offices and the sequestration of hospital directors (Sainsaulieu, 2006). This practice
of detaining senior managers for up to 24 hours in order to trigger negotiations
became more widespread in the recession of 2009 to protest against plant closures.
It was labelled by some as 'bossnapping' but, as physical well-being was respected,
it was viewed widely by the public as an expression of legitimate anger (Pernot,
2010). Successful attempts to involve service users in the campaign were also made
by organizing barbeques. The wider public was also engaged through media
publicity and demonstrations, including one at the Ministry of Health in Paris. This
strategy indicated that the specific issues provoking the strikes were linked explicitly
to broader questions such as budgets and broader public policy. SUD was also
instrumental in organizing several cross-union *coordinations,* which linked workers in
disputes across 20 hospitals (Sainsaulieu, 2006).

The linking of specific grievances with wider social and political issues was
also central to the campaign by SUD-Rail to mobilize cleaners for an occupation of a
works council meeting. Mobilizing for occupations is a widespread tactic in SUD-Rail,
where it is an attempt to put pressure to open negotiations or at the start of
negotiations as a display of militancy (Connolly, 2010a: 195–200). Local activists
helped to recruit most cleaners into the union by identifying such complaints as dirty
and unsocial working conditions. SUD activists and publicity materials sought to
frame these grievances in terms of the requirement for the regional manager of the
publicly owned railway company to accept the lowest tender for cleaning contracts.
Despite intensive efforts, the mobilization was limited to just 40 people, half being
cleaners and half union activists. The action enabled workers to express their
grievances directly to senior management (Connolly, 2010b).

One of the successes of SUD unions is their ability to identify workers'
everyday needs and concerns as the basis for mobilization. Mobilizations have also
revealed tensions between those activists committed to direct forms of democracy,
developed through the more spontaneous mobilizations in localities, and those
activists who wished to develop representative structures, which can more readily
generalize and politicize the specifically focused mobilizations and link SUD into a
confederal structure (Sainsaulieu, 2006). SUD marks a break with the principle of
'associative federalism' that produces a strong, centralized confederation that
dictates policy and action to its federations. SUD has adopted a principle of

organizational autonomy which grants independence to local unions enabling public expressions of disagreement within and across the various SUDs. By generating structures through action and organizing non-hierarchically SUD aims to avoid the pitfalls of institutionalism. This approach is also expressed in SUD's participation in the formation of the inter-union 'Groupe de Dix' (G10, Group of Ten) which was an attempt to generate a confederation from the grass-roots and through collective action It functioned informally from 1981 until formalizing its operation into statutes in 1998 (Damesin and Denis, 2005; Sommier and Combes, 2007). Rather than consider this issue in terms of an inevitable maturation process towards institutionalization, Connolly (2011) explains it as an enduring tension between the movement and institution elements of trade unionism. SUD leaders addressed this tension reflexively through an ongoing dialogue and debate over matters relating to internal democracy and attempts to address wider social and political issues beyond the workplace.

Rather than dismissing SUD unions as expressing a 'pragmatic militancy' that is incapable of producing an alternative social project out of its combative mobilizations (Sainsaulieu, 1999), it may be more fruitful to acknowledge how SUD leaders have grappled with the difficulties of moving the union beyond the 'militant particularism' of workplace struggles towards broader 'campaigns' that link workplaces and sectors and onto 'social movement projects' that express a fully formed alternative to neoliberal capitalism (Cox and Nilsen, 2014). In a context in which French workers have been willing to mobilize in mass but only sporadically, an orientation towards workers' immediate concerns has delivered some significant initial membership gains for SUD, but this growth has largely stalled as mobilizations have not scored a decisive victory (Ubbialli, 2004). Out of the slightly fewer than 2 million unionized workers, SUD membership of 80,000 remains significantly lower than the two largest confederations each with memberships of around half a million (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2012).

Crisis of identity and legitimacy: towards a radical, transversal trade unionism?

In contrast to defaming images as defenders of the privileges of public service employees, SUD has engaged markedly in initiatives to advance the rights of

marginalized groups, particularly insecure and minority ethnic workers, or the campaigns of associations of the unemployed, of the homeless and of undocumented migrants. Connolly (2010b) shows how legal expertise was a key tool for organizing minority ethnic cleaning workers. SUD-Rail nominated cleaner activists as union representatives to provide legal protection against victimization. Its legal advice service was highly popular and assisted workers with employment tribunals, and training made activists aware of how to enforce existing legal rights, such as stopping work in dangerous conditions. SUD has offered practical and political support to associations active in mobilizing and campaigning around issues whose focus is beyond the workplace. SUD was instrumental in the formation of Agir Ensemble contre le Chômage! (AC!, Act Together against Unemployment) whose original aim was an alliance between employed and unemployed workers around a political rather than service-oriented agenda. This strategy did not hinder its transformation into an association mainly composed of the unemployed and offered support for the series of national marches against unemployment in France launched by AC! (Royall, 1998which was later transformed into the European Marches against Unemployment, Job Insecurity and Social Exclusion in which SUD was also a leading protagonist (Mathers, 2007). AC! developed into one of the four main organizations of the unemployment movement of the winter of 1997–1998 and pl ayed a crucial role in extending its repertoire of action to include occupations of public buildings and in extending the issues beyond unemployment to social rights such as income and housing. Influential figures in AC! with a background in SUD brought the crucial resource of activist knowledge and frames to transform unemployed mobilizations into 'rights-based protests … promoting new models of society' (Royall, 1998: 53The resulting action repertoire went beyond traditional marches to include spectacular direct actions, but also legal challenges to reforms of the benefit system, which were also brought by the G10 union confederation of which SUD was a constituent. Such cases served to bring public recognition to the unemployed and other groups of *sans* (those without rights) and to press for their access to citizenship rights (Denis, 2003).

In these kinds of activities, SUD leaders provide not just practical resources, such as finance to support mobilization and legal challenges, but also the ideological resources that frame them within a challenge to the moral and political legitimacy of neoliberalism and as the basis for a just social and political order. Denis (2003)

suggests that the law is used to place norms around management action and also challenges the way that neoliberalism enables the state to withdraw from industrial relations and so depoliticize workplace issues. Moreover, SUD leaders act as 'moral entrepreneurs' whose engagement is shaped by humanist values, which are expressed through various progressive meanings of public service. They engage in a crusade to defend public services, which generate the public good against the evils of private interest produced by neoliberalism. The recourse to law provokes a conflict of legitimacy as what were considered as narrow technical questions of efficiency, are recast as broader questions of citizenship. The dual strategy of combining action in legal institutions and extra-institutional mobilization is a means of projecting issues into the public sphere and provoking a public debate over the 'place of public services in society' (Damesin and Denis, 2005: 24). The recourse to law also forms a repertoire of action of a 'transversal trade unionism', which links specific interests to the general good (Denis, 2003). This strategy also serves to produce a sense of a conflict between social movements as it renders the enemy (of neoliberalism) visible and serves to produce a collective identity amongst its opponents: the 'sans' for example.

This linking of social categories into a new social subject and linking of unions and associations in common campaigns is also an indication of SUD's transversal trade unionism (Ubbialli, 2004). In terms of the nature of this transversalism, Sainsaulieu (2006) describes a pragmatic radicalism that combines unions, pressure groups and social movement organizations, with mainly material concerns, in an ad hoc arrangement. The class discourse of the left-wing leadership (Connolly and Darlington, 2012) of SUD suggests something more organized and coherent about these linkages meaning that SUD may mark 'a return to class-based politics, mindful of the socially excluded' (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010: 516). SUD is thus arguably an attempt to overcome the fragmentation of resistance to the various manifestations of state restructuring by combining class struggles over the content and form of the state into a common project (Clarke, 1991). The organization and coherence of this project may wax and wane according to relations within the broader labour and social movements, as well as within SUD.

Crisis of political representation and project: a politically independent union?

SUD presents itself as standing in the tradition of the Charte d'Amiens which established that trade unionism was a social movement aimed at social transformation, but with complete independence from political parties. Academic commentators have thus raised the question of whether SUD represents the rebirth of revolutionary trade unionism (Ubbialli, 2004) and stands in a direct line back to the origins of anarcho-syndicalism (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2006), or may represent a 'syndicalist opportunism' with 'a rejection of any political dimension to trade union practice' (Connolly, 2010a: 35). The suggestion that SUD-Rail is comprehensible as a form of radical political unionism (Connolly and Darlington, 2012) has been contested due to the lack of clarity over its politics, the relatively low levels of institutional political engagement amongst its activists, and the variation of politics across the various SUD unions (Denis, 2012). It is evident that SUD activists are highly politically engaged, but that this takes various forms, the most marked of which has been a deep involvement in the Global Justice Movement (GJM). SUD has been highly prominent in the GJM contributing arguably to its emphasis on social issues and social justice and on linking opposition to alienation to exploitation. The majority of the diverse organizations constituting the GJM were formed after the movement of 1995 understood largely as a defence of acquired national social rights. However, SUD has eschewed the label of 'anti-globalization', andhas strongly supported attempts to 'Europeanize' the movement such as the European Marches in 1997 and 1999 and the European Social Forums (ESF). The specificities of the GJM in France include its concern to unify specific demands into a common platform, a greater consciousness of '<u>the</u> social movement', and a pronounced role for intellectual leadership expressed as the symbolic domination of the GJM by the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions (ATTAC) in which SUD has also participated (Sommier and Combes, 2007).

Connolly (2010a) found that activists in SUD-Rail did not express their party political affiliations openly and were keen to restate the political independence of SUD. Political activities tended to be restricted to the higher levels of union activism where political differences could spill over into factional disputes. Higher-level activism has been channelled mainly into the G10 which expressed a process of grass-roots confederalization. The majority of SUD unions joined the G10 from 1989 and remain part of its successor Solidaires. The G10 expressed a social movement approach to inter-union relations that translated into directly connecting workers

engaged in collective action within and beyond the workplace rather than institutionally (Damesin and Denis, 2005). Consequently, the G10 was strongly oriented to social movement unionism and developed an omnipresent criticism of neoliberalism with a strong political flavour to its demands. The G10 also proposed the formation of a common anti-neoliberal pole of trade unionism as an alliance with other unions and confederations against the 'social refoundation' project proposed by the employer's federation Mouvement des Entreprises de France (MEDEF, Movement of French Businesses). This project was subjected to intellectual critique by the think tank Fondation Copernic in which leading activists from SUD and the G10 played a key part (Damesin and Denis, 2005; Ubbialli, 2004). Such leading activists also played a major part in the ESF process and the G10 contributed more speakers to seminars at the 2004 ESF than any other union organization, thus enabling it to shape the debates. The G10 was also much more present than other unions in seminars on broader social and political issues such as feminism, ecology and European construction (Giraud et al., 2005). This political agenda was shared largely by the grass-roots, with SUD members more likely to vote 'No' in the referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty than members of other unions (Grunberg, 2005).

Many SUD members identify as anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist yet, within an overall left-wing political orientation, actual sympathies are heterogeneous. The overwhelming majority are on the left with a strong minority on the far left (Sainsaulieu, 2006). More precisely, half of the members of SUD-PTT identified as 'left' and a quarter as 'extreme left' (Sainsaulieu, 1999) and in SUD-Rail, 21 per cent belonged to far-left political parties (Paccou, 2006). This has led to SUD being described as an 'organized front' in which various ideological positions can co-exist without any being dominant. Its political radicalism is expressed as common demands and policies that are 'linked to each other simply by common themes'. This approach to politics overcomes divisions in the shorter term, but is likely to falter in the longer term due to the 'lack of a transformational project'. This political failure is blamed on an influential older generation of 'militants of 68' whose politics were simultaneously overly dogmatic and diffuse (Sainsaulieu, 1999: 813–184).

The first generation of SUD leaders were certainly influenced greatly by the lessons of 1968, central to which was the stifling effect of the political domination of the CGT by the Parti Communiste Français (PCF, French Communist Party). This

resulted in elevating the defence of 'the autonomy of the social movement' from political control to a point of principle. Moreover, in a difficult context for far-left organizational politics in the 1980s and early 1990s, many political radicals eschewed the goal of building fully formed alternative political parties and decided to engage in unions and associations. Their aim was to develop unions like SUD as means for disseminating radical political ideas. This process of politicization has only deepened with the emergence of mass social movements in France since 1995 and particularly the GJM (Joshua and Raison du Cleuziou, 2005). Such a strategy is also influenced by the idea of the 'united front'. This strategy has been articulated by theorists from the far-left party Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR, Revolutionary Communist League), which has influenced SUD activists, as a means of uniting fragmented economic and social struggles into a politicized social movement (Bensaid, 2007). In practice, it produces a set of common mobilizing concerns that are expressed as a set of 'transitional demands' with an anti-capitalist logic that might also be considered as 'revolutionary reforms' (see Mathers, 2007: 172–179). In relation to SUD, it has enabled 'common cause' rather than 'vanguardist' coalitions to be developed. The outcome has been a radical political edge to mobilizations linked to an embryonic project, but this has not been translated into any substantive political representation or influence.

Parsons (2015) argues that union political independence in France is a myth in that union-party links are organized around loose and unstable political families. From reported voting patterns, the political family of SUD is composed almost entirely of voters for the Parti Socialiste (PS, Socialist Party), the Front de Gauche (FdG, Left Front) and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA, New Anti-capitalist Party). All main union confederations apart from Solidaires called for a vote for François Hollande in the 2012 presidential elections yet half of the main confederations walked out of tripartite talks in 2014, suggesting the formation of a social democratic bloc was temporary and unstable (Parsons, 2015). With the CGT preferring to endorse a vote for the PS over the FdG, contrary to what its traditional allegiance would suggest, the space on the 'Left of the Left' seems open. SUD's continued assertion of political independence seems to express an unwillingness or inability to contribute to filling that space. The myth of union political independence seems in this case like a 'strong myth' (Bourdieu, 1998) in that it has real political effects.

Despite the limitations of its political direction, SUD's social movement orientation has enabled significant inter-movement links between unions and associations, whilst also acting as a powerful spur on the CGT to make it more open to social movements. It has also made union leaders more willing to revitalize links with members amongst whom SUD has 'spawned a renewed interest in radicalism and militancy' (Sainsaulieu, 2006: 705). Recent evidence of this is the election of Philippe Martinez as General Secretary of the CGT and its militant stance in the mobilizations over the labour law. The main achievements of SUD therefore appear to suggest that it has functioned as a 'radical flank' of the wider union movement with both inter- and intra-movement effects (Isaac et al., 2006). Whether SUD can move beyond social movement unionism to embrace fully the strategy of radical political unionism and move from the fringes of the labour movement to centre-stage is bound up with the development of the broader social movement against neoliberal restructuring and particularly its engagement with institutional politics.

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