Neoliberal Globalization and Trade Unionism: Toward Radical Political Unionism?

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Abstract

This article revisits the question of changing forms of trade unionism within the context of neoliberal globalization. While it broadly accepts the argument that globalization might encourage the development of more radical forms of unionism as survival strategies, it argues that such radicalism cannot be understood satisfactorily by the term Social Movement Unionism (SMU). This is due to over-reliance on theories of the New Social Movements (NSMs), which produce a largely de-classed and de-politicized perspective. The article uses insights gained from theoretical work on protest and labor movement development to bring the state back into the analysis and applies this analysis to oppositional trade union practice in a variety of institutional contexts. It concludes by making a case for understanding contemporary forms of oppositional trade union strategy through the term radical political unionism which takes account of both its social and political determinants as well as the agency role played by political leaderships.

Introduction

SMU has been often presented as a model on which trade unions may re-invent their identities to survive and thrive in a hostile global environment (e.g. Munck, 1988; Scipes, 1991).

The argument is presented that the transnational nature of capital has weakened the structural power of unions. Internationalism is therefore to the fore in SMU models (Moody, 1997; Waterman, 1998). Past patterns of national institutional support can also no longer be guaranteed under the pressure of labor market de-regulation. Informal work and informal workers, it is suggested, are widespread within poorer countries, and a growing mass within developed economies, creating insecurities and risks under conditions of the 'new' capitalism to replace those of the 'old'. In such a paradigm the emphasis is on informal workers as potential transformative agents, perhaps as part of a 'multitude' against the 'empire' of capital (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Trade unions, as representatives of 'old' labor, must then adopt new ways of working in order to rediscover their associational power. Most importantly, they must begin to work in alliance with other agents in civil society, necessitating less bureaucratic forms of decision-making and more open networking both within and beyond the workplace (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, 2004). Such arguments have undoubtedly provided a powerful theoretical underpinning for the development of SMU as a way of analyzing the emergence of a progressive form of trade unionism. Such a form can address the challenges posed by the fragmentation of work, the rise of insecure employment and the growth of nationalism that have arisen in the context of neoliberal globalization. Thus, SMU has stood out as an alternative course for trade unionism that seeks to revitalize the autonomous, inclusive, and critical dimensions of practice in contrast to the subordinate, exclusive and uncritical practices of business unionism and social partnership (Robinson, 2000).

Despite the strengths of much of the analysis of SMU, there exist significant weaknesses within it. Some dubiety exists in describing SMU. Tattersall (2005, 2009), for example, highlights heterogeneous terminology applied to SMU, referring to variants such as 'union-community coalitions, social unionism, community unionism, social justice unionism or citizenship movement unionism' (2005:99). These terms are often referenced without a clear expression of the meaning. More fundamentally, many writers locate their prescriptions within the framework of NSM theory that distinguishes between 'old' social movements (such as the labor and trade union movement) and 'new' social movements (such as feminist, human rights, environmental campaigns). Much of this literature, as we argue in a later section, adopted a post-industrial paradigm, in which the primacy of the capital-labor relationship was submerged among wider forces of

transformation. NSM theory offered a retreat from a class-based analysis of change in society, in favour of wider societal-based cultural struggle. Waterman (1991: 2) summarized the position by arguing that 'the major international movement of the present day is not so much a labor or socialist one as a broad and complex democratic movement. In so far as one can generalise about the NSMs as democratic movements, the case for looking at unions from their angle rests here.'

We contend that new oppositional union identities cannot be fully understood and appreciated within the constraints of NSM theory. NSM theory appropriately created a framework for analyzing the social movements generated by the crisis of the Keynesian Welfare State (KWS). Neoliberal prescriptions, which were integral to the expansion of global markets, acted to de-institutionalize the structures within which trade unions in the global North operated. In the global South, the expansion of capitalist production relations associated with globalization has generally occurred without the development of institutional structures supportive of organized labor. Despite the changes wrought by neoliberal globalization, class-based social relations remain as important in the dynamic of capitalism as they have ever been. Furthermore, the study of trade unions, as representatives of labor within class-based society, cannot be fully understood by utilizing NSM theory while it continues to downgrade the importance of class as an explanatory factor. In consequence, we suggest that many features of 'SMU' which are drawn from NSM theory are important ingredients for union revitalization under neoliberalism, but they are not in themselves a *substitute* for a class-based analysis of trade unions' strategic options in contemporary capitalism.

To develop our critique we begin by outlining the de-classed character of NSM theory. We also challenge views which ignore or deflect from the role of the state in shaping the environment in which trade unions must operate. This omission has resulted in a de-politicized presentation of SMU due to an 'anti-state' emphasis within much NSM theory. We observe a tendency towards valorizing spontaneity and voluntarism which, while usefully focussing on the self-mobilizing capacity of the rank-and-file, tends to omit questions of unions' political identity and the relationship of unions to the state. Indeed, SMU has all too often been presented in a fashion suggesting that it is a universal panacea for union decline and proposed in such a way as to assume a 'best way' approach to union revival. We thus attempt to restore an appreciation of the political dimension of unions as movements. In undertaking this task we return to the political process model of understanding labor and protest movements which assess state-labor relations in terms of facilitation and repression within 'cycles of

contention' (Tilly, 1978; Tarrow, 1998). We draw on contemporary developments in trade union activity to present our case for radical political unionism that encapsulates the key features of contemporary union movements in a way that definitions of SMU have so far failed to do.

Trade Unions and the NSMs: Collective Action Beyond Class?

Defined as 'old' social movements, unions are depicted as economistic in goal setting and ossified in ways of working which are not conducive either to new innovative practices or new strategies of operating within society. SMU is then usually defined by the degree to which trade unions have adopted ways of working in and beyond the workplace such as coalition building, innovative organizing techniques, and networking practice *as an adjunct*. At its most extreme, this position can result in a simplistic emphasis on 'organizing' as a seeming proxy for SMU with the conclusion that the more innovative techniques are used, the more likely the union will be to recruit and develop a 'new labor movement' (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, 2004).

There is, however, a more deep-seated effect of the adoption of NSM theory for the characterization of SMU due to its repudiation or sidelining of class as a transformative agency. There is context to this assertion. NSM theory emerged in the wake of the failure of the radical worker mobilizations of the late 1960s on, and became paradigmatic in the 1980s during a decade of declining union membership and influence in advanced capitalist societies (Barker and Dale, 1998). NSM theory was most strongly articulated in Western Europe and was advanced in particular by writers approaching social movements from a sociological perspective. Writing in the wake of the failed aspirations of the student and worker revolt in France in 1968, Touraine (1974), for example, argued that due to the new value-focused character of social conflict in the emerging post-industrial society, the class-based labor movement had become anachronistic and was likely to obstruct social change. Again, writing after the collapse of Italian workers' struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, Melucci (1989) developed the post-industrial analysis by identifying the importance of 'hidden networks' to producing visible mobilization. He observed the practice of young peoples' movements based around social centres, which emphasized autonomy from the state and political parties and which appeared to eschew centralized leadership in favour of non-hierarchical organization. The theme of networking is also advanced by Castells who emphasizes the role played by networks within 'informational capitalism'. Castells (1996: 354) views collective organizations of labor as *passé*, having become 'a political agent integrated into the realm of public institutions' which are unable to operate according to the dominant networking logic of the information age.

Giddens, (1990, 1991) and Beck (1992, 2000) relate the decline of class-based politics, and hence the sidelining of the labor movement, to a shift from early to late (or reflexive) modernity. This epochal change manifested itself in a decline of mass production and mass consumption, a retreat from full employment, and a shift in industrial structure towards knowledge-based occupations. The globalization of production and services has acted to reinforce the crisis by increasing individual risk. Indeed, Beck (1992) advances a strong version of individualization to argue that capitalism now exists without classes and so class is no longer a credible basis for social and political action. Indeed, he argues that class is a 'zombie category' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The explicit suggestion is that the trade union movement is tied to defending existing rights and ill-equipped to develop a new project that addresses the insecurities generated by the new risk environment (Beck, 1992).

Other theorists located trade union problems within the decline of the KWS. Trade unions under the KWS had become bureaucratically institutionalized into the *body politik* and were no longer able to respond effectively to the new regulatory regime. Habermas (1981) argued that unions had abandoned mobilization against the *status quo* and had become mere mechanisms for channelling grievances. For Habermas, the future lay in wider 'cultural' protest. In contrast to trade union concerns with material gains achieved within productivism, cultural protest, for example by the womens' movement, would be able to develop new values that challenged the dominant social order. Offe (1985) argued that the cost of integration into the mechanisms of the KWS for unions was that they had jettisoned their old transformative agenda in return for piecemeal gains. However, the NSMs with a social basis in the new middle class, together with groups marginalized from the labor market, had taken up the 'forgotten agenda' of the labor movement. In so doing they had adopted the informal and spontaneous non-institutional forms of protest that characterized the emergence of a new political paradigm.

Despite differing theoretical rationales, each strand of NSM theory suggests that class-based labor movements have lost their transformative capacity. The conclusion may be that unions are condemned to exist in 'zombie' form – dead in terms of progressive social and political agency, but somehow still alive as organizations. There is, however, a more optimistic reading of NSM theory which is that in order to regain a progressive role in society unions are *compelled* to ally with the NSMs. This is apparent in the work of Peter Waterman who draws explicitly on the work of Beck, Giddens, Castells and Melucci to characterize the 'new' era as 'a high or radical

modernity … a complex high-risk globalized information capitalism' (Waterman, 1998: 203) that has undermined the capacity to develop an effective labor movement around a class identity. He proposes that unions should operate according to the principle of networking and link with non-labor organizations (the 'new alternative social movements') to form a global social movement that can rise to the challenge of the 'immediate necessity of civilizing a capitalist world order' (Waterman, 1998: 2).

Such arguments utilize NSM theory to make calls to revive trade unionism as a vibrant social movement. But there remains an implicit tendency to reduce the trade union struggle in the workplace to the status of one among many others (Mathers, 2007). Indeed, Dunn (2007: 134) argues that 'Stated most strongly, such theories … leave considerable doubt whether exploitation exists at all'. This highlights a fundamental distinction in how class and class struggle are understood. Whereas NSM theory regards class as a social category derived from the capitalist labor market (Beck, 1992), class is fundamentally an exploitative social relation (Mathers, 2007). Consequently, class struggle is not merely a distributional question that leaves capitalist social relations intact, but is a struggle rooted in the fundamentally opposed needs of labor and capital (Barker and Dale, 1998). This differing conception has an important corollary regarding the development of labor movement politics. Whereas NSM theory suggests a revitalized social democracy that advances a minimal humanitarian agenda supported by a broad popular movement, the alternative is to understand the NSMs in terms of broadening the class basis of resistance to capital and the state and of a radical socialist alternative (Clarke, 1991). This suggests that while SMU does raise the important issue of revitalizing trade unionism as a social movement in civil society, it tends to downplay the important question of how this is tied up with labor's relationship to the state.

Trade Unions, Social Movements, and the State

Much of the theoretical framework emanating from studies of NSMs regards them largely as socio-cultural phenomena that, for example, defend the autonomy of the 'lifeworld' against the encroachment of the state (Habermas, 1981). Moreover, it was precisely the accommodation of the labor movement with the state and its institutionalization that is assumed to have produced its decline as a social movement (Touraine, 1981). However, the incorporation of labor movements in the KWS was a temporary praxis that the process of neoliberal globalization has starkly revealed. The state moved from its 'positive' role directly providing public goods and services to one of regulating market-based competition (Seidman and Gilmore, 1986). This suggests

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that social movements need to be examined in relation to the changing forms of the state paying due attention to the dynamic relationship between social movements and the state.

Trade Unionism and the State

This disregard of the state in much NSM theory is overcome by drawing on a different tradition in the study of labor and protest that is traceable back to writers like Edward Thompson and George Rudé. The emphasis on the state is present in Tilly (1978) who drew on the history of protest in Britain and France to highlight the importance of two dimensions which shape the development (or failure) of modern social movements. These two dimensions were relationships between the challengers to authority and the authorities themselves (e.g. the state) whereby the challengers must judge the opportunity-threat and the authorities determine the subsequent degree of facilitation-repression. The relationship of the movement to the state is crucial, and the political dimension vitally important. This relationship between authority and challengers would condition the formation of a social or labor movement as individual states would respond in different fashions to the threat from below. Authorities might seek to repress emerging movements, or develop institutional structures to contain and 'process' conflict. A combination of events and outcomes is possible, leading one commentator to apply 'game theory' in the case of the Chinese state response to the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989 (Deng, 2010). In contemporary terms, a sense of injustice, or *moral outrage,* apparent for workers under attack from neo-liberal prescription means that such analysis proves helpful to us. This is because the challenge to existing institutional structures from above, combined with a state revisionist approach to the public domain, may have created the condition for what Tarrow (1998) described as a new 'cycle of contention' between the authorities (or state) and ordinary working people. New movements and new ways of protesting, often constructed by 'early risers', are afforded by the political opportunities presented. The 'Battle for Seattle' in 1999 may be one such turning point in the emergent global justice movement. 'During such periods, the opportunities created by early risers provide incentives for new movement organisations. Even conventional interest groups are tempted by unconventional collective action. Alliances are formed, often across a shifting boundary between challengers and members of the polity' (Tarrow, 1998: 24). The choice between repression/exclusion and facilitation/institutionalization is thus a balanced judgement for those in authority[i].

McAdam (1982) took forward Tilly's analysis to construct the 'political process model' (of the American Civil Rights Movement) which traced political, organizational and consciousness change (see also Eisinger, 1973 and

McCarthy and Zald, 1977). A chemistry of movement formation and consolidation is constructed within this model. Kelly (1998: 129) takes this approach further and identifies the state 'as a key agent of counter-mobilization against organized labor, particularly through its repressive organs such as the police, the army and the intelligence services'. He is also aware that capitalist rule depends on the 'dialectical interplay of coercion and consent' (1998: 59) directing attention towards how states (and employers) channel mobilization as well as repress it. State facilitation and repression of social movements is one of several processes that affect how social movements develop through a 'cycle of contention' where this is understood as a phase of heightened social conflict which becomes generalized across a whole system, often in waves confined to specific periodic events or to more general phases of politico-economic change. The cycle can only be ended by either reform, repression, or, in extreme cases, by revolution. In the 'mobilization phase' the main processes that affect how a social movement develops are the diffusion of protest across groups and space, the construction of new repertoires of action and frames of meaning, and the emergence of new organizations and the transformation of existing ones. During the 'demobilization phase', social movements are affected by other processes such as polarization resulting in the development of factions, a division over radical (violent) and moderate (institutional) forms of action as well as by state strategies of facilitation and repression which in advanced capitalist societies are mostly deployed in a selective rather than generalized way (Tarrow, 1998).

Applying these ideas, we can conclude that the development of the forms of trade unionism identified as SMU coincided with the early mobilization phase of the cycle of contention generated by neoliberal globalization. However, state strategies of selective state repression and facilitation have had a highly significant effect on how this cycle has developed with concomitant effects on the forms of trade unionism that have developed. This has not been an automatic process as such strategies can have unintended consequences. Kelly (1998), for example, argues that state repression can serve to radicalize and generalize labour mobilization. This was clearly the case in South Africa under apartheid. The risks of repression are high, but a strategy of facilitation is not guaranteed success either as prevailing economic conditions dictate the terms of negotiation. The recent financial crisis has severely restricted the state's room for manoeuvre and this has limited the scope for effective social pacts and provoked militant, but largely defensive protests. This seems to be reinforcing the strategic paralysis, whereby trade union leaders seek to find workable strategies of opposition, while being constrained by a questionable faith in their relationships with political parties who have been 'friends of labour' in the social democratic tradition (c/f Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2009). Thus the strategic paralysis of trade unionism is likely

to be a product of incumbent leaderships who can be a serious obstacle to the adoption of new union strategies that may pose a serious risk to their position and to the union machine. This question of leadership is another crucial aspect of contemporary oppositional forms of trade unionism not fully captured by SMU.

The Question of Leadership

How a cycle of contention develops is not merely the product of state strategies, but also involves the responses of social movements to these strategies. Whether repression will be met by acquiescence or radicalized resistance and whether facilitation will result in moderation is dependent partly on the strategic decision-making of movement leaders.

Barker *et al* (2001) argue that,

> "Leadership is fateful for movement development at every stage and turning point – their growth and decline, their heritages for the future and their mark on history – are all intimately tied up with their forms of leadership, the quality of ideas offered and accepted, the selections from repertoires of contention, organisation, strategy and ideology they make" (Barker et al, 2001:23).

In relation to union revitalization, the debate over leadership has been restricted largely to the debate over the organizing model that has revived the bureaucracy/rank-and-file debate albeit couched in terms of an activist/leadership dimension. Concerns have arisen within industrial relations analysis in debates over the role of the trade union bureaucracy versus the rank-and-file (see Hyman, 1971, 1983). The specific social role of the trade union leaders, so well outlined by the Webbs (1894), was inextricably tied to the development of the social democratic model of trade unionism. The heyday of the Keynesian 'Golden Age' aided and abetted the emerging dominance of social democratic thought on the left and within the unions, and allowed the bureaucratic consolidation of the trade union leadership to flourish in times of high employment and economic growth. The crisis of the labor movement identified by the NSM theorists was also expressed as a crisis of bureaucratic forms of leadership and its displacement in the NSMs by spontaneous mobilization and a blurred distinction between leaders and members (Offe, 1985). Kelly (1998), however, highlights the positive leadership role that can be played by activists in mobilizing members around collective senses of injustice and grievance (c/f Klandermans, 1987; Fantasia, 1988). He has drawn criticism from Fairbrother (2005) for adopting a 'vanguardist' approach to union activist leadership in contrast to his own model of 'workplace activism' grounded in the collective strength of workplace organization. In considering this argument Darlington (2007) adopts a dialectical approach and argues that 'Fairbrother's explicit attempt to denigrate Kelly's emphasis on the

role of union activist leadership effectively blurs the distinction between activist and members, leaders and led, re-focusing on what is implied to be a more spontaneist dynamic in which conflict and mobilization originates in the more or less spontaneous action of workers rather than being led by premeditated "vanguard" leaders'. Fairbrother (2005), in promoting the primacy of workplace organization may thus over-promote voluntarism and spontaneity and miss the importance of leadership, engendered at both activist and union leadership levels. Such leadership does not take place in a vacuum. In particular, as Gamson *et al* (1982: 15) suggest, successful social movements will act to challenge the dominant set of beliefs that represent the *status quo* 'with an alternative mobilising belief system that supports collective action for change'. As such, contention is 'framed' by alternative ideology or sets of beliefs.

Following from these observations we suggest that the necessary high risk activism described by McAdam (1986) is only sustainable when some political congruence is evident between the aims and aspirations of trade union members and their leaders. Such congruence is reliant on more open, networked and less bureaucratic forms of unionism. This emphasis on union democracy may highlight a limitation in SMU much of which Camfield (2007: 287) argues is better characterized as 'mobilization unionism' in that it has not been focused on generating 'democratic membership control', but has rather maintained bureaucratic internal relationships. A more democratic union culture, he argues, could be achieved by 'developing workers' knowledge, skills, confidence and activity'. This suggests a shift away from the bureaucratic-authoritative form of leadership that 'disables development in its followers' towards a democratic and persuasive form of leadership that enables the development of an active rank-and-file (Barker *et al*, 2001: 18). With the emergence of a new cycle of contention it is possible to see how the question of leadership in trade unions is moving beyond conflicts over leadership positions that characterized the Keynesian era to conflicts over the type of leadership as part and parcel of the 'internal struggles … over the very meaning of trade unionism' (Barker *et al,* 2001: 22).

Having explained the usefulness of ideas such as a cycle of contention, state strategies of repression and facilitation, and the role of leadership in understanding the development of trade unionism, we now seek to demonstrate this in relation to concrete developments in trade union practice in a variety of institutional and political settings.

Theory and Practice

In applying our ideas to union movements from the global South (South Africa), the USA, Western Europe, and from countries undergoing post Communist transformation, we recognize the importance of the institutional

context. This describes predominant customs and practices shaped by historical tradition, the interplay of state-labor-capital relations, and the national specificities of labor movements. Developed first in relation to union movements in the global South, we can see how early formulations of the term SMU were defined as a *political* form of unionism. This type of unionism fought state repression and produced a 'repressive paradox' (Tarrow, 1998: 84-5) in that one response to repression was a form of radicalization of the unions as moderates were forced to become militants in order to achieve even limited reforms. Of particular interest is the case of South Africa, given its experience of 'rupture' as apartheid fell, and the subsequent creation of a new institutional and political environment. Repressive legislative and political practice under apartheid preserved white privilege and excluded non-whites from anything but the lower echelons of the labor market. But such economic exploitation and political suppression could not permanently contain the movement from below to which organized labor was central. The end of apartheid heralded new institutional practices designed to incorporate black organized labor into decision-making structures led by the African National Congress (ANC) and the trade union federation COSATU. Radical politics appeared to be marginalized as the new black-led state sought to facilitate rather than repress the black labor movement (see Adler and Webster, 1998, for a full description of this process). In observing this process von Holdt (2002) draws links between the socio-political context of COSATU's development and its internal organizational life and contrasts union behaviour and identity during and post-apartheid. He emphasizes the importance of shaping a collective identity forged 'beyond the workplace' which then feeds into union identity and strategy. Such a politicized variant of SMU was shaped during apartheid amidst the movement for national liberation. This popular movement 'was not simply the class organization of a modern proletariat, but also a popular movement incorporating and shaped by pre-modern and non-class solidarities' (von Holdt 2002: 297). Ironically, post-apartheid, and within a new institutional context, the political leadership of the movement sought to emulate 'northern' social democratic practices of facilitating trade unions and institutionalizing conflict under South Africa's Reconstruction and Development Programme (Donnelly, 1999; Bramble, 2003). This strategy 'redistributed power within the union at all levels – both national and local – to those with expertise' (von Holdt, 2002: 296), in 'a more complex engagement with management'. As a result, the distinctive aspects of the union movement which had led it to be characterized as SMU began to erode as trade union organization, defined by activism at the base and democratic practices, was altered and past attempts to carry identity beyond the workplace were dissipated. An institutionalizing effect had taken place, whereby the radical/political aspects of the union movement had been defused.

By contrast, in states in the global North, state strategies of facilitation in the Keynesian era may have militated against the development of any form of 'social' identity by embedding economism in trade union practice. But with the collapse of the KWS we see a de-institutionalization of many of the structures that were relatively supportive of organized labor. In the USA, for example, the institutional support for unions provided by the New Deal was crushed by the Reagan administration in the 1980s. This marked a 'transformation' of US industrial relations from the relatively benign era of the New Deal to a more repressive post Golden Age regime of capital accumulation (Kochan *et al*, 1986). However, rather than facing unyielding state oppression and employer intransigence as in the global South, unions in the USA faced a period in which hostility could be measured by a 'softer' process of marginalization and legislative indifference. Unions began to re-examine their ways of working in a new environment in which trade union societal legitimacy, as well as their bargaining power, had been negatively affected by state and employer offensives (Brecher and Costello, 1999). It was this neo-liberal de-institutionalization that presaged two decades of industrial restructuring which, it is argued, has driven some unions in the USA away from business unionism towards models of unionism more akin to conventional descriptions of SMU (Robinson, 2000; Clawson, 2008). However, such a shift did not appear to embrace the political dimension that we have observed in the South African example. As Robinson (2000: 111) suggests, in an article published a decade ago in *Critical Sociology*, 'In shifting the focus from the global South to the global North, the concept of social movement unionism has become broader and vaguer'. The broadness and vagueness alluded to by Robinson has also been lamented by Moody (2007a) who locates such vagueness as a result of a de-classed typology of SMU, particularly when applied to the US example. Even strong proponents of SMU have acknowledged a neglect of the political dimension to the development of oppositional forms of trade unionism, preferring to focus on political radicalism as a result of rather than contributor to grassroots mobilization (Clawson, 2004). After a long period of union retreat many unions have taken up the organising 'model' with vigor. However, rather than leading to a transformation of the political role of unions this led to an organisational split in 2005 with the Change to Win Coalition. The split occurred at the top of the union hierarchy and was ostensibly over the degree to which the organising model had (or had not) been implemented by the AFL-CIO under its president John Sweeney. Despite a seeming reliance on 'top-down' change there are alternative emergent strategies to note. Central to more recent struggles, and in the long radical tradition of US labor, have been the struggles initiated by new generations of Latinos. The May 2006 immigrant rights demonstrations and strikes, for example, closed down most building maintenance across the country, but also much of the food processing industry, construction in California, and ports on the west coast (Moody, 2007b).

Most union leaders, however, remain tied to the Democratic Party and an 'external lobbying' process provides limits to political expression. Many union activists also involved themselves in the Obama election campaign. Nissen (2010) has nevertheless recently noted a minor sea change in union willingness to adopt an independent political profile. He records a grassroots process of 'civic engagement' by some unions in Florida and elsewhere involving a 'public interest' framing of goals to defend services. The political nature of the union campaigns still remains focused on legislative processes, albeit in terms of '"year-round" politics that is focused on moving important pieces of legislation, not simply the election of preferred candidates' (p. 69).

In Western Europe the scenario is again different. Institutional support for the unions has been stronger than in the USA, as exemplified by the tenuous continuity of the European Social Model (ESM). This model had been founded on a premise of 'social partnership', social dialogue and the related construction of national pacts between trade union leaderships, government and employers. It has been suggested that unions have been less likely to resort to SMU, as they have been able to rely on state support within relatively closed institutional settings (Baccaro *et al*, 2003; Heery, 2005). This has promoted the development of social partner as the dominant union identity and social partnership as the dominant union practice (Taylor and Mathers, 2002). However, this 'social democratic' model has itself been sorely affected by liberalization processes across Western European states (Upchurch, Taylor and Mathers, 2009), whereby the social democratic polity has arguably mutated towards 'social liberalism'. Countries formerly reliant on the social partnership model have now been faced with a fractured political consensus, often accompanied with the emergence of new forms of trade union protest and new political campaigns (Marginson, 2009; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2009). These developments have not shown a consistent pattern, nor have they always resulted in a distinct union identity or strategy. They have been conditioned by institutional context, meaning, for example, that union dissent and opposition to Labour has been primarily focused in the *UK* in those unions unrestricted by affiliation and loyalty to the Labour Party and positioned to the left such as the expelled rail and seafarers RMT, the civil and public service union PCS and the disaffiliated firefighters' union FBU. These unions have exhibited both a high rate of dispute incidence and have experienced recent growths in membership density (see Fitzgerald, 2005: Darlington, 2007; Upchurch, Flynn and Croucher, 2008). Internal dissent within those unions affiliated to Labour has taken the form of withdrawal or withholding of funding to the party (McIlroy, 2008), while commentators have noted a drift of union influence within the party from one which relied on the power of the block vote and direct personal influence to one of internal lobbying (Russell, 2005; Leopold, 2006). Some

affiliated unions, too, have experienced internal dissent at the continuance of the Labour link (e.g. the postal union CWU). As such we can observe a breakdown at the margins of traditional social democratic forms of unionism. This emphasized a form of 'labourism' in which politics (through Parliament) is kept separate from economics (pursued through bargaining with employers). Union loyalties to the Labour Party have since been tested, and unions (especially those in the public sector) have re-politicized elements of their strategy and identity.

In *Germany*, where the union-party linkage between the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) and unions is less formal, similar tensions have led to the formation of a new party to the left of the SPD, *Die Linke*, with support from sections of the metalworkers' union IG Metall and the public service union Ver.di. The cause of the fracture lies in the commitment of the SPD, when in coalition government with the Greens, to the challenge to the German *Sozialstaat* described by Wolfgang Streeck (2005: 163) as the 'abandonment by the German political elite of the social market model'. This was enacted by the introduction of a raft of measures (the Hartz reforms) designed to roll back the welfare state and focus on supply-side solutions (Jüncke, 2007; Nachtwey, 2009). We note a politicization of unions' agendas over such issues as support for a national minimum wage and withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan, as well as a new willingness to break from the social democratic consensus (Taylor, 2008).

In *France* no single party of labor emerged dominant in the post war period. Workers have formed a sustained movement against the attempt to restructure the economy and society along neoliberal lines. Beginning in 1993 with the *Parti Socialiste* being ejected from government, the movement has passed through three main phases (Jefferys, 2003). The mobilizations have been notable for the way that they have spread beyond the public sector workers that were the core of the strike wave in 1995 to include the unemployed, students, young and insecurely employed workers, small farmers, and migrants and for the way that they have linked up across national borders to target transnational institutions such as the EU (Upchurch, Taylor and Mathers, 2009). The mobilizations have also challenged the *pensee unique* of neoliberalism to frame opposition in terms of a defence of republican values (Jefferys, 2003). Alongside strikes and huge demonstrations such as those experienced in 2010, the movement has also adopted radical forms of action such as *sequestration* (boss-knapping) (Marginson, 2009). This has been a product of the increasing repression of mobilization that followed the election of President Sarkozy who has proven less inclined to follow the strategy of selective facilitation adopted by

previous governments. Consequently, union participation in the movement by the major union federations has been ambivalent, sometimes supporting the mobilizations, sometimes opposing, and sometimes remaining in 'neutral gear' (Andolfatto and Sabot, 2004). Ambivalence has been overlain with strategic differences between the union confederations. The social democratic-oriented unions have undergone a 'de-politicization' in the case of the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT), and a turn to militancy by its rival federation Force Ouvrière, and vacillitation between militancy and compromise of the ex-communist oriented *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) (see Upchurch, Taylor and Mathers, 2009 ch. 5 for a more detailed account). Following the end of the hegemony of the CGT and PCF (French Communist Party) over organized labor, a space has opened up to the left of social democracy filled partially by new unions such as SUD (*Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratique*) that offer more consistent opposition to the neo-liberal reforms (Gordon and Mathers, 2004; Damesin and Denis, 2005). While a minority union in the rail industry and public sector, SUD has engaged in political framing of anti-neoliberalism to mobilize members, exhibits a relatively open and de-bureaucratized structure, and engages with other social movements such as the *sans papiers* (undocumented migrants) and *Confédération Paysanne* (Confederation of Small Farmers) (Connolly, 2009).

Trade union independence in *Greece* dates from the end of the Military Junta in 1974, and in consequence the country was by-passed by the 'golden era' of social democracy in the 1950s and 1960s. Trade unions developed a 'clientelist' relationship with the state in the mode of Valenzuela's (1984: 89-90) 'confrontationist type'. However, the fragmentation apparent since 1974 'has not yet managed to minimize the dependency of trade-union structures from the state and the governments in office' (Ioannou, 1999: 31). Union power is traditionally derived more from these clientelist relationships with political parties than through collective bargaining (Zambarloukou, 2006), thus perpetuating difficulties in establishing social pacts. Militant outbursts against austerity programmes are in consequence a more likely possibility in Greece than elsewhere in Western Europe. However, this clientelist relationship between unions and parties such as PASOK has other implications when such parties in power are directly associated with austerity measures. In 2009/10 newly militant trade union groups occupied the offices and centres of traditional union federations in protest at their alleged moderation in recent disputes over the financial crisis. Recent commitment of the Greek Government to further neoliberal reforms and cuts in public spending following its debt crisis have compromised the main union federations, providing political opportunities for the development of these more militant union centres and organizations to develop.

A final example can be taken from the *post Communist states* of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Western Balkans. For unions in transformation economies the strategic choices may be less apparent. As Clarke (2005) suggests, it is difficult to conceptualize the developmental strategies of trade unions within frameworks generally applied to social democratic forms in Western Europe. Liberal and pluralist forms of civil society are only just re-emerging from a Communist past, and social democratic institutions supportive of unions and collective bargaining are embryonic or absent. Studies of trade union strategy highlight the extreme challenges that unions face in this overtly hostile environment. In particular, as Bohle and Greskovits (2004) observe, production regimes in much of the CEE are based on low cost, low wage competitive advantage where workers are denied the 'luxury' of mass consumption and Keynesian welfarism. What has emerged is a mixture of fragmented strategies and union identities ranging from attempts to construct forms of social dialogue akin to the social democratic model, to 'authoritarian corporatism' subjecting organized labor to governing or elective political parties (Stein, 2001), and to examples of unions acting as wider protest organizations exhibiting many features commonly ascribed to SMU (Upchurch, 2006). Examples of the latter include the early *Solidarnoşc* in 1980s Poland, which later shifted identity towards 'authoritarian corporatism' during post-Communism (Ost, 2001), and from Serbia and Croatia. The institutional framework of Communist command planning, a rhetorical 'actually existing socialism' and collusion between the ruling Communist party managers and trade unions provided the context for the rise of the 'early' *Solidarnoşc* in the 1980s. The union assumed an identity as 'tribune of the people'. However, once the fall of the Communist regime had become a reality the union leadership regenerated itself into something quite different, by embracing the 'western' neoliberal mantra and practice and subsuming the interests of organized labor into those of the state. In the two Balkan states unions have struggled to gain legitimacy with their respective Governments since the break-up of Yugoslavia and have resorted (especially in Serbia) to wild forms of protest including road blockages, occupations, street demonstrations and even threatened self-mutilation and suicide in order to gain a voice within civil society[ii].

These examples show that the changing relationship of trade unions to the state is a central matter to consider and, moreover, that the political dimension of trade unionism is at the heart of an analysis of how union identities are changing in relation to neoliberal globalization. We observe a variegated pattern emerging of radical political opposition to traditional social democracy, sometimes combined with more innovative trade union action and alliance building with groups outside the traditional labor movement. We can also observe

varying forms of de-bureaucratized union identities emerging within the new cycle of contention inspired by neoliberal globalization.

Conclusion

We have attempted in this article to re-examine the contribution of social movement theories to trade union revitalization. In doing so we have shown the limits of the term SMU, and are offering radical political unionism as a typology which encapsulates more accurately contemporary oppositional union practice. Tarrow (1998) distinguished between the systemic changes that may usher in a cycle of contention and the specific ways that a cycle actually develops. In this light, it is important to comprehend the development of oppositional forms of trade unionism not only in terms of the broad process of neoliberal globalization, but also in relation to the ebb and flow of the wave of contention that it has generated. It is no coincidence that the use of SMU to describe and promote international (Moody, 1997) and global (Waterman, 1998) union strategies coincided with the early mobilization phase of the broad social movement from 'below' that emerged in the form of the global justice movement (c/f Nielsen and Cox, 2005). Consequently, the usual features of this phase matched what have become accepted as the main characteristics of SMU: innovative forms of local militancy mobilized and spread through new forms of grass roots organization to form coalitions that express their grievances and demands in wider social and political terms.

In our formulation of RPU we observe a sharper focussing of social and industrial mobilization around a class-based interest. The very nature of the sense of injustice felt by workers continues to place class-based struggle for social and economic justice at the centre of union opposition. Following Moody (2007a: 237), there is thus a 'purpose to the coalition building' which is to reinforce the class-based struggle of organized labor, rather than any attempt to relegate organized labour as one actor among many within a wider milieu of social movementism. Our formulation of RPU includes the features of SMU already identified by Fairbrother (i.e. locally focused grass roots mobilization, experimental collective action and construction of alliances and coalitions) with the proviso that such activity is politically focused and is class centred. In effect, the transformative vision and emancipatory politics identified by Fairbrother (2008) is given meaning and content. The political is not one variable amongst many, but is one that we argue here is central to the development of oppositional forms of trade unionism in the context of neoliberal globalization. This suggests that although the external conditions of neoliberal globalization favor the development of SMU (Robinson, 2000; Clawson, 2008) they are not a sufficient cause and the role of agency in union reorientation is vitally important. Here we can see

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a clear obstacle to the development of RPU. The end of the 'compact' between unions and the state or employers increases the risk of repression and we must also assume in RPU the necessity for a higher level of mobilization and innovative forms of action to sustain opposition. For union leaders, 'opening-up' the union to outside coalitions, or de-bureaucratizing decision-making might mean losing control of membership activity and agendas. Therefore, the emergence of RPU as a viable alternative identity and its subsequent consolidation is closely linked to the development of an alternative political leadership within the labor movement. This is unlikely to be a smooth process as there are clearly tensions in radical trade unionism regarding how to respond to state strategies and how the opportunities and challenges generated by mobilization are interpreted.

We are not suggesting that RPU is emerging as the *dominant* form of union identity. Indeed, Rainnie and Ellem (2006: 23) suggest that, 'labour movements at whatever level have to experience near terminal crisis before the rigidities of old structures, attitudes and activities can be opened up to new and challenging ways of organizing'. The reciprocal understandings between union leaders and the 'parties of labor' under the social democratic model remain strong. Radical alternatives to the dominant social democratic model may, however, emerge as a *minority* tendency, subject to fragmentation, re-formulation and a constant pressure to conform to a social democratic model. We would suggest that conditions for the development of radical alternatives exist where there is little institutional support for trade unions (as in much of the global South), or where the traditional supportive institutional infrastructure is decomposing or withdrawn (as in some parts of the global North). In these conditions unions, or sections within unions, may adopt strategic choices which place them in opposition to Governments of both left and right. In such fashion, unions have been re-building power in the workplace and wider society and using this as the basis for advancing a radical project.. We use the term 'radical' to denote a political stance that opposes both hard-line (neo) and softer (social) versions of liberalism while recognizing the diversity and breadth of the ideological bases of this opposition. Thus the specific manifestations of RPU will vary according to the specific ideological and organizational traditions of each national labour movement.

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Notes

[i] Witness, for example, the response of the World Bank in constructing a strategy to deal with the aftermath of the 1999 'Battle for Seattle'. We place our emphasis from the statement in italic to highlight the strategic choice between facilitation or repression:

> There was an overall shift toward more peaceful engagement in the wake of the violence which occurred in 2000 and 2001 at the international meetings in Prague, Quebec, and Genoa, and particularly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, but experience shows that some groups remain committed to using obstructive tactics or even violence. With these more militant groups, there is little basis for the Bank to expect that constructive relations are possible or desirable. However, the evolution of the World Social Forum (WSF) and other civil society forums suggest that *even some of the more radical social movements may be maturing, recognizing the need to move beyond using protest as an advocacy tool and engaging policy makers in serious debate about policy alternatives* (World Bank 2005 p xi)

[ii] see http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=48254 for a report of such instances).

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