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Fragile unions in an age of anxiety

Organised labour in Europe is in crisis. Doubts are even multiplying within the workers' associations, says Robert Taylor

Are trade unions in the western industrialised world heading for extinction? This is not only a theoretical question. Many of these voluntary associations were forged in the industrial revolution to represent the interests of working people. In the new century, doubts are increasing as to whether they can survive.

The most startling evidence of what could be turning into organised labour's terminal crisis comes not from the unions' enemies, but their friends at the European Trade Union Confederation in Brussels, which represents unions across the European Union. In a comprehensive and stimulating comparative study, the confederation's researchers examine what is happening to trade unions in western Europe, the birthplace of free trade unionism. The result is a highly pessimistic assessment of the state of organised labour during a time of rapid change.

Their grim conclusion, borne out by 713 pages of detailed evidence and comment, is that unions in most western European countries are failing to modernise and to restructure themselves sufficiently if they want to survive in the face of increasing international economic competition, technological change, the growth of flexible employment and the rise of the private services sector.

The most devastating evidence that trade unions are in decline can be found in the lack of their physical presence in the workplace. Increasingly, unions are failing even to gain a toe-hold in small companies and private services. Only in Sweden, among western European countries, do more than half the workplaces have a trade union representative. In Germany, shop stewards can be found in only 6 per cent of workplaces. "The absence of union representatives is most marked where the most intensive recruitment efforts are required if the membership losses sustained since the mid-1970s are to be reversed," write the study's co-editors, Jeremy Waddington from the Manchester School of Management (Umist) and Reiner Hoffman, director of the European Trade Union Institute.

The travails of European trade unionism are widespread. In France, the study says, the unions are "in the throes of a crisis deeper than ever before", which is "moral" and "affects the very foundations of their legitimacy". It is forecast that in Spain unions "will be increasingly submerged in civil society" alongside "ecologists, feminists, pacifists and anti-racists".

In Germany the unions are "having little success in penetrating the new, modern, labour-intensive growth sectors, the high-tech industries, the services sector with its small and medium-sized enterprises, and the modern trades and professions." A third of Germany's trade union members are either retired or unemployed.

The picture in the Netherlands is no less bleak. "The credibility of unions is falling fast," says the study. It speaks of "an increasing non-representativeness of working

people within the unions" and their further weakening as they fail to confront the problems of part-time workers, who comprise a third of the Dutch labour force.

Only in the Nordic countries is the position less desperate. Most workers in the region are union members and unions are partners in the development of social market models. Sweden has strong and influential unions in the workplace and in the wider political economy. But even there younger workers seem to be reluctant to join them. And in Norway, the study says, unions' "solidarity and adaptability" face a "tough test", while in Denmark few members are active participants.

The authors cannot disguise their concern about trade union prospects. Too many unions remain trapped in a fading world of male-dominated manufacturing, shrinking public services and full-time, permanent employment. With structures and cultures often still shaped by their early history, trade unions do not appeal to women workers, the young and immigrants, who are all becoming important parts of the emerging European labour force.

Too many unions are led by men who came into the unions in the years following the second world war. That era was characterised by mass production, centralised bargaining and collectivist values - all of which have declined. "Representatives from the traditional areas of membership strength continue to hold the key positions of influence within unions and national union movements," say Mr Waddington and Mr Hoffman. These officials have responded to their troubles by initiating union mergers in countries such as Germany and the UK. But these have been motivated not by a desire to launch recruitment offensives in the private services sector but as defensive action to mitigate the effects of falling membership.

The authors believe that today's trends will deepen trade unions' difficulties. The decentralisation of pay bargaining and the spread of individualised employment contracts will exacerbate the strains on unions as they seek to provide service and support for increasingly uncommitted, individualistic workers.

In many countries there are not enough activists to recruit more members. The failure to develop extensive networks in private service sector workplaces is widespread. But Mr Waddington and Mr Hoffman argue that unless unions can find ways of getting back into workplaces as credible representative bodies, their future is in doubt.

To some, such arguments may sound unduly alarmist. After all, in all western European countries except the UK, trade unions are still treated as partners by governments and employer associations. In the 1990s many were part of the social dialogues that led to trade-offs between pay restraint and employment creation.

At the level of the nation state, trade unions have not lost their legitimacy. But the book asks whether in the future the trade unions can hope to play a role in the political economy, if they cease to enjoy a credible and successful presence among the workers they claim to represent. Mr Waddington and Mr Hoffman fear that unions are becoming little more than hollow shells behind impressive facades.

The study's overall conclusion is that unions in Europe stand the best chance of clinging on if they are given responsibilities to administer unemployment benefit by

the state, as in Sweden and Denmark. But that could change if governments start to question whether unions are truly representative of workers' interests and aspirations.

Inevitably, the study is better on analysis than prescription. But its cheerless argument is likely to be unwelcome to most unions, which remain complacent about their future.

Even those unions that are aware of what is happening tend to be unsure about how to respond. Much depends on the resources available for unions to meet the diverse and complex needs of the new world of work. In the past, trade unions were predominantly collective bargainers, not personal service organisations. Their function was rooted in the workplace, not civil society or the political economy.

In Mr Waddington's view, this remains the crucial question. How can unions regain their role in the diverse and segmented 21st century workplaces as the representative voice of workers? If he and his co-authors have not come up with any remedies, at least they have delineated the extent of the malaise. Their friends in the European trade union movement would make a grave mistake if they were to ignore what has been written.

Trade Unions in Europe: Facing Challenges and Searching for Solutions. Edited by Jeremy Waddington and Reiner Hoffmann. European Trade Union Institute etui@etuc or from Boulevard du Roi Albert II, 5 box 4 B-1210, Brussels, Belgium. E30.