

## ***Chapter 1: General introduction***

This thesis addresses an issue that emerges from the literature pertaining to labour internationalism. This is the fact that, since the early 1990s, labour internationalism studies have, on the one hand, been characterised by an impressive expansion of work and intellectual effort. This can, at least in part, be seen as reflecting a newfound importance of international work for trade unions themselves. On the other hand, the growing number of different areas of focus within the discipline suggests that an approach that can draw upon many of the proliferating strands of research at once may be timely. Such an approach would help to restore a scholarly overview of the field and could lead to new research questions that draw together otherwise diverging lines of inquiry. This thesis suggests one way forward. It argues that by applying a model drawn from labour revitalization literature, clear overlaps and interactions are shown to exist between labour internationalism and trade union revitalization. It further argues that such an approach reveals a strong culture of labour internationalism at different organizational levels of the trade union movement, that is playing a revitalizing role within its structures.

The thesis then draws upon two bodies of literature. These are: 1) the labour internationalism literature; and 2) the labour revitalization literature. The labour internationalism literature is surveyed in order to situate this research in its proper context, and in order to give an account of the character of its development in its different historical phases. This

survey also describes the various directions of labour internationalism studies. The labour revitalization literature that has emerged in the last decade is considered with a view to identifying an analytical framework that might usefully be applied to the broad labour internationalism field.

In Chapter 2 an account is given of labour internationalism studies. It charts labour internationalism from its earliest origins as it has been treated by academic writers as well as some figures active in the working class movement. The cosmopolitan thinking of radical artisan circles in the 1790s, the working class celebration of emancipatory national movements in various countries that featured in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the internationalism of the mass social democratic labour organizations of the 1880s, and the period of working class internationalism associated with the Russian revolution are all considered from perspectives of writings by commentators of the time and since. Theorisations of labour internationalism inspired by changes within the world economy during the 1970s are positioned as the start of a more modern body of work that developed in the 1980s as the New International Labour Studies (NILS) and led, in turn, to a widening interest in what became referred to as the New Labour Internationalism (NLI). During the 1990s the field enlarged, in delta-like fashion, to cover: the activities of the peak international trade union bodies; regional transnationalism, particularly in the European and Latin American contexts; new labour formations in the 'Global South'; labour and global social movements; 'scales' of labour internationalism; trade unions and

the internet; international labour market regulation; international linking as a strategy of trade union struggle; and histories of various aspects of labour internationalism.

In this, second, chapter I also survey the field of labour revitalization studies. I identify and present an analytical model that is taken from this literature and present it as offering one possible approach to interpreting labour internationalism that might provide the kind of synthetic overview that I argue is needed. The model chosen is described in some detail as it represents a crucial element in the methodology used to organize this research material.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology behind this research. The early phase of the research in which some different methodologies were trialled is described. The decision to use an interview based methodology is explained and some of the issues involved in this are discussed. Chapter 4 is a brief note on ‘globalisation’. This chapter has both a general relevance to the labour internationalism literature and has a methodological significance. For this reason it has been included separately after the methodology chapter. The chapter has two purposes which are linked to the special status of the concept of ‘globalisation’ in discussions of labour internationalism. The first is simply that of acknowledging its general importance for this area of scholarship. The second is to explain how, for the purposes of this particular thesis, the term will be employed and why it will not be fore-grounded as an

analytical category but rather referred to in its more generally understood senses.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present the findings of my research. Each chapter looks at a different ‘level’ of trade union international work. Chapter 5 presents the research evidence obtained from interviews with senior staff officers in the main global labour organizations. These were the ICFTU, the Public Services International (PSI), the International Transport Federation ITF and the Union Network International (UNI). Chapter 6 presents evidence from interviews carried out at the European level. These interviews were with union officers from the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), the European Metalworkers’ Federation (EMF) and UNI-Europa. Finally, Chapter 7 presents material from the research interviews carried out within the UK. These interviews were with elected officials, national and regional officers, branch officers and plant convenors in Unison, Amicus, the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU), National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), NATFHE (now absorbed into the UCU), the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), the GMB, the Graphical Paper and Media Union (GPMU) (now absorbed into Amicus), the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and the National Union of Marine, Aviation and Shipping Transport Officers (NUMAST)<sup>1</sup>. Where

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<sup>1</sup> Full titles are given where the acronym is still valid. In some cases the union name, whilst deriving from a historical acronym, no longer represents it. In these cases only the union name is given.

interviewees are quoted they are referenced by initials. Full names are given in Appendix 1.

Each of the chapters where findings are presented is organized into themes that derive from the framework offered by the authors of *Varieties of Unionism: Strategies for Union Revitalization in a Globalizing Economy*<sup>2</sup> (Frege and Kelly 2004). These themes are the revitalization strategies being adopted by trade unions. They are: organizing; organizational restructuring; coalition building; political action; partnerships; and international links.

The structure of these chapters is summarized diagrammatically below:

<b>Level Union strategy</b>	<b><i>Chapter 5 (Global)</i></b>	<b><i>Chapter 6 (European)</i></b>	<b><i>Chapter 7 (UK)</i></b>
<b><i>Organizing</i></b>			
<b><i>Organizational restructuring</i></b>			
<b><i>Coalition building</i></b>			
<b><i>Political action</i></b>			
<b><i>Partnerships</i></b>			
<b><i>International links</i></b>			

The interview material is presented with the purpose of assessing the extent to which it contains evidence of international trade union work that fits with each of these revitalization strategies.

<sup>2</sup> From hereon referred to as *Varieties of Unionism*.

For Chapter 5 (the global level) evidence of revitalization was found. This was especially true in relation to organizing in that many accounts of mobilising members (affiliates) were given in the interviews. It was also apparent that the peak organizations of global trade unionism were widely involved in coalitions of many kinds and were adopting a campaigning style on many issues. In relation to the other strategies these interviews, between them, gave evidence of revitalization activities although of a more inconsistent nature. Little evidence was found of global unions engaging in partnerships for international work.

Chapter 6 (the European level) does not present a strong picture in my assessment of the revitalization effects of international work. These interviewees (with one notable exception) tended to be rather downbeat, and even sometimes defeatist, about their work. Some evidence of revitalization was forthcoming for most themes but it was inconsistent and sometimes even contradictory. For many of these interviewees life had been dominated for many years by the Social Dialogue process through which European trade unions have worked hard to engage with the European political institutions and employers' organizations. The results of this work were often portrayed as having been, at best patchy, and ultimately disappointing for trade unions and their members. The sense conveyed for the theme of partnership working was quite negative here and seemed to warrant a designation of 'decline' rather than

revitalization. This was the only such designation assigned in this research.

The interviews conducted for Chapter 7 (the UK-national level) provided strong evidence of the revitalization effects of trade union internationalism. This was true for the theme of organizing in that there were many accounts of industrial disputes in which international links or passive and active solidarity from abroad had been a feature. Many unions were reported to be highly involved in and supportive of coalitions that campaigned over issues of global justice and oppression around the world. There were also frequent reports of British unions engaging with unions in other countries where there was a natural affinity by sector, political stance or membership interest. With regard to political action there was some evidence of unions seeking influence within European political institutions although little detail was given and the accounts suggested policy commitment rather than well resourced strategy. International partnership working did not feature as a significant strategy for union revitalization.

These assessments are summarized in the table on the following page.

Assessments of the significance of six union strategies for the revitalization of international trade union work based upon evidence from research interviews*			
Level Union Strategy	Global	European	UK
Organizing	Strong revitalization	Weak revitalization	Strong revitalization
Organizational restructuring	Weak revitalization	Weak revitalization	Weak revitalization
Coalition building	Strong revitalization	Weak revitalization	Strong revitalization
Partnership	No revitalization	Decline	No revitalization
Political action	Weak revitalization	Weak revitalization	Weak revitalization
International linking	Weak revitalization	Weak revitalization	Strong revitalization

\*Strong revitalization. (Consistent evidence with no qualifications or minor qualifications)

Weak revitalization (Some evidence but strongly qualified and inconsistent or contradictory)

No revitalization (No evidence or evidence was present but of a marginal or exceptional form)

Decline (Evidence of a decline in the vitality of union work)

In Chapter 8 I pull together these findings and draw conclusions about the extent to which the assessments of trade unionists regarding their international work correspond with this labour revitalization framework. I conclude that the experience and perspectives of these trade unionists do indeed support the view that some strategies of trade union revitalization describe well some of the kinds of international work with which trade unions are engaged. I also caution against over simplification in any final assessment, however. There was, in fact, a lot of variation between the levels of research and between the different union strategies. The findings for the European level were noticeably less strong for a revitalization



perspective, for instance. With respect to union strategies the strongest evidence for revitalization tended to be for those of organizing and coalition building. The weakest strategies in this regard tended to be partnership working and political action.

In my conclusion I also employ a four-part conceptualization of the meaning of revitalization for trade unions. This offers a way of capturing key dimensions to revitalization and, in so doing, gives the term the definition needed for a concluding discussion. It is provided by a group of contributors to *Varieties of Unionism*, Behrens, Hamann and Hurd (2004). These authors identify four dimensions to revitalization. These are: (1) membership; (2) economic impact; (3) political impact; and (4) institutional dynamism.

## ***Chapter 2: Theoretical perspectives on labour internationalism and revitalization***

### **The practice and theory of working class internationalism**

The period from the early part of the nineteenth century through to the 1930s provides a historical backdrop of practical labour internationalism to the labour internationalism studies that emerged in the 1970s. It is discussed in its various phases in this introduction. The early part of this period saw the first attempts by workers to organize across national borders on the European continent to prevent strike breaking and to extend solidarity to workers in struggle with their capitalist employers. It later saw the emergence of political and industrial international organizations that linked together a family of nationally based social democratic movements. Finally in the period following the First World War working class internationalism was bound up with the hopes and expectations of revolution and working class emancipation. This was an era in which ideas associated with Marxism were of great influence within the working class movements of Europe from the latter part of the nineteenth century and later within liberation movements in much of the colonial world. Throughout all of these phases, over the period that we can refer to as the ‘classical period’ of labour internationalism, the notion of a unified working class with one, indivisible world ‘class-interest’ was usually to the fore, in theory and rhetoric, if not always in practice. For

most of this period, also, writing on the subject of worker internationalism was episodic rather than systematic and written by figures who were themselves immersed in the labour movement. In the absence of a substantial academic literature *of* this period we will consider it through the existing literature *on* the period.

Following this historical survey the introduction focuses upon the academic work that has dealt with the topic of labour internationalism. The first example of this can be found as early as the late 1920s. It is only by the 1970s, however, that systematic academic analysis and debate starts to occur about labour internationalism. In part this literature reflected hopes for a revived labour internationalism at the level of trade union policy and practice that were kindled by the rise of multi-national corporations in that era. A more contemporary literature that continues today started in the early 1990s. This literature concerns itself largely with the position of organized labour internationalism in the ‘new’, ‘global’, economy. Much of this literature is permeated with an intellectual pessimism for the prospects of national trade unionism. Many writing in this period of international labour studies, however, are also concerned with questions of a labour internationalism that is said to be ‘new’ in character, purpose and style and distinct from previous historical forms. An interest in overlaps with current social movements, new forms of activism and notions of ‘global solidarity’ are also important themes in this phase of writing on the topic. Each of these bodies of literature will now be discussed in more detail.

## **The historical roots of labour internationalism**

### **1790s-1840s**

Internationalism was a part of the earliest forms of working class politics. The enlightenment of the eighteenth century found a plebeian expression in the thinking and writings of leaders such as John Thelwall and Robert Owen. Influenced by the cosmopolitan ideas of the Scottish enlightenment, represented most directly for them by William Godwin, they called for universal peace, federative relations amongst all peoples and the abolition of standing armies (Claeys 1988). By the 1840s communities of political émigrés from the continent had begun to have an influence within the English working class movement. These communities were populated by enthusiasts for the democratic revolutions and struggles of young nations that characterised the era (Lattek 1988). This internationalism fed directly into the politics of the Chartist movement which supported struggles against imperial oppression – especially that of the British in Ireland. It was then, one expression of a youthful and vigorous working class movement. It was also intrinsically linked to a determined and, in its different phases, militant struggle for political emancipation.

By the 1840s calls for workers to organize on an international footing were a feature of the working class movement. Examples of this are to be found in Flora Tristan's 1843 pamphlet *L'Union Ouvrière* and, more famously in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels. The

*Communist Manifesto* linked the call for the working class struggle to be understood and organized within an internationalist perspective with their nascent analysis of the global character of the capitalist system of production. They describe the relentless expansion of capitalism around the globe. For every part of the world the introduction of modern industry becomes a “life and death question.” The sheer productivity of capitalist manufacture compared to previous forms of production, and the cheapness of its goods, breaks down barriers and local prejudices against the new system. Finally:

*It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst; i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (Marx and Engels 1998: 40)*

Consequent upon the spread of capitalism was the growth of an international working class whose labour it exploited. As capitalism developed, so in more and more countries the capital-labour nexus was the dominant factor in determining social relations. In this situation the social experience of a worker in a factory in Belgium would be very similar to that of a worker in a factory located in the North of England. It was this commonality in the experience of workers from one country to the next that gave Marx and Engels hope in the emergence of the working class as a revolutionary class on a world scale. It would take fourteen

years for the international vision they had put forward in the *Communist Manifesto* to appear in an organizational form.

## The 1860s

It was in 1864 that the International Working Men's Association (IMWA) was founded. The extraordinary record of strike solidarity of the IMWA won for it a fearsome reputation amongst both workers and capitalists alike. It also helped to overcome divisions between workers such as that between Walloons and Flems in its Belgian section (Devereese 1988). This, First International as it became known, was principally an instrument of solidarity. Although workers were more numerous than their exploiters, this would not in and of itself guarantee victory in the class war. As Marx was to point out "numbers weigh only in the balance, if united by combination and led by knowledge". Without international coordination and solidarity workers would be "chastised by the common discomfiture of their incoherent efforts" (Marx 1987a: 536-7).

Through the First International Marx also propagated the principle of working class support for the oppressed peoples of the colonies. What Marx stressed was the *interdependence* of the struggles against colonial oppression and the class struggle waged at home against those same capitalist exploiters. To the extent that workers in the imperialist countries did not side with those struggles abroad they remained in

mental bondage to the capitalist system at home. As Marx put it in relation to the question of Ireland:

*... for them [the workers of England] the national emancipation of Ireland is no question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but the first condition of their own social emancipation.* (Marx 1987b: 592)

The launch of the international campaign for the eight-hour working day almost simultaneously, though independently, in the United States of America and in Europe, in 1866, appeared to vindicate the expectations that socialists had of the international character of the struggle against capitalism. Marx was delighted at this development. For him it was evidence that a common working class consciousness and programme could emerge “instinctively out of the conditions of production themselves” (Quoted in Foner 1986:12). Again, the combination of rising confidence in the working class movement and the historical novelty of these developments goes a long way to accounting for the optimism surrounding this phase of labour internationalism amongst socialists.

## 1880-1914

A new chapter in working class internationalism opened with the emergence of forms of mass socialist politics in Europe in the late 1880s. The period presents a paradox for our discussion in the way its end

contrasts so starkly with the huge confidence in the possibilities of international solidarity that characterised its dawn.

The Second International was established following the founding Paris Congress held on Bastille Day, 1889. Internationalism was a key theme. The internationalism of millions of workers in this period was genuine and enthusiastic, as is evidenced by the enormous May Day rallies of the early 1890s (Wrigley 1996). International May Day demonstrations became an established part of the socialist and working class movement calendar in almost every part of the world. In 1909 American socialists organized the first International Woman's Day with the Europeans following in 1911 (Kaplan 1988).

The essentially national state focus of each of the various socialist parties in this era, however, warped the development of this internationalism. The result was a political culture in which nationalist as well as internationalist sentiments competed for expression. This compromised and ambivalent form of internationalism was put to its ultimate test by the onset of war in 1914. Against a background of massive anti-war demonstrations in Germany, Austria, Italy, France and Belgium the parties of the Second International, with the notable exceptions of the Italian Socialist Party and the Russian Bolshevik Party, collapsed behind the war chauvinism of their respective nation states.



## 1919-1930s

The working class internationalism of this era relates largely to the course of the 1917 revolution in Russia. In both the industrialised countries and in the colonised regions, communist, socialist and ‘people’s’ parties were established that were connected with one another in their different international political families by formal linkages and by loose, cultural affiliations.

The Third International, properly known as the Comintern, was founded by the Russian Bolshevik leadership in 1919. Its original purpose was the export of revolution across the world. It became a training school for fledgling communist parties. The policy of the Third International was summed up by Lenin advocating support for the ill fated Irish rising of 1916:

*We would be very poor revolutionaries if, in the proletariat's great war of liberation for socialism, we did not know how to utilise every popular movement against every single disaster imperialism brings in order to intensify and extend the crisis.*

(Lenin 1977:161)

The Third International's trade union adjunct, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), was launched in 1921. In its programme of action RILU declared that unions must make general “every local

uprising, every local strike, and every small conflict” (Nicholson 1986:66). In the colonies the task of the ‘red’ unions was also to fight for the leadership of predominantly peasant anti-colonial movements. Working class internationalism in this era was one aspect of a world working class movement that was challenging capitalism and represented a vital force around the world.

The fact that workers’ states did not establish themselves in other countries, and the consequent isolation of the revolution, was to have profound implications for the direction of politics within Russia itself. Under the increasingly tight grip of Stalin the international ambitions of the revolution gave way to the doctrine of ‘Socialism in One Country’. It was this policy that Trotsky was to oppose from his exile in 1929 up until his assassination by Stalin’s agents in 1940.

Trotsky argued that the socialism could not be built in Russia alone because the capitalist system was integrated on a world scale. Russia could not survive as a socialist island in a hostile sea of capitalism. The productive forces of capitalism had “long ago outgrown ... national boundaries” (Trotsky 1971: 146). In these circumstances, a socialist Russia, already economically underdeveloped and cut off from world markets and advances in productive technique, would perish. This did not mean that the revolution was doomed. Trotsky had long held that the world revolution could begin in the least economically developed

countries that were dominated by the imperialist powers. This reversed the logic of the theorists of the Second International who had argued that socialism could arise only after a long historical period of capitalist economic development that raised production to adequate levels. Such revolutions, however, against colonial rule and for democratisation, would not be able to sustain themselves as fledgling independent democratic capitalist states. Rather their revolutions, given the small size of their indigenous bourgeoisies, would be compelled to grow over into workers' revolutions. These new workers states, in their turn, could only survive as the preludes to revolutions in the advanced capitalist world. This was Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution.

Trotsky's perspective, then, remained internationalist. This meant that the struggles of the colonised peoples of the world for liberation, was intimately tied up with the struggles of workers in the imperialist countries against their exploitation. Speaking of British imperialism Trotsky argued:

*... the internationalism of the British and Indian proletariats does not at all rest on an identity of conditions, tasks and methods, but on their indivisible interdependence. Successes for the liberation movement in India presuppose a revolutionary movement in Britain and vice versa. (Trotsky 1971: 150)*

The fate of working class internationalism after the period of the early 1920s is inextricably linked with internal developments in the USSR, the re-establishment of the Second International and the period of capitalist consolidation in the West. It is a period in which practical internationalism does not loom large in the histories of the time. One important episode that stands out as an exception to this picture is the British seaman's strike of 1925 which was joined by Australian, New Zealand and South African crews and which paralysed trade within the British Empire for the best part of four months (Hirson and Vivian 1992).

In the early 1920s an optimistic view of the prospects of international working class solidarity had prevailed and was expressed by the leader of the ITF, Edo Fimmen, in his book, *Labour's Alternative* (Fimmen 1924). In that book Fimmen had argued that a more internationalised world labour movement would rise from changes in the structure of capitalism. That view, however, by the late 1920s had given way to a much less sanguine one. The most significant academic publication on the subject during this period was *Labor and Internationalism* by Lewis Levitzki Lorwin. Lorwin's work was commissioned by the anti-communist Brookings Institute. His view contradicted the optimistic and revolutionary prognosis that had been represented by the challenge of the Third International. He identified labour internationalism as having its roots in: the migration of labour; competition on world markets; strike solidarity; a working class democratic ideal and sympathy with small states against imperialism; the question of war and peace; and the

“socialist ideal of the emancipation of labor” (Lorwin 1929: 3). Lorwin’s conclusions are pessimistic for the prospects for labour internationalism. He argued that working class consciousness has an inherently dual nature which springs from the position of the worker within capitalism. Internationalist perspectives, in Lorwin’s view, would always be compromised by the interest that the worker has in the national development of their trade.

A final word for this section must go to the internationalist solidarity shown by working class men and women from more than fifty nations who volunteered to fight for the defence of the Republican government of Spain between 1936 and 1939. Following early successes by the armies under the command of General Franco a decision was made within the Comintern to establish International Brigades, named after heroes of the Left from within each country. Around 60,000 individuals were to fight in these brigades and were to play notable roles in some of the key battles of the conflict such as the Battle of Madrid from November to January 1936, the Battle of Jarama in February 1937 and the Battle of Teruel in January 1938.

The case of the international volunteers who went to fight in the Spanish Civil War stands somewhat alone as a category of proletarian military internationalism. Some precedent does exist with the case of the Russian Civil War of 1918 to 1922. The level of volunteering was not anywhere

near on the same level however. Many volunteers were from countries in which fascist governments had already become established. Most were ideologically driven. The fate of the workers' revolution in Russia, and the need to stem the rising tide of fascism in Europe were concerns that, either together or separately, galvanised the fervour of the extraordinary mix of communists, socialists and radical democrats that made up the International Brigades. Around 10,000 volunteers sacrificed their lives in that struggle.

### **Modern perspectives and academic writing on labour internationalism**

#### **1970s**

A renewed interest in the theory and practice of international trade unionism began to show itself in the early 1970s. This work focussed on historical analyses of the main international trade union bodies such as the ICFTU (*e.g.* Wedin 1974), national case studies (*e.g.* Sturmthal and Scoville 1973) and the role of the trade union movements of the imperialist countries in the colonies (*e.g.* Harrod 1972). A crucial debate emerged, however, that was to dominate the field for the next decade. This revolved around questions relating to the significance of the rise of trans-national companies and their significance for organized labour at the national and international levels. Windmüller (1969) had suggested that the activities of multi-national companies (MNCs) would, in Polanyi-

like fashion, produce their counterpart in a resurgence of international trade union activity. The debate is commonly understood, however, to have been opened by a senior figure in the international trade union movement, Charles Levinson, in his 1972 publication, *International Trade Unionism*. In it he argued that the rise of trans-national companies and the internationalisation of capital, was giving rise both to the objective potential for, as well as the need for, a new era of multi-national collective bargaining. In this new era, the aim of international and, increasingly, national trade unions would be the striking of world company contracts covering all workers within particular firms. Here, then an analysis that was premised upon the economic interests of trade unions and their members was used to support an optimistic assessment of the prospects of a new – and revitalized – trade union internationalism.

The notion of a new era of trade union internationalism based upon economic interest was challenged by Olle and Schoeller (1977). For these authors the dominance of economic considerations was a source of division within the working class at the international level, rather than one of unity. The First International, they argued, had foundered, not upon ideological tensions but rather upon the separate interests that workers had in the economic development of their respective countries. In the modern economy also, they continued, differential patterns of capital accumulation meant that workers in different countries and different economic zones of development would also come to see their interests as being different and even antagonistic. Any meaningful labour internationalism, then, if it was really going to be more than an expedient

extension of national trade union interests, would require a concerted ideological commitment on the part of trade unions.

This line of argument for the prospects of effective trade unionism at the international level was developed by Northrup (1978). Northrup argued that low member interest, the reluctance of national trade union leaders to relinquish sovereignty and hostility to multi-national collective bargaining within capitalist firms, meant that the hopes for international solidarity represented nothing more than the naïve optimism of theorists with little real grasp of the realities of trade union identity and practice.

The question of whether political ideology or economic interest should be given the greater weight in understanding and interpreting internationalism in the working class continued as a point of dispute into the 1980s. Logue, in his *Towards a Theory of Trade Union Internationalism* (1980) argued that working class internationalism was rooted in economic interest. With special focus on the chemical, metal and transport industries, Logue traced the evasion of national state control by companies and the consequent increase in the need for cooperation between the ITSs of these sectors. This pragmatic view effectively rejected the notion of a more ideological solidarity based upon the notion of labour internationalism being embedded within socialist internationalism, drawing on a sense of a 'unity of labour'. Logue's



alternative was to root labour internationalism, not in ideology, but rather in 'rational interest'.

### The 'New International Labour Studies' of the 1980s

The decade of the 1980s saw a shift with a broadening out of the field to encompass aspects of labour internationalism that went beyond debates around economic interest, ideology and consciousness. Munck (1988), in his definitive treatment of the subject, described the shift as representing a transcendence of the old approaches that had been drawn from the traditional areas of: industrial relations; trade union studies; labour history; and 'technicist' labour studies that addressed labour process dynamics. Munck listed the concerns of the 'New International Labour Studies' (NILS) as focussing upon: proletarianisation and class formation; worker struggles; casual labour; trade union imperialism; international labour solidarity; labour migration; and feminist labour studies. The NILS was also distinctive for its interest in the social and cultural history of labour organizations and movements. It drew further upon the analysis put forward by the New International Division of Labour (NIDL) school. Citing Fröbel, Heinrichs and Kreye (1981), and after describing the key elements of the model as being the dramatic growth of a pool of cheap labour in the Third World, the relocation of production 'sub-processes' to the Third World and the development of

cheap transport and communication technologies, Munck explained the impact of the NIDL and the cautious optimism of its early advocates:

*On this basis the NIDL fundamentally restructured the relations of production in the Third World, with the emergence of a substantial manufacturing sector orientated outwards toward the world market. The 'world market factories' carried out a super-exploitation of their mainly female workers, but created the conditions for the emergence of a 'classical' confrontation between labour and capital. Finally, according to Fröbel et al., 'The development of the new international division of labour ... contains the possibility of international solidarity between workers'.*  
(Munck 1988: 33)

These writers were holding out a cautious hope for a new vitality in the world working class movement. Munck credits Robin Cohen as having put forward the NILS as a new paradigm of international labour studies. Cohen (1980) sought to transcend the geographical compartmentalization of labour studies into capitalist core and periphery and 'socialist' economies. Johnson and Bernstein (1982) developed the field with a focus on rural and town struggles in the developing world. The case study approach of their work was distinctive for its subaltern approaches and its attention to the marginal as well as the mainstream, women as well as

industrial male workers, the quotidian as well as the exceptional and to the voice of the traditionally voiceless. Wolf (1982) added the important element of sensitivity to the importance of culture, kinship and geographical context for an understanding of identity and organizational behaviour in working class formation.

The collection edited by Peter Waterman, *For a New Labour Internationalism* (1984), marked another milestone in the development of the NILS. Contributors covered themes of empirical cases of international solidarity, the use of new communications technologies, trade union paternalism and imperialism, gender and internationalism and a critique of the ‘economism’ of Logue’s and Levinson’s models.

The overlap between the NILS and the interest in the industrialisation of the Third World within the NIDL school was developed in the collection edited by Roger Southall, *Trade unions and the New Industrialisation of the Third World* (1988). In their contribution to this, Haworth and Ramsay offered a model of trade union consciousness that was based in the immediate experience of the workplace. On this account, the further away one moves (analytically) from the labour process and site of production, the weaker – or less concretely - does ‘worker-consciousness’ express itself. Labour internationalism, then is not a spontaneous impulse of the working class as it is normally constituted. Any labour internationalism, it follows, requires an overarching ideological structure

that sustains a sense of international solidarity as well as practical international links. Scepticism regarding the potential for genuine worker solidarity across national borders, especially between those in the 'advanced' industrial countries and those in the industrialising Third World, was also echoed also by Press (1989) who drew attention to the very real obstacles, caused by competition for jobs, that existed to the building of trade union internationalism.

### The 1990s onwards

In the 1990s international labour studies expanded dramatically. The end of the ideological divisions of the Cold War, the ushering in of the 'era of globalisation' and the emergence of a new empiricism in the field as evidence grew of a proliferation of new forms of international labour practice, all converged to produce a new wave of writing in the field. Over the course of the decade, and into the next, international labour studies has developed into different specialisms, each with its own body of literature. These different branches overlap frequently and strongly but can be seen as distinct. The following section gives an account of each of the directions in which labour internationalism studies is now moving

### ***Labour internationalism at the global scale***

At the most general level the era of globalisation, whether seen as myth or as reality, brought with it new speculation and analysis of the place of organized labour, and of labour as a social movement, in the contemporary world system. Optimism for a renaissance of world wide solidarity based upon newly emerging commonalities came from some significant voices within the trade union movement itself. Commenting on a discussion at the ICFTU 1996 congress Bertil Jonsson, President of the Swedish LO, summarised the feeling:

*They [the delegates] all spoke of cutbacks in social welfare, of less security for employees, of deterioration in labour law, increasing unemployment and growing social divides. Of course there were differences, but I do not believe the consensus has ever been as great before. (Jonsson 1998: 53)*

*Global Unions? Theory and strategies of organized labour in the global political economy* (Harrod and O'Brien 2002) is a diverse collection of contributors who look at questions of institutional arrangements for labour, labour and social movements and strategies of resistance. Running through the collection, however, is an attempt to establish a new paradigm for understanding the theory and practice of international trade

unionism. This consists of four elements. These are: questioning the abstracted status of 'the company' in industrial relations analysis; an acknowledgement of progressive internationalism within new forms of organization; a sensitivity to scales of engagement with capital; and a stress upon the need for inter-disciplinarity across the fields of industrial relations, social movement theory and international political economy.

*Labour World Wide in the Era of Globalisation* (Munck and Waterman 1999) contained contributions covering surveys of the state of the working class in the neo-liberal world order and national case studies of the experience of workers movements in countries that have suffered the consequences of the most rapid introduction of neo-liberalism *e.g.* New Zealand. Munck and Waterman themselves, eschewing economic analysis, stress the importance of the interaction between workers' movements and political movements and conclude with an optimistic assessment of the potential of 'social movement unionism' (SMU) to create a new era of opposition and resistance to capitalism. Radice (1999), building upon a perspective that is sceptical of the reality of globalisation, draws upon a theme of growing importance within the post-Seattle social movements literature, to conceptualise labour as one amongst a number of new 'trans-national actors'. In this view, involvement in these social movements and the coalitions within them can be seen as bringing new energies into trade union institutional processes.

Hyman (1997; 1999) is amongst those writers who have attempted to prescribe new formulations of trade union practice for a rapidly changing world. Commenting upon the rapidly changing world with which the trade union movements of every country are having to contend, Hyman draws attention to the increasingly complex nature of membership composition. On this premise Hyman calls for a shift from 'mechanical solidarity' based on a supposed or imputed unified 'class interest', towards an 'organic solidarity' based upon a recognition of difference. Such a perspective, where it is taken up, for example in the form of self-organizing and special interest groups within unions clearly belongs within a revitalization framework. Observing also the rise of insecure and informalised patterns of work Hyman suggests a threefold agenda for labour of 'flexibility', 'security' and 'opportunity'. The notion of a 'universality' or 'unity' of interests across the working class globally is also rejected in this analysis. The focus is on particular interests rather than commonalities. On this basis Hyman points to a 'crisis' of solidarity and calls for the reinvention of its meaning. For Hyman, the alternative is an 'organic solidarity', based upon the notion of 'coordinated diversity' (Hyman 1999a: 107).

Some authors have been keen to stress the active role of workers within the process of economic change thus countering the construction of workers as passive victims. Herod (2001a), for example, strongly emphasises the active role that workers themselves play within the processes of globalisation. Through their actions, he argues, workers

shape the landscapes that, in turn, frame their horizons. Traditionally, worker internationalism has been driven by political ideology rather than by economic interest, according to Herod. Nonetheless, in the changing environment within which unions find themselves having to operate, new networks of cross-border activism highlight the agency of workers in responding to the challenges of globalisation. In a similar vein Waddington points to the South Korean case:

*... labour can influence the form and content of change ... in South Korea a surge of union militancy influenced the process of economic transformation away from a reliance on low wage, low value-added production, as unions established a collective 'voice' through which they could influence developments. The point here is that shifts in the international division of labour are not pre-determined. But may be subject to influence from labour. (Waddington, 1999: 8)*

Some authors, working from within the world of international labour, take a very much less hopeful view of the ability of workers' movements to shape the more internationalised environment in which they exist. The contributors to *Organized Labour in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Jose 2002), for example, published by the International Labour Organization (ILO), convey far less optimism. Overall, the collection paints a picture in which



the high point for labour, in terms of influence and political weight, was that represented by the social democratic countries of Europe in the post-War era. Since the onset of neo-liberalism, the authors seem to agree, the trajectory has been sharply downwards with respect to organizational coherence, commonalities of identity and the prospects for international solidarity.

Burgess (2004) has focussed less on the sociological and economic aspects of the impacts of globalisation on the position and state of organized labour, than upon its traditional political arrangements in countries around the world. Employing the notion of ‘voice’ for the political expression of the workers’ interests, and skewing her study towards Latin America and Southern Europe, she charts the decline of traditional national blocs that have held unions and ‘parties of the working class’ together, often for generations. She points to newly emergent models of interest representation and a shift towards informal and contingent alliances.

A long historical view of ‘labour in the global’ is taken by Silver (2003). Silver relativizes the atmosphere of despair that she says permeates the field of labour studies, by looking at previous phases of global economic expansion and their effects on the position of labour. With an analysis that pulls away from what might be considered as a revitalization perspective in this field, she urges caution regarding the prospects of a

‘new labour internationalism’, questions the reality of an ‘objective basis’ for labour internationalism and stresses the complexities of the process of change:

*... insecure human beings (including workers), have good reason to insist on the salience of nonclass boundaries and borders (e.g. race, citizenship and gender) as a way of making claims for privileged protection from the maelstrom. The de-socialisation of the state thus does not in itself supply fertile ground for labor internationalism to take root. Indeed, one could argue that the living standards of First World workers today are less dependent on the ability of their states to fight imperialist wars than on their ability to keep out competition from Third World labor by imposing import and immigration restrictions. (Silver 2003: 177-8).*

A number of authors have begun to move debate forward from analysis to more prescriptive statements of proposed policy and strategy for organized labour at the international level. In *Globalisation and Labour*, Munck (2002) stresses the instabilities and insecurities created for workers by trends within modern capitalism. The new ‘flexibilisation’ of work is providing new challenges to the international trade union movement:

*Trade unions at the start of the twenty-first century are facing a different reality due to globalisation, and 'flexibilisation' of work in particular, which demands a 'cultural revolution' if they are to meet the challenge. (Munck 2002: 190)*

Munck sees a crucial part of the role of the international trade unions as being to achieve social regulation over global capitalism in order to begin to tackle these and other issues within the world of work.

One collection that also points towards possible new directions for organized labour in the modern world economy is *Working Class: Global Realities* edited by Panich and Leys (2001). Panitch concludes the collection with an appeal for a new – and revitalized - strategy for labour consisting of five elements. These are: to make radical demands upon the state once more and, in so doing, raise the expectations of the labour movement; to transform labour itself so that it becomes more inclusive to new constituencies, more 'organizing' as opposed to 'servicing', and more democratic; for labour to become more open to coalitions and to become part of a 'structured movement' made up of many actors including those of the anti-capitalist movement; and to establish a new internationalism, based, not upon abstract calls for solidarity, but upon learning and sharing the experience of local struggles in order to enhance the prospects for each national movement.

## ***Regionally based transnationalism***

### The Americas

Beyond those authors who have attempted to theorise the position of labour in the world economy at the most general level, there are others who have focussed instead on those parts of the world where workers are actually beginning to organize across the regional national boundaries that have hitherto separated their movements. A significant literature now exists on the cross-border organizing that has developed since the early 1990s in the Americas. Authors concerned with cross-border organizing by US unions have often focussed on opposition to the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the prominence of labour-NGO alliances in these campaigns and struggles (Hacker 1993; de la Cueva 1998). French (2002a) has conceptualised the convergence of labour and civil society movements and the new forms of resistance as being the result of new inter-scalar interactions occurring within international and domestic – ‘intermestic’ – processes. Some have seen these new convergences of labour and civil society movements as the result of a marginalised position for the US labour movement (Pollack 1999; Bacon 2001). The question of ‘interests’ has also been raised by some authors who see paternalist agendas and motivations behind the new appeals to internationalism coming from the US labour movement (*e.g.* Johns 1998; French 2002b) and for some the obvious inequalities of capacity for international work by unions North and South of the US-Mexican border

is a concern (*e.g.* Armbruster 1998). Others, however, have seen these cross-border links as examples of an exciting new solidarity developing between ‘Western’ US workers and Latin American workers in the ‘global South’ (Kamel and Hoffman 1999; Chase-Dunn 1998) and some have also argued that these new trans-American links demonstrate a commonality of interests between US and Latin American workers (*e.g.* Gagnon 2000)

### Europe

Another regionally focussed and substantial sub-body of literature has emerged in relation to cross-border union organizing across the European Union (EU). A tension exists in this literature between those who stress the accommodationist tendencies of European trade unionism (*e.g.* Hyman 1996) and those who emphasise the new energies and activism associated with European cross-border union links (Rigby 1999). More than any other global region Europe has been the focus for speculation regarding the prospects for a genuinely trans-national trade unionism. Many have seen in Europe an arena in which trade unions can begin to transcend the *inter*-nationalism of separate, nationally based trade union centres and achieve an integrated regional trade union policy and practice. Some see in this the potential for European trade unions to play a role on the global stage as the EU itself becomes increasingly a ‘global player’ (*e.g.* Breitenfellner 1997). For others the process by which European trade unions have worked towards convergence has been

essentially one of 'accommodationism' at the regional level. These writers see moves towards a Europeanization of labour as passively shadowing the restructuring of capitalist political and economic institutions. This process then, is seen as having shaped the development of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) (Dølvik 1999).

Many writers have stressed the obstacles that exist to the development of a genuinely regional trade unionism at the European level. One important example here is the enduring organizational and political inertia of the national level in the routine operations of trade union practice (Dølvik 1997). Another obstacle is the diversity of industrial relations systems and cultures across the EU and the accession states (Rigby *et al.* 1999; Hege, 1997). Some have developed this theme to draw attention to the increasing divergences of industrial relations systems, including the absence of any developed system within accession states, as Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries join the EU (Vickerstaff and Thirkell 2000).

The establishing of company based European Works Councils (EWCs) by EU Directive has been an area of intense interest for many authors. Some have seen in EWCs the possibility of a new era of European wide collective bargaining and as carrying within them the germ of a new industrial relations logic (Weston and Martínez Lucio 1998). Further to this, some have stressed the significance of EWCs as creating new sites of civil society activism through the opportunities that they provide for

networking and cross border links (Weston and Martínez Lucio 1997; Herman and Jacobi; 2000 Steiert 2001). Others see the experience of EWCs as having been a mixed one for trade unions and their potential for cross-border liaison and organizing as not having been fully realised (*e.g.* Wills 2002).

Another focus has been on the demography of European trade unions on issues such as the changing composition of trade union memberships (Hyman 1996; Waddington and Hoffman 2000), declining memberships (Waddington *et al.* 1997) and issues of recruitment and representation (Ebbinghaus 2002).

### The 'Global South'

A smaller group of authors in the field of transnational labour studies have focussed their attention on the 'Global South'. Significant work in this area has been done by Rob Lambert and Eddie Webster who highlight what they regard as resurgence in the fortunes and organizational vitality of workers' movements across the poor countries. In their recent work they have focussed on the rise and development of a network of trade union centres and unions across the Southern Hemisphere. The Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) is comprised of unions that tend to be of the left leaning, political and social movement orientated variety. Lambert and

Webster argue that it is an effective coordinating body and that it represents the start of a 'Global South' response by organized labour to the globalisation of capital (Lambert and Webster 2001). Another focus has been on those parts of the Southern hemisphere where the most explicit expressions of labour internationalism have occurred, for example amongst the working class movement of South Africa (Barchiesi 2001).

### ***Labour internationalism and social movements***

Many working in the field of international labour studies have emphasised the newly emerging models of cross-border networking and activism within contemporary social movements. This is a body of literature which, with occasional exceptions, provides accounts of labour internationalism that fit clearly into a revitalization frame of analysis. Some of the authors working in this area of labour studies have seen in the new movements, mobilising around issues of social justice, globalisation, human rights and the environment, the emergence of new transnational actors, of which labour is one amongst many, that are finding new commonalities upon which to unite (Drainville 2002). The importance of social visions for the sustaining of particular struggles and of the labour movement more generally has been highlighted by some case studies (*e.g.* Lopez, 2000). Such new social visions would, for some, emerge as an amalgam of alternative politics rising out of the ashes of the



‘old’ socialist movements of the Cold War era, and out of the interactions of many other new forms of issue-based and identity-based internationalism – or to be more precise, internationalisms (Omvdt 1993; Waterman 2000). The interaction between social movements and labour, as it specifically connects with the international horizons and activities of labour, has been a particular focus for Waterman who appeals strongly for the transcendence of the ‘old’ style of international labour practice that represents an extension of essentially national trade union policy to the international level. Waterman’s vision is that of a new ‘global solidarity’ premised upon the merging of many other forms of internationalism such as that of the women’s and gay movements (Waterman 1998; 2001). He proposes that organized labour is best seen as an important actor in a wider array of actors that together make up the “global justice and solidarity movement” (Waterman 2005a:196). Waterman also puts forward a framework of criteria that he suggests characterises these new forms of trade labour internationalism. These are some of their attributes: face-to-face encounters between workers; decentralised communications networks; a shift away from the ‘aid’ model of trade union beneficence towards workers in the poor countries to a more genuine solidarity based upon common identities; a shift from rhetorical gestures to more political and practical activity; and an energetic grass-roots activism. This interest in forms of labour internationalism that are emerging beyond and outside of official trade union structures also leads to a certain view of the flourishing of what Waterman calls a “left international labour studies” (Waterman

2005b:208). For Waterman, an institutional focus upon trade union structures misses the dynamic of the new internationalisms that are emerging through social movement events such as the annual World Social Forums.

A small number of authors however, less optimistic in their assessments, have emphasised the weakness of the orientation that new social movements have towards trade unions in particular and, more generally, towards the working class. Cassen, for example argues this of the Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l'Aide aux Citoyens (ATTAC) campaign for the Tobin Tax to slow down the capital transactions at the global level (Cassen 2003).

The ways in which trade union practice has itself changed, partly as the result of interactions with social movements, has also been an area of interest. The rise of social movement styles of trade unionism, though not new when the examples of the black trade unions in South Africa under apartheid, and the insurgent trade union movements of Latin America are considered, have nonetheless been given new emphasis in the labour internationalism literature by some authors. Transnational forms of SMU, then, of which the earlier mentioned SIGTUR can be taken as an example, have been seen by some as the appropriate response by organized labour to the internationalisation of capital (Moody 1997: Pieterse 2000).

### ***Labour internationalism and the internet***

The rise of the internet as a means of cheap and international communications has been timely for the new generation of cross-border activists. Lee (1997) has argued forcefully that the internet is providing a vehicle for new paradigm of international labour practice in which the dream of a truly united world wide labour movement can be realised. Elsewhere, Lee argues that the end of the ideological divisions of the Cold War and the growth of the World Wide Web is creating the basis for the re-emergence of 'classical' labour internationalism typical of the pre-First World War era (Lee 2001). Others have provided tentative evidence for the hopes that have been raised of the internet's potential for international trade unionism. Innovative uses of the internet by worker activists have been pointed to, for example, by Diamond and Freeman (2002). Countering these optimistic assessments, however, have been those who take a rather less sanguine view of the internet. Norris, for example, has emphasised the global cultural divide that exists across the World Wide Web with respect to its Anglophone nature (Norris 2000). Within official labour institutions there is also a greater awareness of the very mixed blessing that the internet and information technology more generally has been for organized labour in terms of job losses and work intensification (*e.g.* Kahmann 2003).

### ***Geographies of scale***

Another branch of international labour studies has grown through the interest of political and economic geographers. Some writing in this area combine a focus on the international economy with a scepticism regarding 'globalisation' and an upbeat assessment of the prospects for organized labour (Cox 1997; Herod 2000). As we have seen in the earlier section on labour internationalism at the global scale, Herod is distinctive for his emphasis on organized labour as an actor that can shape the geography of industrial relations as much as capital (Herod 1997) and for his focus on local sites of production within a more internationalised economic landscape (Herod 1998; Herod 2001a). Swyngedouw (1999) also rejects the binary opposing of the 'global' and the 'local', preferring instead to talk of the 'glocal' in order to emphasise the constant interaction of scales in relation to trade union work and action. In similar vein Hines (2000) urges trade unions to root their global concerns within a localized practice.

### ***Labour internationalism and industrial relations***

The work of industrial relations specialists has overlapped with international labour studies insofar as there is an expanding literature on the practical development and future potential of transnational industrial relations regimes. A large literature has developed particularly in relation

to the possibilities of a new European level industrial relations practice. Some have stressed the difficulties of achieving an integrated industrial relations policy across Europe. National characteristics such as ideology, political institutions and historical traditions all continue to play a role (Yruela and Del Rosal 1999; Hoffman 2000). The tendency towards divergence rather than convergence is set to become stronger with the expansion of the EU into the CEE region. Pressures of CEE industrial relations systems, on this view, are pushing towards increasing fragmentation and differentiation rather than any kind of common European level regime.

A pessimistic note runs through much of the literature that comments upon the institutional arrangements within the existing EU member states. Sectoral asymmetry between trade union bodies and employer bodies, trade union exclusion from many of the EU's Social Dialogue (SD) processes, a paucity of effective social policy instruments and weak mechanisms of employer engagement, all conspire to create an adverse industrial relations environment for unions at the European level (Keller and Bansbach 2000).

Others, who have also pointed to the strongly nationally embedded nature of industrial relations practice within the respective European nation states, have nonetheless argued that this is precisely what calls for a new era of supranational labour market regulation (Waddington 2000). In the

1990s there seemed to be some evidence of European level industrial relations institutions emerging ahead of European trade union practice (Turner 1996). Some have also given much more hopeful assessments of the industrial relations commonalities existing at the European level (Ebbinghaus, 2002). In the late 1990s Hyman, for instance, put forward an optimistic prognosis for organized labour to resist the incursions of capital under European level institutional arrangements (Hyman 1999).

### ***Labour internationalism and labour market regulation***

Beyond the European level, the prospects of labour market regulation at the more global scale has also attracted attention. Some have argued that such transnational regulation could in fact only come about through the activities of national states. The historical precedent for this, it is argued, is that the Bretton Woods institutions (BWI) themselves, even at the high point of the regulatory power of the ILO and tri-partite corporatism, were only effective through the actions of the national states and governments that supported them (Edwards and Elgar 1999). Others have looked to both old, corporatist institutions such as the ILO, and to new regionalist institutions, such as the Treaty of Maastricht and EWCs, as possible candidates to play the role of vehicles for a new scale of industrial relations regulation (Haworth and Hughes 2002). The rather dismal results thus far, of the attempts by international trade union bodies to achieve minimum labour standards has been charted by some authors

who place hopes in the prospect of softer, non-legislative alternatives such as corporate responsibility and ethical codes (O'Brien 2002). Finally, the Northern centred and exclusionary nature of the campaign for minimum labour standards and social codes has been critically discussed by Munck (2002).

### *Strategies of labour internationalism*

The examples given above, of campaigns for minimum standards and social codes, point to another area of interest within the labour internationalism literature. This is the changes of orientation, strategy and structure within the organizations of international trade unionism themselves. A number of writers have focussed upon the campaigns to achieve minimum standards through institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as seeking to reform those organizations (Breitenfellner 1997; O'Brien, Goetz, Scholte and Williams 2000). Some have drawn attention to the dynamic campaigning styles of some of the major international trade union bodies such as the ICFTU and a number of the global unions (Gumbrell-McCormick 2000). Others, writing from the perspective of practitioners of international trade unionism, have concentrated much more on organizational change, in particular union mergers at the international level, and the practical task of achieving multi-national collective bargaining (Thorpe 1997). There is debate regarding the

significance of the global scale in determining the outcome of industrial struggles, however. Lavalette and Kennedy (1996), for instance, have questioned the viability of concentrating on the international level in relation to industrial struggles in general, and the Liverpool Docks dispute of 1995-8, in particular. With a different emphasis Walden Bello has stressed the need for international strategies for labour that help to straddle the divide between workers in the North and Workers in the South (Harris 2004).

### ***Histories of labour internationalism***

A steady stream of historical work in the area of international labour studies has continued more or less independently of the debate over contemporary developments in international trade union practice. Examples here include Reinalda (1997) whose edited volume on Edo Fimmen, the charismatic leader of the International Transport Federation (ITF) during the mid-war years, covers biographical and anecdotal contributions, as well as analyses of the politics of international trade unionism in the era of the Amsterdam International, the Comintern and the struggle against fascism. MacShane (1992) traces the split in the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) that unified the world working class at the official level for four brief years following the Second World War, back to the tensions and political irritations caused by the tactical manoeuvrings of the communist led RILU. Beinz (1996)



stresses the commonalities for trade unions across the countries of the industrially developing world in the era of the rise of the ITSs from the 1890s up until the First World War. These commonalities included the experience of declining trades and growing industrialisation, as well as a socialist political influence. Some historical studies have related to more contemporary debate through a periodisation of different phases of internationalism, in ways that attempt to shed light on its meaning today (Stavis 1998; Silver 2003). Another aspect that has been given historical treatment, but that nonetheless touches upon current debate, is that of 'labour imperialism' whereby what is presented as trade union internationalism in fact represents the interests of the unions of the imperial world, and even of imperial interests, within capitalism. (Southall 1995; Jakobsen 2001). Such considerations are, for instance, a part of the discussion around the campaigns by trade unions in the West for core labour standards. Finally, some have given an analysis of the roots of international labour regulation based upon insights into the rise of a bureaucratic industrial internationalism amongst sections of capital in different phases of the twentieth century. Such studies draw our attention to the ways in which labour internationalism has intertwined with international dynamics of capitalism itself (Cox 1996; Carew 1987).

### The need for a new synthesis

We have seen from the literature survey presented here that there has been a dramatic expansion of research and publishing in the area of labour internationalism since the early 1990s. This work has produced a plethora of empirical studies as well as attempts to provide some theoretical understanding of how organized labour is responding to the economic, political, social and cultural changes in its environment. Those who have offered theoretical perspectives on contemporary labour internationalism fall into different, though overlapping, camps. Some have emphasised the interaction between organized labour and social movements of various kinds (Waterman 1998; Munck and Waterman 1999). Others have emphasised the significance of new formulations of purpose and organizational style within global trade unionism (Harrod and O'Brien 2002) as well as that of reformulations of the meaning of solidarity (Hyman 1997 and 1999). Still others have found the time opportune to call for new horizons of assertive and radical global trade unionism (Panich and Leys 2001). Commenting on the different modes of labour internationalist practice itself, Hyman (2005) has called for a new synthesis that combines 'from below' approaches (the 'agitational' model) with 'from above' approaches (the 'bureaucratic-diplomatic' model) to create a model of practice that can be effective for the future.

With exceptions (Silver 2003; Jose 2002) most authors have seen evidence of the foundations of a new era of international trade union practice being laid, as changes in the world economy do their work in eroding the political and economic boundaries that defined the corporatist

era. The tone of much of this writing, whilst acknowledging and, indeed, emphasising the challenges facing organized labour world wide, also point to developments that are purported to indicate stirrings of new energies, new perspectives and new strategies within its ranks.

Whilst the various directions of labour internationalism studies suggest a divergence of empirical themes, the commonality often linking them is the notion of a resurgence of labour internationalism itself. This suggests, in order to identify a framework that can achieve a more unified and integrated approach, that the field of 'labour revitalization' might be a good place to look.

### Labour revitalization literature

The 'new' labour internationalism appears to be bringing with it a new vitality into trade union structures and processes. This has led me to surmise that there is a strong affinity between much recent literature on labour internationalism and the newer field of labour revitalisation studies. This has, in turn, led me to focus upon the extent to which categories used within the revitalization literature capture experience that trade unionists have of international work within their organizations. One way of assessing this is to map the ways in which trade unionists actually describe their experience of international work against these categories to look for correspondences between them. Indeed, this is the core

methodology behind the research for this thesis. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

Two bodies of literature therefore have influenced the design of this research. The field of labour internationalist studies provided key themes through which my inquiry was organized. These themes included: perceptions of the impact of globalisation for trade unions; the stance of trade unions on international political issues *e.g.* UK foreign policy; changes in modes of economic governance and regulation: assessments of trade union international solidarity: membership interest in international issues: coalitions and trade union links with NGOs; the interaction of trade unions with international social movements: and the impact of information and communications technology (ICT). It was these themes that informed and shaped the design of the research interviews I carried out. The labour internationalism literature also suggested different dynamics for internationalism at different levels of structure in the trade union movement. This meant that the structure of the interviews had to be tailored accordingly. The research design reflects this in that the material has been organized at three levels: the global; the European: and the UK-national.

A final key theme was taken from labour revitalization theory – that of ‘strategic union choice’ which is discussed in more detail below. My research was designed then, to identify overlaps, correspondences and differences between the *reported* experience of internationalism at these

different levels of the trade union movement and this key theme from the revitalization literature.

### Overlaps between two bodies of literature

Assessments of the history, experience and significance of labour internationalism can, to some extent, be given in terms that relate to labour revitalisation. Assessments that point to sectional interest, cross-border activism that remains exclusionary along lines of sector or company, and nationalist tendencies within formally transnational processes, are unlikely to be considered as representing creative strategising designed to expand union memberships or 'reach-out' to new constituencies, for instance. Conversely, assessments that emphasise a more genuinely solidaristic aspect to international trade union work and that point to a transformatory potential within it, are also likely to consider it as having a positive relationship to revitalising tendencies.

The notion of working class internationalism as something that is ethically uplifting or even transformative, is touched upon by some authors on the subject. McShane, for example, identifies a 'universal-inspirational' labour internationalism as opposed to 'regulatory-functional' and 'diplomatic-national' forms (McShane 1992: 10). Johns (1998:252-27) distinguishes between 'accommodationist' forms of trade unionism which adapt to changing capitalist arrangements and 'transformatory' forms of cross border solidarity. Gumbrell-McCormick

(2001), in her summary of the purposes of labour internationalism, makes a distinction between political self-interest and the much more complex area of ideology. Much of the literature regarding political interest (*e.g.* Carew 1987; McShane, 1992; Wedin 1970) as well as institutional interest (Windmuller 1967) has been drawn from studies of organized labour during the Cold War. Against these approaches Gumbrell-McCormick points to a cluster of related concepts which suggest different interpretations of working class internationalism. Solidarity and identity as well as ideology, she argues, provide a “framework for the mediation of individual interests and motivations” (2001:19) and have informed other studies (Hyman 1999b; Munck 2000; Waterman 1998).

The real strength of an emphasis on ‘solidarity’ and ‘identity’, however, is that it shifts the focus away from the practice of official leaderships and towards a discussion of what internationalism means for worker members of trade unions when they support the struggles of workers in other countries or when they themselves receive such support. This view of labour internationalism suggests an understanding that has more to do with activism, social movements, rank and file democracy and emancipatory idealism, than it has to do with institutional responses to capitalist restructuring or organizational pragmatism.

These categories do not always overlap straightforwardly with revitalisation categories. It is not always possible to connect ‘solidaristic’ or ‘interest-based’ definitions of labour internationalism directly to

particular positions on labour revitalisation within the literature, for instance. This resonates with a similar point made by Martínez Lucio and Stuart (2005) in their critical discussion of what they term ‘binary’ characterisations of partnership models of trade union practice. Nonetheless these two sorts of approach do provide a way of framing the relationship between the two research fields in very broad terms.

### Phases of labour studies since the 1980s: crisis, demise and revitalization

If the expectations of the working class as a political and emancipatory force that prevailed in the 1960s and early 1970s were high, the dominant note over the next two decades was altogether more melancholic. The requiem to the working class came in 1980 with the publication of Andre Gorz’s *Farewell to the Working Class* (Gorz 1980). Gorz argued that the location of the working class within the capitalist production process, far from empowering the working class, as in the Marxist theoretical frame, in fact *dis*-empowered it. The atomisation imposed upon the worker in her struggle to survive created the ground, not for collectivity but rather for an individualised consciousness. Capital’s assimilation of the working class into cultural and political processes that it controlled was reinforced by the patterns of high consumption made possible by the relative affluence of the West and by the steady deindustrialisation of Western societies. The book came to represent the disappointment felt by a generation of radical intellectuals by the 1980s.

Throughout the 1980s hopes that the Western working class might still retain an emancipatory potential only receded further. Some argued that social groups other than the working class might emerge to replace the working class as an opposing force to capitalism. For Nicos Poulantzas, for instance, hope lay with the radicalised petit-bourgeois. For some, the class structure of Western society had changed fundamentally so that the old divisions of clear opposition between workers and capitalist employers were no longer relevant. The sociologist Ohlin Wright argued that the lines of worker-management demarcation were so blurred in the modern workplace that class identification had become a highly complex affair. Eric Hobsbawm, in 'The Forward March of Labour Halted' (Hobsbawm 1978) argued that changes in industrial structure had led to the increasing marginalisation of a radical political position within the working class. For Laclau and Mouffe (1985) the changes in contemporary social reality meant that the working class had become displaced from its position as the sovereign agent of social change and now had to take its place alongside of a myriad of other social groups and movements that only together could be seen as constituting a hegemonic opposition to the dominance of capitalist exploitation.

In the 1990s this tendency towards seeing the working class as a historically spent force intensified with the onset of the era of 'globalisation'. The prognoses for the prospects of organized labour tended strongly towards the pessimistic amongst theorists of



globalisation, with an emphasis on weakening national regulatory frameworks and a 'race to the bottom' that pitched workers of different countries into increasingly competitive downward cycles. For Castells (1996) the rise of an information based and globally networked capitalism had displaced the spaces in which labour could organize, leading to a reality in which, whilst labour (work) would continue, labour 'movements' would decline.

The severity of the sense of malaise within both the labour movement and within the field of labour studies was expressed clearly by Silver (2003):

*For many, this double crisis of labor studies and labor movements is long term and structural – intimately tied to the momentous transformations that have characterised the last decades of the twentieth century going under the general rubric of “globalisation”. For some, the crisis is not just severe, it is terminal. (Silver 2003).*

But, as Silver herself goes on to say, there is evidence that for both labour movements and for labour studies, the tide has turned. From the mid-1990s onwards a new and more optimistic note has entered the analysis and argument of some key authors on the subject of organized labour. This change appears to have been created by events. The public sector strikes in France in 1995, the Seattle protests at the World trade Organization ministerial conference in 1999 and shifts towards

organizing models on the part of trade union movements in a number of core capitalist economies, have all breathed new life into the notion of the working class as an agent of social change. New work has grown out of this new sense of optimism that is often referred to as ‘labour renewal’ or ‘labour revitalization’ literature.

Labour revitalization theory has its precursors from historical eras in which the energies of organized labour have recovered after a period of appearing dormant. There are, for instance, writings about the period of recovery of working class activism and radicalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s that anticipate some of the themes of more modern treatments of the topic. Such studies had often stressed, for example, the ways in which workers’ movements at that time interacted with the new social movements of the day and sought to form broad aggregations of social and political aims (Crouch and Pizzorno 1978; Sabel 1982).

Before identifying an appropriate analytical revitalization framework however, I will, in sub-sections 2g and 2h, consider the wider labour revitalization field in order to provide some context to the discussion and to highlight the strengths of the model finally chosen.

### Labour revitalization literature today

Contemporary labour revitalization literature draws our attention to a new dynamism across the broad spectrum of trade union activity, from grass-

roots member activism on the one hand through to new forms of partnership and liaison with employers on the other. In some cases this occurs against the background of organizational restructuring that might have been expected to be unfavourable to effective trade unionism. Corby and Blundell (1997), for instance, found that decentralisation did not lead to a decline of stewards' activism within three NHS Trusts. In studies of the labour renewal in the US factors 'from above', such as initiatives by the AFL-CIO leadership, have coincided with 'factors from below' in raising levels of membership activism, to produce more dynamic modes of trade union activity (*e.g.* Hurd *et al.* 2003). This sort of dynamic has also been found to be relevant to union renewal in the British context (Dundon 1997; McBride 2004). The British TUC, for instance, launched its Organizing Academy in 1998 to train specialist organizers with the aim of maximising recruitment and membership involvement (Heery *et al.* 2000).

For unions in particular sectors such responses have often been forced by challenges of various kinds, such as the introduction of new management techniques (Stewart and Wass 1998), the impact of the opening up of markets to international competition and the growth of the 'open shop' within particular sectors (*e.g.* Erlich and Grabelsky 2005). Indeed some have stressed the ongoing harshness of the environment for trade unions to introduce a sceptical note on the actuality of a recovery of trade union prospects (*e.g.* Charlwood 2004; Cumbers 2005). Nonetheless, by the late 1990s a new mobilization perspective was emerging that emphasised the

importance of union and worker choice and strategy formation (Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998; Kelly 1998). Key within this literature, also, were studies that addressed changes in the composition of trade union memberships as these became more feminised, blacker and more culturally diverse. New forms of representation that reflect such changes became an important element within broader revitalization themes (Hyman 1997). The receptiveness of immigrant labour to organizing efforts was also highlighted by researchers working in the US context (Milkman 2000). Finally on this point, Tufts (2006) has highlighted the ways in which one American union in the hotel industry has employed strategies that emphasise and celebrate the diversity of its members through programmes of cultural activities.

One reason cited for these new energies within trade union movements is the dis-articulation of the institutional arrangements within which unions operated in the post-war era. Baccaro *et al.* (2003) argue that unions seek institutional support, and that when these are present the incentive to mobilise is reduced. As institutional support is eroded, unions are seen as everywhere re-launching themselves as political actors. The loosening of such historical arrangements has led to new organizing orientations and coalition building. Two major types of response are identified. These are strategies of social partnership and those of social movementism. Unions in most countries are seeking to enhance their role as political intermediaries to give them the strength needed to survive. Unions also seek external support as part of revitalization strategies leading to new

forms of networking and coalition building. National variations in this analysis remain a conspicuous feature of how unions are behaving within these changing realities. For example, unions in the US and the UK, according to these authors, have embarked on organizing and coalition building drives whereas unions in Germany, Italy and Spain have tended to ignore grass-roots coalition building.

With specific reference to Germany, Behrens (2003) has highlighted the fact that although German unions have been instrumental in initiating cross-border working, they have been very slow to forge links with other social movements. In this case then, whilst elements of revitalization are evident, there is no systematic revitalization strategy. In the case of Britain, some have conceptualised the revitalization strategies adopted as reflecting a dilemma between an organizing model that is focussed on recruitment and a more robust work-place presence, and a European style social partnership model that seeks compromise and *quid pro quo* with the employer (Heery *et al.* 2003).

Some within the labour revitalization field have stressed the interaction between unions and wider society as they seek to reach out to new constituencies and other groups in society as well as social movements (*e.g.* Turner and Hurd 2001; Baccaro *et al.* 2003). Indeed this sort of ‘field-enlargement’ for trade union activity was being identified as an international trend by the late 1990s (*e.g.* Wever 1998) and one that has continued into the 2000s (Day 2004). In the European context these

trends have been found to result in tensions as partnership strategies pursued by official leaderships and grass-roots involvement in social movements pull in different directions (Taylor and Mathers 2002a). Coalition building with social groups and movements has become more extensive in recent years. One aspect of this has been the sharing of objectives with groups whose identities are 'work mediated' but which go beyond the employment relationship. Such approaches have shaped the work that unions have conducted and sponsored within their own structures as well as within workplaces and political campaigns. Examples here include: anti-racism work; equality agendas for black members, women, gays and lesbians and disabled members; and campaigns for family-friendly policies. Some of the changes in response to the challenges posed to trade unions in general, and public sector trade unions in particular, have also resulted in the emergence of shared agendas with social movements. This is true, for example, of some aspects of the women's movement (Wajcman 2000; Parker 2002). Kirton and Healey (1999) have drawn attention to the interrelationship between union renewal and the 'transformatory' effects of women's activism. Some have noted, also, the adoption of the informality of the women's movement within some UK trade unions (Heery 1998). Healy *et al.* (2004) have also explored the ways in which ethnicity and gender can intersect in the workplace to generate raised levels of collectivism.

The equality agenda in the trade union movement, however, has not been an uncontested area and internal conflicts and tensions have been evident

over its introduction (Colling and Dickens 2001). Motivations for becoming active within the union have also been a focus of interest with respect to women's participation. Harrington (2005) for instance has highlighted sectoral variation on this theme. She found that women activists in the South Wales and Western Division of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), a division in a region of strong trade union traditions, cited family influence as a key factor in their decisions to take up union positions. For these women it seemed the 'natural' thing to do. For women activists in the Banking, Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU) in the South and West areas of England, with lower levels of trade union density, this was not a significant factor. Rather, they cited the importance of mutual protection and support amongst work-mates. Strategies for achieving higher levels of women's participation have also centred upon education and learning in many British unions (Greene and Kirton 2002). The significance of both 'tradition', revealed in the study of women's activism in South Wales, and of education are linked, for the purposes of revitalization, in the identifying of a common heritage between new organizing strategies and theories of popular education and radical history (Brown 2006).

An aspect of labour revitalization that has been recognised by some authors has been the adoption of more transnational strategies on the part of unions. The argument is that as the domestic terrain becomes more difficult for trade unions, with the erosion of social democratic states, declining memberships and the intensification of competition for jobs,

they have started to reach out beyond their traditional national borders and link up with unions in other countries for mutual strength.

*One way of attenuating the effects of this dilemma is to become more globally conscious: that is, not only to link up with foreign unions in solidarity campaigns (a pressing need), but to learn the lessons of union successes and failures in other countries as well. (Baccaro et al. 2003)*

Again national variations are apparent. For example, whilst in the British case, the tendency is for unions to prefer involvement in European Works Councils over formal inter-union bilateralism (Heery *et al.* 2003), such inter-union international cooperation is clearly linked to revitalization strategies in the case of Spanish unions (Hamann and Martínez Lucio 2003). Such national variations do give cause for caution regarding how revitalization should be defined at the general level. They are not, however, the only reason. Frege and Kelly (2003) argue that the problem is partly that the real meaning of quantitative measures that can be applied to assessing the degree to which unions are really ‘revitalizing’ varies from one country to the next.

National variation, as a factor that shapes forms and levels of revitalization, is also acknowledged in the collection edited by Cornfield and McCammon (2003). These authors are concerned with the socially embedded nature of labour action and revitalization efforts. The



contributions are organized into three themes: the relationship between union structure and union membership; the relationship between unions and employers; and relations between unions and the state. The aim of these authors is to develop a “sociology of labor revitalization” to “help to identify the social processes that tighten the relationship between workers and trade unionism”. They intend, in this way, to inform the design of strategies for trade union revitalization (Cornfield and McCammon 2003:17).

A different approach to conceptualising union revitalization, or ‘renewal’ as these authors call it, is taken by Bacharach *et al.* (2001). They focus upon the *logic* of union renewal. They attach special importance to the ‘mutual aid’ model of trade unionism that can be traced back to the earliest forms of ‘benevolent’ labour organization. They identify a cycle by which unions, when facing a hostile social and economic environment, adopt familial modes of engagement with their members and, when facing a less inclement situation shift towards more individual interest based and service orientated strategies of recruitment and membership appeal. They call for a foregrounding of mutualism as a response to membership decline across the trade union movement in the US. This kind of conceptualisation also resonates with a growing literature on new forms of ‘community unionism’ that are said to be emerging as a response to economic restructuring, the increasing significance of contingent work patters, deindustrialisation and demographic change resulting from employment linked migration flows (Black 2005; Ellem

2003; Wills 2001). Some research, however, has highlighted the ways in which such community models of unionism, and the revitalization strategies associated with them, are threatened by the recent trend towards union merger by which small unions are absorbed into much larger bodies (Sayce *et al.* 2006).

In thematic case studies drawn from the Canadian context the collection edited by Pradeep and Schenk (2004) focuses upon a range of strategies used for the purposes of union renewal. Looking at the experience of different Canadian unions they consider how long term ‘evolutionary’ approaches to renewal as well as shorter term campaigns, focussing on particular membership groups, such as women workers and young workers, have contributed to improvements in union performance. Other strategies, such as building international networks through exchange programmes and solidarity alliances, raising the level of worker-member participation in decision making processes and the building of union-community alliances, form the basis of more case studies.

The collection edited by Fairbrother and Yates (2003) draws together a number of case studies of union renewal efforts across the English speaking world. In broad terms the thematic thread running through all of the contributions is that of the shift from the ‘service’ model of trade unionism that conceptualises the ‘member’ as a consumer and the union as a provider of welfare and support, to the ‘organizing’ model in which the ‘member’ is an active participant in the life of the union. Some

contributions also see the prospects of a further shift along, and beyond, the ‘service-model’ to ‘organizing-model’ spectrum, as unions in some national case study settings embrace a ‘social-movement’ model in which unions interact with a range of community struggles and rights based campaigns.

## A labour revitalization model

### *Six strategies of labour revitalization*

A framework that places union strategic choice at its centre as well as adopting a cross-national comparative approach is offered by the authors of *Varieties of Unionism* (Frege and Kelly 2004). The range of different national case studies covers three distinct types of national regulatory culture. These are: i) liberal market economies (the UK and the US); ii) coordinated market economies (Germany); and iii) Mediterranean economies characterised by regions of industrial development alongside of regions of small-holder farming. The different trade union strategies found within these settings provides the authors with the ‘varieties of unionism’ that they need for their comparative approach. The framework has been criticised for its complexity and for having “more categories than there are cases” (Clawson 2005: 731). The combination of elements within this framework, however, as well as the thematically coherent and systematic way in which it is organized, gives this framework a high level of generality – and *generisability*. Moreover, these authors’ interest

is in unions as ‘strategic actors’ making ‘choices’, rather than as institutions responding mechanically to external pressures. This lends itself to a research approach premised on the opinions, interpretations and perspectives of individuals in key positions within trade unions, as opposed to a study based upon organizational data. It is this combination of characteristics that makes this framework useful for a consideration of whether revitalization themes can be identified in the accounts and interpretations offered for any area of trade union work – including that of international practice. This is the reason that this particular model has been selected for the purposes of my exploration of the relevance of revitalization theory for labour internationalism. We will look at this model in some detail.

In order to produce a generalised analytical model of labour revitalization activity Frege and Kelly look at five case studies. These are the labour movements of the UK, the US, Germany, Italy and Spain. They offer an analytical model drawn from social movement literature that is premised upon commonalities in the dynamics of both social movements and unions. This model comprises four independent variables: 1. social and economic change; 2. institutional context; 3. state and employer strategies; and 4. union structures. It also incorporates a process variable (framing processes) and the dependent variable – union choices. By ‘framing processes’ Frege and Kelly mean cognitive and perceptual factors that determine the ways in which trade unions see their situation. They point to the importance of interactions with social movements as a

framing factor. In this they echo the analysis offered by Starr (2000) who employs a notion of perceptual framings to explain the explosion of new transnational energies of political resistance since the Seattle protests of 1999.

Attempting to overcome the difficulties caused by the different meanings of revitalization indicators within different national contexts, they choose instead, to proceed by conceptualising union decline as a set of problems. They then conceptualise union revitalization as the range of strategies that are developed to solve these problems. They identify six major strategies. These are:

1. organizing (recruitment, mobilising, building sectional and workplace strength);
2. organizational restructuring (mergers and internal restructuring, economies of scale *etc.*);
3. coalition building (engaging with social movements for resources, knowledge and information, and individual activists);
4. partnerships with employers (seeking working relationships based upon perceived mutual interests);
5. political action (seeking labour friendly legislation and case law);

6. and international links (improving exchange of information across the firm, enhancing bargaining position, leap-frogging, mobilizing members in campaigns, lobbying at transnational levels)

The mix of independent, dependent and process variables and the six strategies that make up the key components of this model, provide a framework by which revitalization can be approached at the general level. The use of social movement theory also provides a means of positioning my study of trade union internationalism in a way that highlights the interactions occurring in their institutional aspects with social processes. The model is used selectively. I employ the six strategies of revitalization identified across the collection. The main focus for this research was upon trade unionists as strategic actors. My interest was in the views that were held of the strategic actions and work being done in relation to international practice. To this end I decided to use these revitalization strategies to organize the interviews and their analysis.

The four independent variables and the process variable described earlier were left out of this analytical framework for the purposes of this thesis. Whilst they are all important for the broad context within which and through unions operate, my key concern was that of the *responses* that unions were making to their changing environment. In order to do justice to the large amount of empirical data I had gathered on this, latter, theme,

and within the limitations of a thesis, I could not realistically attempt to explore these other themes within the model.

The application of strategic choice analysis then, will demonstrate that contemporary trends in trade union internationalism are best understood, not as purely defensive responses to an increasingly hostile neo-liberal environment, but rather as a much more complex repertoire of pro-active as well as reactive strategies. This suggests an understanding of labour internationalism that places it much more within the arena of labour renewal and revitalization than that of crisis. I will show that contemporary trade union internationalism is both an area of activity that is contributing to revitalization strategies as well as having itself been revitalized. I will do this by applying this revitalization ‘strategy’ model to the empirical themes that have emerged from primary research at the international, the European, and the UK-national levels.

First, however, I will present the key elements of analysis used by these authors for each of the union revitalization strategies they identify. These will also be used to explore the resonances between the research material relating to trade unionists’ assessments of the current state of labour internationalism within their organizations, and labour revitalization perspectives.

### Strategy 1: Organizing

Heery and Adler (2004) lay out an analytical framework for an assessment of the ways in which unions seek to improve their performance on work with membership. They are concerned with the level of organizing activity, the direction of organizing policy and the methods used. They also consider factors to explain the variance of organizing patterns across five national case studies: the US; the UK; Germany; Spain; and Italy.

The authors define 'organizing' by identifying three of its components. The first is that of 'resource allocation' comprising: 1. 'formalisation' - the allocation of resources to such things as the adoption of formal policies, the setting of budgets, the establishing of evaluation procedures *etc.*; 2. 'specialization' - the setting up of dedicated bodies with clear task-focused remits; and 3. 'centralisation' - the level of priority given to organizing within the central bodies of the union.

The second component is 'targeting' comprising: 1. membership 'consolidation' by which a union seeks to increase membership density in an already organized area; 2. 'expansion' by which a union seeks to gain members either amongst occupational groups within which it already has members ('close expansion') or amongst occupational groups that are entirely new to it ('distant expansion'); 3. 'field enlargement' by which a union reaches out to new constituencies such as women, migrant workers and young workers; and 4. 'depth organizing' which refers to those strategies by which a union builds its organizational presence for



collective bargaining for the workplace rather than relying on solely upon individual recruitment.

The third component to organizing is that of the methods used. Methods may be ‘diffuse’ in that they rely on marketing the union through routine activities and informational processes or they may be ‘concentrated’ insofar as they are aimed at particular groups and involve a concerted effort over a period of time. They may be ‘employer targeted’ in seeking to win recognition agreements. They may also be ‘employee targeted’ in that they attract workers through their ability to represent member-interests and offer union based services or through appealing to workers as potential activists. This, latter distinction is akin to that normally made between ‘service’ models of trade unionism and ‘organizing models’. In the former model the union offers itself as a professional service provider to members and potential members who are seen as passive. In the latter model, the union will tend to present itself as ‘only as strong as the members’ in that it seeks to help organize worker-members on a participative, activist footing.

For the purposes of the chief concern of this thesis – the question of the ‘fit’ between the perspectives of trade union activists and officers on trade union internationalism and labour revitalization literature – ‘organizing’ will be treated in the sense that was alluded to above. That is, it will be understood in its conventional meaning and as opposed to the ‘service model’ of trade union practice. In broad terms, then, and

distinguishing it from the other revitalization strategies that are identified by Frege and Kelly (2004), ‘organizing’ is taken to refer to strategies that are about engaging with ‘rank-and-file’ workers, grass-roots activism, membership participation, union democracy and industrial action.

### Strategy 2: Organizational restructuring

In their discussion of the contribution of organizational restructuring to labour revitalization Behrens, Hurd and Waddington (2004) highlight a key finding from the empirical work that “structural adjustment is a common element of revitalization efforts”. They describe three categories of structural change of relevance to trade unions: ‘external’ restructuring by which the boundaries within which a union operates change, perhaps in relation to other unions, such as in the case of union merger; ‘internal’ restructuring that relates to union governance and covers areas such as union democracy, representation and membership participation; and ‘internal’ restructuring that relates to union administration covering organizational management and resource allocation.

These authors develop their framework by identifying three types of motivation for structural change. Firstly, there is ‘aggressive’ restructuring. In this situation a union seeks to broaden its membership base and extend its influence by absorbing smaller unions into its structures. Motivations for this kind of expansion can include the political ambitions and agendas of union leaders. Secondly, there is ‘defensive’

restructuring. This is akin to the ‘survival’ motivation identified in much of the literature on union merger. This tends to occur where unions are struggling to retain memberships or bargaining position with employers. It takes two forms: internal – focusing upon a restructuring of the union’s own processes: and external – involving new alliances with other unions and non-union organizations. The vast majority of union restructuring projects fall into the ‘defensive’ category. Thirdly, there is ‘transformative’ restructuring. This refers to cases in which the union undergoes substantial structural change that leads to real revitalization. The motivations for transformative restructuring, then, include the aim of increasing membership participation, widening the range of social constituencies involved in the union, and improving the overall effectiveness of the union’s strategies.

Behrens, Hurd and Waddington (2004) emphasise the fact that restructuring can happen at any level of the trade union from the local, branch level to the cross-national level. In relation to the cross-national level they argue that pan-European restructuring has a particular significance for union revitalization.

### Strategy 3: Coalition building

The relationship between coalition building and union revitalization is discussed by Frege *et al.* (2004). They present the argument that, in order to revitalize, unions must embrace a form of trade unionism that is not

restricted solely to workplace and industrial issues but that takes on board the social and political dimensions of the environment in which they operate. They point out that unions have historically formed coalitions with non-labour groups but they also argue that there is a new urgency in the need to form such coalitions. They point to five types of resource that coalition partners can offer to trade unions. These are: financial and material resources; access to new social groups and constituencies for recruitment or influence; expertise and specialist knowledge; legitimacy and credibility with social groups; and mobilization.

These authors identify two ways of categorising labour coalitions. The first is based upon the mode of interaction between unions and their partners. The second looks at the methods that such coalitions employ. The first of these classifications – that of mode of interaction – breaks down into three sub-categories. The first they call ‘the vanguard coalition’. In this scenario the union is the dominant – vanguard – partner. Its aims and interests are to the fore and the explicitly stated role of coalition partners is to support it in its endeavours or in its struggle. They cite the British miners’ strike of 1984/5, when miners and their families were sustained in struggle by a myriad of support groups and networks, as a classic example of this sort of coalition. The second type they refer to as the ‘common-cause coalition’. This refers to coalitions built upon an identified common agenda. The relationships tend to be those of a parity of esteem. Often the coalition will form under a common umbrella uniting a diverse range of partner organizations of which the

union is but one, acting either as a source of activists or as an affiliate sponsor. Finally there is the 'integrative coalition'. Here the interests of a non-labour partner or movement become absorbed into the culture and structures of the union. Examples would include the integration of issues of oppression, such as those of women and gays and lesbians, into the working culture of unions, and of environmental and anti-fascist campaigns.

The second means by which coalitions can be classified is by the methods they employ. This breaks down in the following way. Firstly they can be grouped according to how they interact with the state. Under this sub-category fall union efforts that seek to shape government policy either as accepted 'insiders' within the relevant processes, or as excluded 'outsiders' relying on protest and industrial action. In first case, unions may form coalitions with organizations that are already seen as legitimate players in the policy process. In the second case they may ally themselves with other constituencies, such as community and special interest groups, who seek to impact upon government policy by external action.

Finally, the authors identify six factors which they say promote the formation of coalitions. Firstly, union coalitions tend to form in situations in which the resources available to unions in their efforts to mobilize around an issue are limited. Forming coalitions, then, has the obvious advantage of enabling unions to share the costs and organizational burdens of the actions and campaigns concerned. Secondly as unions

expand the range and constituencies of interest that they seek to represent, they will often find themselves coming into contact with the social, cultural and political organizations that are relevant to the area or group. In such circumstances there is a natural tendency to formalize these organizational relationships by establishing new coalitions. The presence of activists involved in social movements is an important third factor which allows unions to form coalitions. Such activists can also come to shape the internal agendas and organizational style of unions around specific issues. This has been the case, for instance, with the influence that activists from the women's movement have had within British trade unions. A fourth factor is that of union identity. Where a business model of trade unionism prevails, by which the union sees itself as representing its market sector then it is unlikely to seek coalitions with social groups. As this model gives way to either class based or social partner based models then unions will become more inclined to seek alliances outside of their traditional areas of activity. Fifthly the availability of potential coalition partners is an obvious prerequisite for coalition formation. The authors point to opposing trends of a decline of strong industry-community linkages on the one hand, tending to reduce the availability of potential coalition partners, and the emergence of powerful identity movements on the other, providing new types of potential coalition partner. They also point to this as a significant factor in the variance of coalition formation across different national settings. Finally there is the factor of political opportunity. This is partly to do with the ways in which political and policy processes are articulated. In

situations where there are multiple 'points of access' to these processes there will be a greater number of opportunities that can be exploited by coalitions - which will therefore be more likely to form.

The revitalization potential of the forming of coalitions lies, according to Frege *et al.* in tendencies that usually accompany it. These include efforts to extend the influence of the union beyond its traditional base of support, inclusive rather than exclusive notions of representation, engaging with new energies in the form of contact with social movements and the fact that the forming of coalitions can be an innovative departure from well established patterns of organizational behaviour.

#### Strategy 4: Partnership

In their contribution on the theme of social partnership Fichter and Greer (2004) consider whether partnership arrangements between unions and employers can be seen as tools for revitalization. They argue from their findings of labour revitalization studies across five national case studies that it does contribute when: 1. it is institutionalised as a part of wider partnership arrangements; 2. it is part of other union strategies; and 3. when it is linked to a wider social horizon of union aims. It is only when all three of these criteria coincide that partnership can play a revitalizing role. Cutting against a tendency to dismiss partnership as something that has no potential for revitalization that they identify within the relevant literature, they further argue that labour-firm partnerships can, for

instance, under certain conditions and when these three specific criteria are met, lead to greater union density and disruptive power. Despite this, however, they acknowledge that such conditions are unusual and that the examples of such cases are few and far between.

Fichter and Greer highlight a contradictory picture for partnership deals with regard to the institutional terrain on which they would normally seek to operate. On the one hand the neo-liberal onslaught conducted by most successive national governments around the world for the last thirty years has significantly weakened the national institutions through which such partnerships would function. On the other hand the emergence of new regional institutions, such as economic development bodies, has provided an alternative arena in which such arrangements might work. The reality, however, as the authors again acknowledge, is that such sub-national structures bring with them their own constraints on union effectiveness in the form of problems associated with decentralisation.

The 1980s, the authors note, saw a proliferation of academic writing on labour-firm partnerships in the US. In a period where North American unions were decisively on the retreat outcomes were determined by the 'strategic choices' of management. This literature did not, however, typically consider how such partnerships could be subverted, on the union's terms, into strategies for revitalization. Indeed within this literature existed a view that partnerships necessarily entailed labour working within them as the subordinate partner. In the European



literature on the topic differences in outcomes for workers, resulting from partnerships across different national contexts, was a key theme. These variations tended to be attributed to different institutional arrangements and industrial relations cultures. In concluding their account of their analytical framework Fichter and Greer (2004) suggest looking beyond national contexts in order to consider specific firms and sectors. By adopting what they call an ‘actor-centred’ approach they seek to identify any link, actual or putative, that might exist between partnerships and union revitalization. They conclude that, not only are the specific conditions for partnerships rare, but that the different elements that are required can even conflict with one another. They illustrate this point by way of reference to German institutions that can be seen as both facilitating effective unions whilst at the same time constraining their potential for revitalization.

#### Strategy 5: Political action

Hamann and Kelly’s (2004) contribution to *Varieties of Unionism* addresses itself to the question of whether political action taken by trade unions can constitute a ‘recipe for revitalization’. They note the ways in which the erosion of the institutional frameworks of the corporatist era has in many ways undermined the organizational basis of certain forms of trade union action. Both in terms of economic power and political influence with governments they are seen as having lost ground. They further note that this has been the result of intensive state intervention

within national economies designed to increase global competitiveness to the detriment of labour. They frame their inquiry into the revitalization impact of union political action in terms of responses to these challenges. Whilst acknowledging the growing importance of the supra-national and sub-national levels they nonetheless focus heavily upon the national level with the justification that this remains the primary arena of trade union action.

‘Political action’ is defined by these authors simply as action that is designed to influence state policy at many levels. Normally this covers three areas: elections; legislation; and the implementation of policies. These are, in turn, broken down into the forms of action pertaining to each. The electoral sphere covers activities such as: independent union participation; candidate selection; voter mobilisation; and providing institutional or financial support to political parties. Union interest in legislation and involvement in legislative processes includes: initiating or supporting legislation that will be of benefit to members such as that covering welfare policy, lifelong learning and the regulation of standards in the workplace; initiating or supporting legislation that will benefit the union organizationally in areas such as rights relating to organizing, representation and collective action; and seeking to ensure that legislation that is of benefit to trade unions and their members is fully implemented in such areas as the minimum wage or health and safety. The forms of action in this sphere that the authors identify include: negotiating within partnerships with government; political lobbying; acting as social

movements seeking to exert pressure on governments; and acting as litigants in defence of their members through the courts. These forms of action can be used separately or in combination. They are also interchangeable in that the form of action taken does not depend in any causal sense on the particular purpose or intended outcome for which it has been chosen.

Hamann's and Kelly's (2004) empirical survey of their five case study countries (the UK; the US; Germany; Spain; and Italy) reveal a picture of contradictions. In Italy and Spain, for instance, mobilisation and collective action has resulted in the consolidation of political influence. In the US, despite vigorous efforts in the area of political lobbying membership has continued to decline. In Germany effective involvement in electoral campaigns has helped in the victory of social democratic governments, but has made little or no difference to membership, coverage or influence with government. In the UK the return of a New Labour government in 1997 has been associated with a moderate revival of the fortunes of trade unions apparent in improvements in membership and bargaining coverage, despite the political decoupling that has also characterised the period.

One difficulty for unions in relying on strategies of political action to effect recovery is that they depend in large part on the receptiveness of governments. Another problem identified by the authors, is that it is very difficult, analytically, to isolate a 'political action effect' in that strategies

of political action usually occur in periods where other factors are operating such as government change or employer responses to economic trends. The outcomes of forms of political action then tend to be contingent upon these other dynamics. Overall this means that although, on the one hand, in all of their five case study countries, unions have adopted political action as a major strategy for revitalization, on the other, the results vary significantly across them.

#### Strategy 6: International links

Lillie and Martínez Lucio (2004), in their discussion of the role of different national approaches in the revitalization of international trade union practice, note the ways in which the trade union movement world wide remains 'segmented' along lines of national, sectoral and corporate identity and interest. They also note that the behaviour of sub-national groups in one country intertwine with those of other countries, such that it is impossible to have an understanding of them without an encompassing transnational perspective. Although, as they explain, transnational activity is becoming more systematic and regularized, it can also be the case that activity at this level merely reproduces the motivations and agendas of national trade union practice at a new level. Against these background observations they frame three questions: how do national industrial relations mediate the development of internationalism?; what are the new challenges for international

revitalization?; and what are the conditions today that make international worker and union solidarity possible?

These authors identify six dimensions across which a new labour internationalism is occurring. These are: transnational union collaboration within companies; the rise, since the 1970s, of transnational labour and industrial relations institutions such as the ETUC and the EWCs; the shift represented by the end of the Cold War and the emergence of new forms of political activism that are more sensitised to global inequities; more effective transnational coordination organized *via* bi-lateral arrangements between unions, and supported by international trade union bodies in the role of ‘information nodes’ and ‘coordinators of conflict’; the introduction of lifelong learning as a key strategic priority for unions in much of the industrialised world; the emergence of new, non-hierarchical conceptualisations of the role of trade unions in emancipatory struggles against oppression and in opposition to global capitalism. They point to a problem in the literature covering these various aspects, however, which is that it tends to gloss over the fact that most of the processes involved are articulated at the national level and are therefore mediated by essentially national factors. It is these factors that Lillie and Martínez Lucio seek to identify and understand.

One general theme that these authors address is that of whether international action is solidaristic or competitive. As they point out competition between unions for jobs is sometimes a reality and

international action is not necessarily the same thing as internationalism. They also highlight the greater capacity that company managements have to monitor and evaluate processes and outcomes and the relative advantage that this confers when dealing with labour issues. Employers tend to be more manoeuvrable also in terms of the uses made of company restructuring and changes in ownership. These authors do, however, emphasise the lengths that unions go to in different countries in order to overcome these problems and to present a united front to their employers. Furthermore, it is also the case that:

*systematic, stable, non-hierarchical inter-union relationships can allow unions to overcome competitive interest politics to a degree, facilitating transnational solidarity and the development of new forms of international labour activity.*

(Lillie and Martínez Lucio 2004: 163)

Lillie and Martínez Lucio offer a taxonomy of national strategies that impinge on transnational labour practice. They begin this by reiterating their key theme that the international strategies and practices of trade unions carry their national regulatory characteristics with them. In their framework they emphasise the fact that the state continues to strongly regulate labour markets, the internationalisation of production notwithstanding. The continuing orientation of unions on the national state, then, means that even when confronted with transnational challenges they will still tend to conceptualise those challenges, and

therefore their responses to them, through the prism of the national level of action. The different environment represented by the transnational level, however, means that unions tend either to modify their practice in order to accommodate these differences or to retreat into a denial of the reality of the challenges presented. The authors also cite the three dimensions of trade unionism identified by Hyman (2001). These are: the promotion of member welfare *via* collective bargaining; social partners within a democratic polity; and vehicles of class conflict. All unions, on this categorisation, display aspects of all three though to differing degrees depending upon tradition and political identity.

Lillie's and Martínez Lucio's national case by case taxonomy, then, broadly follows the five national case studies that form the empirical base of this collection. They see three models across this range of case studies. There are what they term the trade union approaches of the 'low-road' capitalist countries of the US and the UK. Here the company and workplace level of union recognition and bargaining means that unions, in their international strategies, tend to opt for a minimum level of labour rights and broad, transferable framework agreements that enshrine recognition and the right to organize. By contrast, in the 'high-road' capitalist countries such as Germany, unions are less concerned with the workplace level of representation and far more with their position within tripartist arrangements that bring together unions, employers and government. This means that they seek, in their transnational work, to bring the German model of labour regulation into European processes in

order to block what they see as the threat of an Anglo-American orientation within the EU. Finally, there are the national industrial relations systems of the Mediterranean economies such as Spain and Italy, where unions are caught in the competing pressures of class oppositionalism and social and political participation. Whilst domestically, traditions of class combativity may prevail, at the European level the tendency of most unions is to seek formal integration within tripartite arrangements. The horizons of the confederations in these economies, then, are defined by a 'progressive' vision for the EU and the building of a supranational state. There is something of a paradox in this situation in that, as the authors put it in relation to the Spanish case, "international linkages do not always reflect the supposed mobilization-based character of ... national activity" (Lillie and Martínez Lucio 2004: 166). The Europeanization of the Spanish left and the shifting configurations of labour-capital relations in Latin America have also further complicated Southern Hemisphere transnationalism amongst the Spanish trade unions.

The key point for these authors is that the national level of union activity is not merely a block on internationalism. Rather it serves to frame union approaches to international work. The important question to pose, then, is which of these provides the most favourable conditions for the revitalisation of trade union international action? They finish by speculating upon the contrasting strengths and weaknesses of the German model and that of the Anglo-American model. The former, whilst



providing stability and institutional position, is bureaucratic and so may stifle the kinds of activist networks that have been identified as characterising new forms of trade union internationalism. The latter, whilst representing a relatively weak institutional position for labour may, in fact lend itself more to the sorts of grassroots, workplace based activism that enable cross-border activist links to develop across and within sectors.

### ***Four dimensions of labour revitalization***

Whilst each of the analytical frameworks given for the six union strategies offer a way of characterising developments within them the authors of *Varieties of Unionism* still need an analytical tool by which assess the extent to which revitalization is happening for each. This is provided by Behrens *et al.* (2004) who point to four dimensions across which revitalization can occur. These are: 1. the membership dimension; 2. the economic dimension; 3. the political dimension; and 4. the institutional dimension.

#### **1. The membership dimension**

This breaks down into three aspects: total membership; membership density; and membership composition. In different ways each of these will, in turn, affect organizational resources and mobilising power, legitimacy and representativity, and degrees of internal membership

engagement and participation. This dimension then, is both quantitative and qualitative in its application.

## 2. The economic dimension

This covers the bargaining power of the union, the impact of the union's activities upon wages and the distribution of wealth in society. For this dimension innovations in the techniques used by the union are seen as being a measure of revitalization. Assessments of revitalization for this dimension are also complicated by the fact that revitalization may, in some industrial relations regimes, have more to do with company participation in the appropriate employers' organizations than with membership strength.

## 3. The political dimension

For this dimension revitalization means that the union improves its ability to affect policy processes. This refers to: membership and resource mobilisation for the election of an affiliate party; lobbying within the legislative process in such areas as job market regulation and social entitlement; and work relating to policy implementation and the enforcement of legislation that is in the interests of its members. A union may involve itself in such processes at any level of government from the local, through to the national and the supra-national.

#### 4. The institutional dimension

This dimension covers organizational structures, governance and internal dynamics. Revitalization for this dimension would mean the union becoming more able to adapt to new situations, respond to challenges and adopt new strategies when needed. Such revitalization may be associated with changes in leadership. The authors stress here, also, that revitalization along the institutional dimension is often the result of changes in the other three dimensions they have identified.

These four dimensions will be used to give an assessment of the extent to which trade union internationalism is being revitalized, at the global, European and UK-national levels, in the conclusion to this thesis in Chapter 8.

### ***Chapter 3: Methodology***

This chapter gives an overview and rationale of the decisions made regarding methodology and research procedure. During the initial phase of my research a number of different approaches were trialled without success before I settled upon the semi-structured interview as the main research method. These are described to give a sense of how the methodology evolved. The issues involved in interview based research are discussed in the section following this. The relationship of the research supporting this thesis to these methodological issues is also discussed. Finally, I explore the issues and limitations of my methodology. Factors such as language and terminology, interview setting and cultural and political context are all therefore reflected upon.

#### **Choosing ‘the interview’ as a method**

In the early, experimental, phase of the research a small range of methodologies were considered and tried. Initially I had hoped to use electronic forms of communication and data gathering such as telephone, fax and email to reach trade unions in different parts of the world. I did in fact manage to email a questionnaire to a trade union conference in South Korea. A South Korean contact I had made in the UK and with whom I had maintained an email dialogue, agreed to take my questionnaire to the conference of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). This union is important for the contemporary story of labour internationalism

because of its profile as a union centre that is prepared to reach out to other trade unions around the world. When no questionnaires had been returned after two months, it seemed clear that this was not going to provide a steady and reliable data stream for my research. In fact six completed questionnaires were eventually returned to me nearly seven months later from a group of senior national Australian trade union officers and officials who had attended this conference. By this time decisions about methodology had already been made.

Another method I trialled was on-the-spot interviewing at significant mobilisations that had brought together trade unionists from many countries. I carried out such interviews on the trade union march at the Council of European Ministers in Nice in 2000 and at the European Social Forum in Florence in 2002. These ‘participant-observer’ type interviews were enjoyable to conduct but often took the form of rather hasty and unsystematic conversations in which only the main themes of the excitement of the day were discussed. Selection of interviewees was also problematic in that I simply had to talk to whoever I was able to persuade to give me a few minutes attention. This meant that I found myself talking to a fairly random mix of people with many different sorts of involvement in their organizations. The necessarily short nature of the interviews was also an issue that compounded the problem of randomness and unevenness in the subject matter and quality of the interviews.

Textual data was also considered in the early phase of this work. For several months I systematically collected publications that could be seen as being a part of one of the most significant movements relevant to this research, the Anti-globalisation Movement. In particular the electronic bulletin of the ATTAC movement was routinely archived. In the end, however, it was clear that a major limitation of this method was that coverage of trade union involvement in the movement was restricted to major events in which unions had participated. What they did not capture were undercurrents of thinking, problems and issues and developments that were not obvious to an external observer but that were nonetheless highly significant for this research.

In the end a conventional methodology was adopted as the main means of data capture. This was the semi-structured interview with key trade union actors within their institutional setting. This method was chosen because I was interested in the outlook of trade unionists. I wanted to talk in-depth, directly to people in key positions, as 'insiders' to get a sense of how they emphasised their points, what sort of weight they attached to particular themes, as well as some sense of the emotional meaning of the accounts that they would give. This made issues of 'voice', intonation, mood and gesture important for my interpretation of what was said.

The methodology for the research behind this thesis has been that of obtaining the perceptions, opinions and feelings that trade unionists have of internationalism within their organizations. The aim has been to gain

some sense of what internationalism means to these trade union officials, officers and activists. Their statements were taken at face value. No attempt was made to independently verify the accounts that they have given. Insofar as the research has focused upon organizational and personal *meanings* it can be regarded as a phenomenology. This is true in only a partial sense, however, in that interviewees also gave *information* regarding the history, development and current practice of trade union internationalism. I have made a methodological assumption that, by virtue of the positions that these interviewees hold within their organizations, whether as staff officers and activists or, in some cases, elected representatives, their views do bear some relation to the truth of how things are. There are issues here that do need to be acknowledged. It cannot, of course, be guaranteed that every statement made by each interviewee is factually correct or that it is free of personal or organizational agendas. I cannot, with certainty, rule this out as something that might distort my conclusions. I have, however, tried for all themes to draw upon the testimony of more than one research interviewee in order to minimise this problem.

The interviews were semi-structured. The same interview format was used in every case. The interviewee was asked to carry out a ten minute exercise based upon a questionnaire. This consisted of ten themed statements drawn from the labour internationalism literature. The interviewee was asked to respond to these statements according to their level of agreement or disagreement. A small space was provided for each

statement for the interviewee to elaborate their response if they wished. Once finished, the interview proceeded by looking at the responses with the interviewee and asking them to expand on each. This method gave the interviewees a chance to reflect on each of the themes of inquiry and therefore to give quite full comments and remarks on them. It also ensured that all of the themes were addressed and that more or less the same ground was covered by all of the interviewees. This made the interview style stand a long way from the standardized respondent or survey model, although it was also somewhat more structured than the purely discursive, informant style of conversational interviewing, according to the distinction identified by Powney and Watts (1987). This allowed the interview to gain some depth as it developed whilst also keeping it within the very real time constraints for interviews with people who were very busy.

In all, forty-one trade unionists were interviewed. Three levels were chosen at which to conduct the research interviews. These were: the global; the European; and the UK levels. At the global level thirteen interviews were carried out at the ICFTU, the PSI, UNI and the ITF. For the European level five interviews were carried out at the ETUC, the EMF, EPSU and UNI-Europa. For the UK level twenty-three interviews were carried out with officials, officers and activists within the TUC, Unison, the TGWU, Amicus, the FBU, NATFHE, ASLEF, the RMT, and the GMB. All of the interviews were taped and later professionally



transcribed. The transcriptions were then manually coded and the emerging empirical themes summarised for analysis and interpretation.

### **Perspectives on interview-based research**

The methodological perspective to which my approach bears the closest resemblance is that of ‘interpretivism’ as a branch of ethnography. Following Schutz (1967; 1973) my focus was upon the ‘common-sense’ meanings that themes of internationalism had for these actors. I wanted to know how these people constructed their understanding of the place of trade unions in the world and of themes such as ‘solidarity’, ‘interest’, international links *etc.* I also wanted to have the opportunity to probe further into promising lines of discussion that presented themselves in response to initial inquiry questions. The focus of the inquiry was upon how these trade unionists themselves interpreted their experience, and then how well this fitted with a labour revitalization perspective. The use of ‘the interview’ then was somewhat akin to the approach taken by Spradley (1979) also working within an interpretivist ethnographic background.

This research can also be considered to have some overlaps with the approaches of ‘institutional ethnography’ (Smith 1996; Ng 1995) insofar as the key method used was to interview these actors with respect to their positions within their organizations. The fact that they were all representing their organizations, even if they did also present personal

opinions, brought a level of credibility and authenticity to the findings that have enabled me to treat them as reliable. This, combined with the fact that I have, wherever possible, brought together more than one respondent's views in order to explore and illuminate a theme, means that I can present these findings with some confidence regarding what they represent about the research field itself (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

'The interview' has been critiqued from various standpoints. Scholars working from within a feminist perspective (Oakley 1981; Woolf 1996), for instance, have drawn attention to the reciprocal nature of the interview as a two-way process in which information, ideas and perspectives are exchanged rather than passed from one person (the interviewee) to another (the interviewer). Post-modernists (Stronach and MacLure 1997; Scheurich 1997) have gone further in questioning the very form of the data produced by the interview – often the transcript – as being itself a construct of a complex set of hidden social expectations and rules. They stress the *particularity* of the interview as an event in time that occurs between two or more people in a pre-arranged fashion. The point is that the specificity of the interview raises issues of generalisability, validity and reliability for the method itself.

Although it is true that many factors can influence the content and character of an interview, many of which may be unacknowledged, and even unseen, by the researcher, I believe that these can be countered, as factors that introduce bias, to a large degree. Researcher vigilance and

alertness to the possibility of bias caused by circumstance and interpersonal dynamics are required. I accept that the ‘interview’ is indeed an artificial situation. However, I believe that its strength lies precisely in this. By structuring the interview, preparing carefully for it, and conducting it within parameters and protocols that are understood by both parties involved, it is possible to achieve both reasonably consistent data gathering as well as an ethical research practice. This is less true of un-structured, episodic and conversational forms of information gathering in which the distinction between interviewer and interviewee is blurred. To this end I subscribe to the simple definitions of ‘the interview’ offered by Pole and Lampard (2002) that it is:

*A verbal exchange of information between two or more people for the principal purpose of one gathering information from the other(s)* (Pole and Lampard 2002: 126)

and by Cohen and Manion (1989) whose definition adds greater emphasis to the deliberate nature of the interview as an event and to the active role of the interviewer. This says that the interview is:

*... initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research relevant information and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation* (Cohen and Manion 1989: 307)

I do believe, however, that potentially biasing factors need to be acknowledged. This is what I seek to do below for what I saw as being the most important contextual factors.

### **Issues and limitations**

A number of issues do arise from the nature of this research and its conduct. Firstly it will be noted that the numbers of interviews carried out for each of the levels of the research are not the same. Far fewer interviews, for example, were carried out at the European level than at the global or the UK-national levels. This reflected limitations of access. Requests for interviews on the topic of trade union internationalisation met with far more success at the latter two levels than at the European level. It also reflected limitations to do with opportunities to travel. Two trips abroad – one to UNI in Geneva and to the PSI in Fernay-Voltaire, France and a second to the ICFTU in Brussels - were possible for interviews at the global level. Only one trip abroad – to the ETUC, EPSU, UNI-Europa, and the EMF, all in Brussels - proved to be possible for the European level over the active data-collecting research period. More interviews were carried out at the UK-national level than at the other two levels. This reflected ease of access in many senses. Interviews within the UK had also been organized into three levels. These were the national; the North West regional; and the branch levels. There had been an initial ambition to incorporate five levels of analysis into the thesis.

This proved to be too large an undertaking, however and, for the purposes of analysis and thesis structure the UK-national interviews were collapsed in one thesis section. This was another reason, however, why far more interviews had been conducted at this level.

The political and ideological background against which this interview based research began was distinctive and significant for the main themes of inquiry. The first interviews conducted with officers at the ICFTU, and indeed the first major interviews carried out for the research programme, took place from the 10 September 2001. The following day, in the middle of a research interview, news came through of the first of the passenger planes to hit the World Trade Centre buildings in New York. Minutes later I found myself watching the second plane strike in a hastily convened television room with youth delegates from around the world who were present for an ICFTU youth congress. The discussions that morning were memorable for the immediacy of the responses to those calamitous events. They ranged across many subjects from speculations regarding the likelihood of war, comments upon the inequalities upon which the world is based and the importance of labour internationalism and solidarity as a response to what was occurring. What was to become known as '9/11' became, from that moment on, a ubiquitous background theme, if not a foreground focus of discussion, for much of the rest of the research.

As mentioned a little earlier, nearly all of the interviews were carried out at the offices of the interviewees. This was a deliberate strategy. Occasionally interviewees did offer more 'relaxed' environments in which to conduct the interview. In each case I pressed to have the interview take place in a more official setting. I wanted the interviewees to be self-aware of speaking in their official capacity in order to obtain an institutional viewpoint from them. In fact most interviewees moved in and out of the 'official voice' as they presented both their professional or 'representative' views and also ventured more personal opinions and perspectives. In both cases, however, my interest lay in the ways in which they made sense of the international practice of their unions, both as official representatives and as individuals. In reality it was clear that both kinds of perspective were usually linked for each individual interviewee.

I did consider factors of gender and ethnicity in that I endeavoured to achieve as even a mix as I could. In reality, however the main factor that determined who I interviewed, along with the actual gender and ethnic composition of officers at each of the levels I was working at, was that of simple availability. I was not able in the end to interview any minority ethnic trade unionists. I did interview women trade unionists, though they were few in number. In both cases this does reflect a disproportion of representative positions in trade union organizations and membership compositions. In all cases I interviewed using the same format and focused upon the *institutional* level of the position that the person occupied in guiding my lines of inquiry during the interview.

The ethical considerations for the research were restricted to assurances that comments that might be considered to have been contentious within the person's union would not be quoted or referred to outside of the academic domain, for instance in other interviews within the same organization. In the main interviewees, having agreed to be interviewed, in fact seemed confident of their opinions and self-assured. These were people who were used to giving their opinions and had no apparent difficulty in expressing them. In reflecting back upon this work I find myself asking why I did not pay more systematic attention to my own position as an academic as a factor in the interview process. It is clear to me however, that in no case did I have the feeling of being intimidating to a research interviewee. In all cases the interviewees were strongly grounded in their own experience as trade unionists and tended to speak very cogently and even forcefully on the main interview themes. I did make sure that each interviewee was comfortable with my using a tape recorder to record the interview. No objection was made or even hinted by any of the interviewees.

Another consideration for the methodology employed for this research is that of my own personal background and interests. I myself have been an active trade unionist for most of my adult life and have occupied several positions at branch and regional level in a local government union and in a teaching union. I have also been involved in many debates about, solidarity gestures towards and actions around the struggles of workers in

other countries. I am what might be called an ‘enthusiastic’ trade unionist and internationalist. Whilst always striving to present a neutral face as a researcher, with the consistency of the research format in mind, inevitably my knowledge of the subject, my ability to relate to stories of solidarity that I myself had taken part in and to probe certain lines of inquiry in an informed manner, as well as the ups and downs of animation in the interview conversation, betrayed my particular passion for the subject from time to time. I can only say that I worked hard to keep this to a minimum and to take it into account when analysing the data, taking care for instance to find corroborating evidence from different interviews where my own enthusiasm may have inadvertently encouraged a particular theme.

One area where a number of issues arose was that of language. This can be broken down in a number of ways. It needs to be acknowledged, for instance that all of the interviews were conducted in English. This simply reflects my own limitations in speaking no other language. This was a clearly an issue for access, certainly at the global and European levels. It meant, for example, that at the global level a disproportionate number of the interviewees were Australian, North American, New Zealander, or British. Other interviewees at this level, were Norwegian, French and Belgian. They all, however, spoke noticeably good English. This issue was also apparent at the European level. One interviewee for instance was Irish and one was British. The other interviewees at this level were French and Belgian. Given the fact that issues of language and cultural



nuance and political sensitivity were a part of the findings of this research it important to note that it cannot be ruled out as having been a distorting factor in the research itself.

Language is also an issue in how this material has been processed and interpreted. Given that the interview material was taken largely at face value, since the aim was precisely to assess the level of agreement between how these interviewees described their own experience and perceptions, and labour revitalization theory, it proved necessary to work with a high level of tolerance to issues of linguistic expression and terminological precision. In other words, terms were often used loosely or with populist meanings that ignored the academic debate. An important example for this whole area is that of the term ‘globalisation’ and its corollary ‘anti-globalisation’. The term ‘globalisation’ in its more academic and disputed meaning is discussed in a short chapter that follows this discussion on methodology. This chapter is included in order to acknowledge the special, yet contested, status of ‘globalisation’ for research in this field generally.

An early decision was made not to pursue a critique of the term ‘globalisation’ for this specific research. For the conduct of interviews it was thought likely to create an impediment to discussion. Rather, it was decided to accept that the term has both a contentious position in academic debate *and* a broad and commonly accepted meaning in society. This latter meaning was taken to encompass notions of moves

towards open global markets, US ascendancy in the world, the rise of powerful MNCs, the new prominence of bodies such as the WTO and the IMF and the breaking down of national economic borders and the power of national governments. Similarly, the term ‘Anti-globalisation Movement’ has been used both by interviewees and therefore also within the thesis, in its commonly understood sense. This has been taken to be an understanding informed by opposition to the power of MNCs, a generalised hostility to the WTO and IMF, a desire to protect the environment and the media image of a youthful, dynamic and colourful movement.

The terms ‘labour internationalism’ and ‘trade union internationalism’ have been used interchangeably in this thesis. Within the labour internationalism literature distinctions are made between these, with the former often having a wider meaning that takes in the outlooks of working people who are not necessarily members of trade unions. The term ‘working class internationalism’ has sometimes been used here in this wider sense. The terms ‘transnationalism’ and ‘cross-border organizing’ are used where the activity concerned occurs with a defined region, perhaps even between only two countries. The common meaning behind all of these terms, of course, is that of trade unionists engaging in activities and communications that have a dynamic that transcends their national borders to at least some degree. Again, flowing from the logic of the research methodology and the conduct of the research interviews, it is

with this simple and common understanding that these terms have normally been used.

## ***Chapter 4: A note on ‘globalisation’***

A special case of the issues of language discussed in Chapter 3 is that of the term ‘globalisation’. The influence of globalisation theory as a model for understanding our world is certainly of relevance to the study of international labour affairs. For the purposes of this thesis, however, it will be treated as having background relevance. The approach being employed for this research is that of focusing attention on the relationship between interviewees’ own interpretations of labour internationalism and categories drawn from the field of labour revitalization. It is not that of critiquing the language of labour internationalism itself. For this reason the term ‘globalisation’ is accepted in the sense (common-sense) that interviewees have used it. The term is used frequently in interview quotes, usually to refer to competition for world markets and expansions of world trade, and in my own comments where I am referring to what someone has said or to its general usage. For my own analytical discussion, mindful of its disputed status, I avoid the term, preferring alternatives such as ‘internationalisation’, or ‘world markets’. This said, it is also important to both acknowledge the debate and to give a brief overview of it as a significant normative factor in the framing of how the position of trade unions in society is understood, as well as how it relates to discussions of labour internationalism and labour studies more broadly.

For some theorists the internationalisation of the world economy, particularly in the form of the growth of MNCs from the late 1960s

onwards, provided the basis of a new era of labour internationalism and multi-national collective bargaining (MNCB) (*e.g.* Levinson 1972). This approach flows directly from a tendency to see capitalist economic forms as *the* determinants of trade union practice. So, earlier in the history of trade unionism national capitalist development has been seen as the basis of trade union protectionism (Olle and Schoeller 1977). More recently, even amongst theorists who are critical of globalisation theory, there is a tendency to accept its basic tenets as true. For some, globalisation is providing the basis for a recovery of working class politics (Meiskins Wood 1997). Others see globalisation as having thrown traditional forms of labour organization and solidarity into crisis and look to newly emergent forms (Hyman 1999). Still others see globalisation as having created a crisis for national forms of trade union organization which has, in turn, made a more internationalised trade unionism necessary (Taylor 1999; Ramsay 1999; Hodgkinson, 2002). But whatever the response, the concept has become pervasive in the field of labour studies.

At the most general level the concept of ‘globalisation’, as both a descriptive and an explanatory device, is constituted in the following way. After a historically unprecedented long post-war period of economic expansion characterised by intensive national infra-structural capital investment significant changes began to challenge the corporatist consensus some time around the early to mid-1970s. The rising profile of trans-national companies (TNCs) and MNCs in terms of both market reach and of the proliferation of sites of production offered an

opportunity to governments increasingly concerned with attracting foreign domestic investment (FDI) as well as posing a threat to nationally based industries. The dramatic growth of the financial markets in this period, along with the end of fixed exchange rates in 1971, also provided a major stimulus to the growth of a much more speculative form of capitalism than had hitherto been seen, as well as providing a source of fluid capital for lending *via* the major Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs). The combination of these economic realities produced key changes in industrial and social policy in both the industrialised North and the much less developed South. The order of the day became one of orientation towards export markets, franchising out, downsizing of scales and the development of leaner production techniques in industry, reductions in capital overhead costs in the form of public sector and welfare cuts, aggressive and conflictual industrial relations policies and high levels of borrowing particularly by the poorer countries.

These economic changes also had social and cultural consequences as the breaking down of Keynesian regulatory mechanisms and the rolling back of market protection. This enhanced a process within which globalising forces began to smooth out the differences between countries at the national-structural level. Indeed erosion of the institutions of public life and civil society within the nation state increasingly registered at the levels of community and individual identity. Changing mind-sets, driven by these de-localizing tendencies, were accelerated by leaps in communications technology, particularly, though not exclusively, in the

form of the internet. This 'smoothing-out' process also took the form of diasporas and cultural fusions as well as frictions and backlashes. Micklethwaite and Wooldridge (1996) have described one example of this process, and its economic and social significance, in relation to the spread of Chinese communities throughout South East Asia.

The effect of these shifts, according to the orthodox theory, has been the emergence of a new paradigm of economic, political, social and cultural realities. Held *et al.* (1997a; 1997b) have attempted to provide a coherent conceptual framework which captures the key elements of globalisation theory. They point to four related aspects: extensification; intensification; velocity; impact. By extensification the authors describe the ways in which commodity and social relations have spread around the globe. The complexities of global manufacturing and trade as well as the movements of people in search of work have stretched the social relations which previously typified nation states. At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, the exchanges by which global trade and communications proceed have increased in frequency. This applies to financial transaction, commodity exchange and to actual communication between individuals. The speed with which goods and information flow around the world has also increased. Finally, changes in communications technology have brought an 'instantaneous' quality to life in the globalised world. Events in one part of the world are relayed almost immediately to every other part of the world in a manner which has profound effects on political emotions as well as on markets. Equally

decisions taken in one part of the world, usually the wealthier and more politically powerful, can have major impacts on the lives of people in the most remote locations to it.

Other authors have either added to this list or have observed the same phenomena differently. Thus some have talked of ‘time-space distancing’ (Giddens 1990) or ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey: 1989) Cultural geographers such as Tomlinson (1999) have described a ‘deterritorialization’ by which cultural forms are uprooted from their origins and re-embedded in new places. A complementary trend to this is the tendency for more and more locally situated people to think and communicate – reflexively - at the global scale (Beck 1992). The changing dialectic between the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ has been a conspicuous theme, as has an interest in the adjustments of economic, social and political scale which have mediated this process (*e.g.* Swyngedouw 1997). Some have insisted on conceptualisation of a sort that combines both the global and the local in a more unified and depolarised analysis. Robertson (1992) has suggested the term ‘glocalisation’ to capture this idea. For some the increasingly porous nature of borders has become the key site of analysis. This interest in ‘trans-border’ or ‘cross-border’ activity, whether of commerce, legislation or organization, reveals a desire to ground an understanding of globalization in more locally concrete studies (*e.g.* Sassen 2000). Another focus has been on the rise of new or newly significant institutions of governance which operate above the level of national governments



through global networks of influence and communication which they control (Castells 1996).

It would be wrong to suggest that any stable consensus exists as to the reality of globalisation or indeed the meaning of the term. At least three positions on globalisation are discernable. First, there are the 'hyper-globalists' (e.g. O'Brien 1992; Grieder, 1995; Ohmae 1990). Amongst these theorists the view tends to be that globalisation is a historically novel and unstoppable, technologically driven phenomenon which is taking humanity into a thoroughly new and uncharted epoch. A second position can be described as 'rejectionist' or 'sceptical' (eg, Weiss 1998; Gilpin, 2000; Hirst and Thompson 1996; Krasner 1999). For these writers globalisation is at best an exaggerated phenomenon with a plethora of historical precedents and at worst is a constructed myth designed to mask a capitalist offensive concerned with nothing but the maximisation of profits. In between there are a group of writers who regard globalisation as the dominant transformative process of our times. (Mann 1993; Giddens 1999; Castells 1996; Held *et al.* 1999; Rosenau 1998) Such writers stress the interaction occurring between new and old structures, the reconfiguration of the role of the nation state, the centrifugal and centripetal forces occurring within changing economic realities and the open ended and contested nature of current trends in world affairs.

What is beyond doubt, however, is the ways in which 'globalisation' as a term has entered the general language of politicians and opinion formers

on every level and has come to form a sort of common sense used to describe what is different about the world from the way it used to be. By the mid 1990s, from being a term of summary description it had become firmly established as a prime cause in and of itself. In his speech to the Keidanren in Tokyo, in January of 1996, Tony Blair declared that the “driving force of economic change today is globalisation”. This globalised world, for Blair was one in which “capital and technology are mobile ... (and) people are our key resource”. The only way forward then was ‘to accept globalisation and work with it’ (quoted in Froud *et al.* 1996:8). Another apostle of globalisation was the American President, Bill Clinton. By the end of his presidency despite the emergence of a significant oppositional movement which was beginning to temper some of the rhetoric coming from political leaders, Clinton’s basic enthusiasm was unabated.

*I think we have got to reaffirm unambiguously that open markets and rules-based trade are the best engine we know of to lift living standards, reduce environmental destruction and build shared prosperity. This is true whether you’re in Detroit, Davos, Dacca or Dakar. Worldwide, open markets do create jobs. They do raise incomes. They do spark innovation and spread new technology ... Let me be clear: I do not agree with those who say we should halt the work of the WTO, or postpone a new trade round. But I do not agree with those who view with contempt the new forces seeking to*

*be heard in the global dialogue. Globalization is empowering people with information, everywhere. (Clinton 2000)*

By the turn of the century Clinton's gesture of recognition to protest movements, which were raising concerns about the directions that world economic policy was taking, was becoming developed into a more nuanced way of talking about globalisation itself. Globalisation was perhaps something that could be 'guided' or 'moulded' to curb its most aggressive and nakedly capitalist excesses. Announcing the UK government's White Paper on globalisation the UK government minister, Claire Short, called for a "tide of public opinion that will shape globalisation to benefit humanity" (Short 2000:3). Similarly the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, also commenting on the UK government's White Paper, opined that "To get the best out of globalisation we must learn how to govern better at local and national levels" (Anan 2000:1). Even amongst those theorists who deplored the effects of the end of the welfarist consensus there was scorn for the notion that globalisation was not a real phenomenon:

*The view of globalization advanced by academic sceptics ... underestimates the novelty of late twentieth century conditions.... Like the hyperglobalizers, whose Utopian fantasies they effectively criticize, globalization sceptics are trading in illusions. (Gray 1999)*

The underlying message was that globalisation itself was now a fact of life. This thoroughgoing acceptance of the reality of globalisation, along with the darkly pessimistic mind-set that often accompanied it, was nowhere more present than in trade union movements around the world. The intensification of competition to attract investment had produced a punishing logic for labour. In the scramble to win and keep jobs trade unions had become supine before the all conquering power of the MNCs and TNCs which were now able to demand the most exploitative conditions for labour and the giving up of social protections for working class people. Labour leaders the world over reluctantly announced the grim news. In the words of the Zwelinzima Vavi, General Secretary of COSATU, one of the more robust of the national trade union federations:

*Globalisation is an objective reality we face and it is here to stay ... The challenge is not to push our heads into the sand like an ostrich or wish it away. The greatest challenge to human kind as we move closer to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is to make globalisation relevant to the ordinary people of the world. Currently it is not regarded as the saviour of human kind but as the destruction of the gains won by the working people through many hard years of struggle and sacrifices. (Vavi 1999)*

As noted earlier, this pervasive and casual use of the term ‘globalisation’ has suggested a consensus regarding its meaning and status which was

not shared by its authors. Nonetheless it has also attested to the extent to which the concept has permeated much of the thinking of trade union leaders around the world, and the degree to which it has come to assume the status of a kind of common sense in the world of trade unionism.

## ***Chapter 5: Revitalization and labour internationalism at the global level***

Frege and Kelly (2003:8) have suggested that “unions are likely to repeat well-worn behavioural patterns in responding to new challenges, rather than risking new strategies” when organizational structures are rigid, when leaderships are weak and when imagination is lacking. Such conditions lead unions into conservative rather than innovative responses. The evidence from the research carried out for this thesis suggests that this is not true of contemporary union activity at the international level. Indeed quite the contrary. The research has revealed that the work that is going on to meet the challenges of change in the world in fact makes a ‘revitalization’ framing appropriate for most of the union strategies considered.

This chapter will explore the ways in which trade union activity at the global level can be said to fit into a ‘revitalization’ perspective. It will relate the evidence gleaned from research interviews with senior figures within the ICFTU, the new Global Union Federations (GUFs) and the older International Trade Union Secretariats (ITSs)<sup>3</sup>. It will cover themes such as: shifts towards the international and global scales in union work; the position of unions in relation to MNCs; union responses to change; the erosion of long standing sectoral boundaries; the role of ideology; shifts towards organizing models of trade unionism and towards worker-

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<sup>3</sup> Where both Global Union Federations and International Trade Secretariats are being referred to, the term ‘global unions’ will be used for convenience.

mobilisation; generational dynamics; changing intellectual perspectives; and innovations in trade union practice. It will also address areas where there are obstacles and complexities to the ability of international unions to take up and exploit the opportunities presented.

## **Union strategies**

### **Organizing**

In the analytical framework that Herry and Adler (2004) propose for assessing the revitalizing potential of organizing strategies for unions resource allocation, the targeting of work upon certain union priorities or membership groups and the methods used are all highlighted. In the research interview material the theme of affiliate and worker-member mobilisation stand out as having particular relevance. This touches upon all these three elements of the framework. The mobilising tendencies discussed gave clear evidence of the strategic shifting of organizational resources. 'Targeting' was also evident in the efforts that are being made by global unions to reach new layers of hitherto unorganized groups. Of special significance is the work that is being undertaken to improve recruitment amongst young workers. This aspect to targeting, under Herry and Adler's framework could be considered 'close expansion' through which recruitment in sectors in which the union already has members is improved, or as 'field enlargement' in which new social groups are reached, depending on the particular characteristics of the

union's work that are emphasised. Mobilising also fits into this framework when it is seen as an attempt to improve membership participation. This also means that it fits best when interpreted as being a part of an 'organizing' as opposed to a 'service' model of union work.

### ***Mobilising affiliates***

A new orientation on mobilising was a conspicuous theme within most of the interviews that were conducted at the global level. This evidenced revitalisation tendencies within the international trade union bodies in relation to membership – both that of organizational affiliates and the worker-members of those affiliates. This is a significant theme insofar as it marks a contrast with the orientations of the social democratic international unions, principally the ICFTU and the various sectoral ITSs, in the era of classical corporatism. In this, latter, period the predominant mode of operation for international unions was that of regulationist lobbying and inter-union diplomacy. One important exception to this was the case of the apartheid regime in South Africa against which UK unions did regularly mobilise their members. According to these interviewees, it is in the era of neo-liberalism that international unions have been more generally prepared to mobilise affiliates and, where possible bring worker-members out onto the streets. This was reported as being evidence of a new sense of commonality amongst the national affiliates of international union bodies who feel that they have more to genuinely and actively unite over than before. Moreover, many interviewees



conveyed a sense of international trade union bodies acting more like trade unions in the traditional sense, as opposed to being merely adjuncts to their national affiliates, playing essentially an ancillary symbolic role.

The involvement of international unions in real struggles has become much more pronounced with the rising profile of global institutions such as the WTO and other IFIs. There is a clear view that the challenge of privatisation cannot be met at the national level alone and that battles against neo-liberalism that remain purely at the national level are unlikely to be very effective. This is, in turn, based upon a view that the motivations and key policy drivers in neo-liberal national domestic agendas are actually not located entirely at the national level, but in fact are often located rather at the global and regional trans-national levels.

*It doesn't matter how strong you are in the UK or the US or Scandinavia. You can't deal with the likes of the World Bank effectively. That's got to be done on a global basis. (MW)*

An important focus for this mobilising tendency was said to have been to do with privatisation drives by national governments pursuing neo-liberal political and economic agendas. This has involved many national affiliates and union centres confronting such waves of privatisation at more or less the same time and certainly within the same time-span measured in years. This is an area where commonalities are to the fore for

public sector unions particularly, as well as for those working in other sectors that became involved through community struggles.

*The way in which people have organized against privatisation is much more vigorous than used to be the case ten or fifteen years ago. People really are prepared to go on strike for that. There are real mass mobilisations. They've managed to form good coalitions with community groups and so there is very popular support for the kinds of actions that our people want to take. In fact our people are often just part of much wider community actions. So there are several countries where people have taken strong action against privatisation. (MW)*

Important examples were given of global unions playing an active role in the local struggles of their affiliates fighting against privatisation. One powerful example is that of the fight of the PSI affiliate, Sintra-Emcali in Cali, Columbia, against the local state's attempt to de-regulate all government service provision, announced on Christmas Day 2003. This announcement led to a dramatic occupation of government buildings by Emcali employees against a backdrop of severe government repression against trade unionists. Another PSI affiliate, the British union, Unison, together with the PSI, organized a video link-up, from the unions' head offices in London, with the occupying workers. This kind of action, in directly linking with real struggles and using modern information technology to make links in 'real-time', was said to be crucial in

exposing the behaviour of the local state to international scrutiny as well as boosting the morale of the workers involved.

Global union officers say that they are finding themselves called upon to play much more serious roles in the real business of their national affiliates. The Assistant General Secretary at UNI-Postal contrasted this situation with that in the corporatist period in which the international trade union movement was a “Robin Hood movement”. During this era affiliates in the North would give financial and moral support to unions in the South. The international unions would be, in effect, the vehicle for this support, playing the role of mediating organizations. The situation today, he explained was very different. Crucially, this meant that the demands being placed upon international union bodies were coming from unions in the North as well as unions in the South. UNI he went on, in supporting unions in the North, is involved in processes that interface between unions within the EU, the European Commission and EWCs as well as with MNCs and employers’ organizations. International unions are also finding themselves increasingly called upon to play key roles in industrial struggles in which their affiliates are involved. Often these roles include the trans-national coordination of the actions themselves. A good example was given by the Deputy General Secretary of the ITF:

*We’ve had a lot of small disputes where we have made a fundamental difference. We had good one last year with Maerlev in Hungary. It’s an airline. Maerlev got into this big*

*dispute with its ground staff – the people who maintain the aircraft. Maerlev said ‘we’ll have our aircraft serviced in Austria and Germany and Poland’. Well luckily the union called us and we called our affiliates in Poland, Austria and Germany and within 12 hours they had been refused anywhere. Suddenly Maerlev had its planes grounded and had to negotiate with the union. (DC)*

In particular industries global unions have also involved themselves in efforts towards achieving regulation that have yielded results. This work has, for example, led in some cases to employers grouping themselves internationally into sectoral employers’ bodies in order to negotiate with international union organizations. In the transport sector for example, companies, if they negotiated at all, had tended to do so unilaterally. They were now reported to be more inclined to negotiate as a group of companies. In the shipping industry the International Maritime Employers Committee (IMEC), which negotiates with the ITF, has grown from a small employers’ association to one that represents eighty companies including the employers on around half of the six thousand ships covered by ITF agreements.

### ***Mobilising workers***

In a situation of increased demand from affiliates in every part of the world, international representative bodies need to be confident that they

are in touch with the needs and agendas of national unions and that they are communicating effectively with them. Mobilisation was said to be one means by which international union organizations are doing this today.

One stated purpose of this mobilising tendency is to engage with worker-members. Related to this is an understanding that mobilisation through such things as days-of-action and involvement in the industrial struggles of national affiliates, raises the profile of global unions and is itself a form of communication and dissemination of information. This also points to a changing sense of the *raison d'être* of the international unions. Whereas, in the corporatist era, engagement with worker-members was, at best, a secondary consideration and seen as something that was primarily the job of national unions, more recently global unions have felt the need to be more connected to, and visible amongst, worker-members, and certainly activists within the work-place.

Apart from 'closing-the-gap' between international and local structures interviewees within the global unions expressed a desire to build a greater sense of unified identity and purpose amongst their affiliates as well as across sectors.

*Mobilising the national centres of the affiliates is really growing in importance. The more we mobilise together the*

*more we can speak with one voice as an international trade union movement. (MW)*

This shift is connected to two pressing and related concerns. The first is the historic decline of union membership world-wide. The second is the poor performance of the trade union movement in appealing to younger workers, and the consequent deterioration of the demographic age profile of average trade union memberships. These two related areas are also identified by Frege and Kelly (2003) as being key amongst the ‘problems’ for trade unionism that revitalization strategies are designed to address. Frege and Kelly also, nonetheless, point out the need for an interpretative understanding of the statistics for trade union membership since the meaning of low union membership density varies from one national context to the next. Still, membership decline is seen as one of the most important, if not *the* most important challenges that the international trade unions must face. One senior officer at the ICFTU put it as follows:

*There has been a historical decline in union memberships and it took some time for that to really feed through to changes in union culture. The change has been from a service culture in which you look after the members you already have got in terms of benefits and so on, to one that says you have to go out and bring new members in. It has been slow but that*

*has been the most important change. This has had an impact at the international level. (MW)*

The need for unions to campaign at the ‘grass-roots’ within their organizations in order to appeal to youth, was also emphasised by the Information and IT Coordinator at the ICFTU.

*We’ve spent a lot of time working directly with youth representatives inside trade unions. They’re not the international secretaries and not the national secretaries and very often they’re not even coming from a national centre. So these people can get quite close to the grass-roots. They have been helping the ICFTU to run a campaign to persuade affiliates who have not yet made a priority of youth that they should do. As we all know youth membership’s falling and is one of the reasons why union membership all over the world is falling. (DP)*

Senior staff officers and officials of several international unions talked about the increased importance of days-of-action that they described as being a more frequent feature of the union calendar. Again imaginative use of the internet is changing the experience of such actions for those taking part. The Deputy General Secretary of the ITF explained the way in which the instant communication made possible by the internet was

used to create a sense of pace and excitement over the course of a day-of-action. Actions that began as the morning sun rose in Tokyo could be communicated to each city in turn around the world as the day wore on, and finish by being announced at concluding rallies and events in Los Angeles.

### *Activist networks and the impact of the internet*

The formation of international groups of activists which organize around new industrial formations has been a feature of the raised profile of the global unions amongst their national affiliates. The ITF again, gives some examples of this. In the airline industry, for instance, ‘solidarity networks’ of activists work around and within new employer bodies, such as the Star Alliance and the One World Alliance.

This ‘new wave’ of organizing and mobilisation goes hand in hand with new activist networks, made possible, in part, by the internet. The rise of networked ways of cross-border working has itself attracted a great deal of attention within the literature on labour internationalism, as well as that of labour revitalization. Networks, for example, are seen by some as being the organizational form that has facilitated the interaction of unions with social movements (Pollack 1999; Stillerman 2003). The internet has been the technological communicative medium for these networked forms of activism. In the following quote the Deputy General Secretary of the ITF describes the way in which the secretariat is increasingly



facilitating contact between activists who can share information and organize together effectively.

*Companies are buying subsidiaries in the States, in New Zealand and in Australia and we are putting together the people who work with those companies – like shop stewards. More and more they're swapping information with each other every day. We're not controlling it – we are aware of what's going on – we are not controlling it. But it's a very, very interesting thing to see going on. (DC)*

The rise of the internet as a medium for grass-roots political and trade union activism, then, is a timely development for the global unions and one that was consistently reported as being tremendously enabling for the new processes at play. The themes of the use of the internet, new activist networks and youth recruitment referred to above, fuse together in the following comment by an interviewee at the ICFTU:

*On the ICFTU website I have tried to make the pages attractive to younger trade unionists. I got an email network going. The email network meant that people were receiving updates on campaigns or recent publications or the youth magazine. A lot of young trade unionists used this kind of information for communications as well as for the activities they were organizing. It has been one of the most successful*

*campaigns because it really led to real activities in about 50 countries. (MK)*

But crucial to an understanding of the impact of the internet on international union affairs is an appreciation of how its role has interacted with mobilisation and broader union activity. The internet, in this perspective, is not merely to do with the communication of information. It is rather, a part of the new mobilising tendencies that characterise the work of the global unions. As such it needs to be seen as an important element in the revitalization of trade unionism at the global scale.

‘Real-time’ involvements in the struggles, actions and business of national affiliates is taking many forms. Again, this has been enormously aided by the emergence of the internet. One interviewee at the PSI expanded the meaning of ‘mobilisation’ to include the increasingly active role of global unions in the negotiations of national affiliates with employers and their representative bodies. An example given was that of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) running ICT programmes that supported African affiliates in their bargaining with employers and government bodies. This programme represented a genuine innovation in providing an immediate-response service to ensure that essential factual information, intelligence and advice was on hand, when it was needed, to strengthen the affiliate’s position at crucial stages in negotiations.

The importance placed upon the rise of the internet by international union organizations is supported by an expanding literature on the subject. The theorisation of the internet and its importance for international labour organization was pioneered by Eric Lee in his 1997 publication *The Labour Movement and the Internet: The New Internationalism*. Lee concluded his book by proposing that the internet held out the prospect of the re-birth of the vision of a globally united working class movement that could respond to the challenges of the post-Cold War era:

*The 'new world order' is giving birth to a new internationalism. Participants in the international labour movement have begun to transcend their own local and national limitations and feel themselves to be part of a global community based not on language or skin colour, but social class – and a vision of a new society.*

*Thanks to the Internet, a century long decline in internationalism has already been reversed. For thousands of trade unionists who log on every day, the International has already been reborn. (Lee 1997: 186)*

Others have speculated on the potential that the internet offers for improving the representation of previously marginalized groups within

the trade union movement (Greene and Kirton 2003). The possibilities for adapting the internet to specifically trade union purposes has also been explored by Diamond and Freeman (2002). This again fits with the 'membership expansion' aspect of revitalization identified by Heery and Adler (2004). They identify such possible adaptations as: the development of virtual unions where employer recognition does not exist; the enhancement of union democracy; supportive intervention during industrial disputes; and improving communications across the international labour community. The same authors also, however, conceptualised the internet as a 'threat' to trade unions insofar as it carries with it the potential to replace many of the services and roles traditionally provided by trade union organizations. The note of caution here is echoed by researchers who have stressed the importance of an appreciation of complex character of the impact of the internet, and of the cultural and political context within which the internet is used, in assessing its emancipatory potential. The simple availability of ICT hardware, for example, is only one factor in determining whether the opportunities offered by the internet are really taken up and used by trade unions in ways that can take international labour practice forward into a new era. Despite claims for the subversive potential of the internet that fact remains that in conditions of political repression its democratising impact is severely restricted (Kluver and Banerjee 2005). Other factors that have been identified as mediating, and sometimes limiting, the impact of internet-based forms of communication have been communications strategies, forms of internal democracy and political

culture (Martínez Lucio 2003) as well as access to training for union activists (Hertenstein and Chaplan 2005).

### *Summary*

The willingness of the international unions to engage with national trade unions in action and activity and the encouragement of worker-activists to form trans-national networks provide evidence of a strategic shift in the direction of organizing and mobilising. It also presents a more energetic picture of international trade unionism than that which prevailed for much of the post-War period. This, more robust, style of international unionism again suggests that far from it being characterised by atrophy or reflex and reactive responses, it is rather entering a phase in which its structures and processes are indeed becoming revitalised at various levels of activity.

### Organizational restructuring

For this strategy two key themes emerged. The first was that mergers have played a significant role in the organizational restructuring of international trade union organizations in recent years. Secondly, the impact of ICT has been significant in its impact upon internal processes and work patterns. These, in turn, relate well to the two key aspects of revitalization that Behrens, Hurd and Waddington (2004) highlight for this strategy. Firstly there is ‘external’ restructuring by which unions alter

the boundaries of their operations. This relates clearly to union merger. Secondly there is 'internal' restructuring which covers the two separately identified aspects of union governance and union administration. The changes introduced by ICT applications are relevant to both of these aspects.

### ***Union merger***

There are several examples of mergers at the level of the international trade unions. Frequently these examples grew out of the experience of the rise of MNCs as key global actors. In fact, the importance attached to the growth of MNCs as providing the key motivation for a new era of international trade union practice has been challenged by those who point to the relative *insignificance* of MNC activity in relation to the world economy as a whole and within the largest economies such as those of the US and Japan (*e.g.* Harrod and O'Brien 2002:14). Nonetheless, rapid technological change in some sectors, economic deregulation, the emergence of powerful MNCs and changes in state industrial relations regimes and employer strategies were all said to have led to responses on the part of global unions.

International trade union bodies were consistently described as adapting to changing realities that threatened to make old ways of working redundant. A part of this story has been a pattern of amalgamation by ITSs into the much larger GUFs. Examples have included the formation

of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Union (ICEM) in 1995 from the Chemical, Energy and Allied Workers International (ICEF) and the Miners' International Federation (MIF) and the International Union of Food-workers (IUF) that grew from a merger of workers in the food, restaurant and agricultural sectors in 1994. A further example is that of the founding of UNI in 2000. The following account of the organizational rationale, history and emergence of UNI as a new GUF, illustrates some of the ways in which international union organizations have adapted to technological changes and the sectoral realignments consequent upon them.

The historical roots of UNI lie in the Post, Telegraph and Telephone International which later became the Communications International. The transition from a relatively protected, public sector, infra-structural industry, into an intensively competitive and technologically fast moving private sector industry created shifts in thinking within trade unions in the communications sector. Overlaps began to become apparent between a number of sub-sectors including telecoms, cable television and electricity supply companies that had not been so obvious previously. The levels of trade union membership and organization in these private sector industries were low. The threat of membership loss and sectoral shifts led to talks between unions in the communications sector and unions such as the Media and Entertainment International (MEI) which organized workers in television, radio and theatre who were not actors or musicians. The principle driving force behind these talks was the emergence of cable

television as a newly emergent industrial sector. These talks broadened out to include graphical workers in the print industry.

From around 1997 the pace of these changes began to speed up. Three motivating factors were at play: technological change; privatisation; and deregulation. These processes worked in conjunction with an increasing internationalisation of the sectors involved as newly privatised companies, released from their national regulatory frameworks, launched themselves onto world markets. Changes in information technology were also affecting the working and business patterns, as well as the sectoral position of companies that worked in the financial sector. Banks, insurance companies and stock trading companies began to employ telecom and internet-based systems in order to trade. These infrastructural changes once more increased the momentum of change for international communications trade union bodies and talks began with FIET, the largest of the component bodies that were to soon form UNI.

These sorts of changes led in many cases to workers being transferred directly from public sector employment to private sector employment. The old demarcation between public and private sector membership and representation was becoming less and less relevant, or indeed real, for the national affiliates of the four international trade union bodies of the Communications International, the International Federation of Commercial, Clerical, Professional and Technical Employees (FIET), the International Graphical Federation and the MEI. These bodies were to



merge, after eighteen months of negotiations, to become UNI in January 2000.

There has been a trend also of small ITSs merging into the larger international union bodies that today make up the family of global trade unionism. These comprise ten sectoral global unions, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (TUAC). Motivations for these mergers have included declining union memberships, sectoral shifts and institutional change.

### ***The impact of the internet***

All of the union officers interviewed stressed that ICT had vastly increased the flow-rates and volumes of information being circulated within their organizations. One positive aspect of this was said to be the improved ability of unions at the global level, to respond to moves made by global capitalist institutions during inter-institutional negotiations. An example given was that of the request of the EU to the WTO, on behalf of all member states, for the opening up of water to privatisation in 2002. The EU had denied to the PSI that it intended to appeal to the WTO for the de-regulation of water. The internet, it was explained, had enabled the PSI researchers following negotiations to detect the subterfuge and to respond quickly, putting the EU on the defensive over the issue.

ICT was said to be producing important changes to the nature of communications and the conduct of internal affairs. The Information and IT Coordinator at the ICFTU gave the view that in the past internal ICFTU meetings, where delegates met to discuss and decide policy, were also used as platforms for ‘speech-making’. The meaning here was that a certain element of ‘playing to the gallery’ was involved in ICFTU events on the part of some attendees that did not make for an efficient policy process. The advent of internet-based forms of communication was said to have reduced this problem considerably, with more business being conducted before significant meetings, thus diminishing the need for, as well as the opportunity for, speech-making.

*One thing you'll find - although people still aren't that good at submitting documents before a meeting and as a result removing the need to read out comments in the meeting - there's a lot more that goes on between meetings. People are much, much better informed when they come to meetings. As a result there is a space for them to be a lot more practical than in the past. Because you know in any walk of life there will be the tendency to show up at a meeting and use it as an excuse to give a speech. (DP)*

The internet as a means of disseminating information throughout the peak international union bodies, their affiliates and their affiliates' structures

and worker-members was strongly highlighted in a number of interviews. The Assistant General Secretary of the PSI equated the knowledge that the internet could provide to members, with power within union organizations. This was said to have had a profound affect in creating a situation that was less hierarchical, more participatory and more democratic than in the past. Global unions were seen to be no longer as remote bodies, irrelevant to the affairs of national unions and invisible to the local structures and worker-members of affiliates.

*Obviously the fact that we now have websites and that members can have a direct interface is something completely new. It didn't exist in the past because the unions themselves held the information. Now it's public. Now it's open to all members. And this is a very big change indeed. The fact that millions of members can log on to the PSI [website] and find out what PSI is doing ... whereas in the past it was maybe half a dozen people in PSI headquarters who knew what the PSI was doing. Those were the ones who attended our conference, our executive committee and so on. And often unions actually held that information. They didn't want the members to know. Which was unfortunate. It was a power thing. (AL)*

The relating of the dissemination of knowledge with issues of power within union structures was a theme in several interviews in which the

impact of ICT of union processes was discussed at length. Power differentials were highlighted that were said to be resulting from differing levels of access to and/or competence with ICT. The Director of Communications and IT at the PSI explained that in a number of unions in the developing world a digital divide was operating within national organizations, in which senior and often long-serving union officials were becoming outflanked in their political influence by a new generation of IT literate lower officials and local activists. This new, young and powerful, layer was made up of people who were working in jobs, or who had recently moved into union positions from jobs, which relied on ICT competence. In some unions, especially those based in government or government-run services, this was leading to a situation where memberships were sometimes ahead of the union leadership on important matters of policy. This sort of dynamic has been explored by researchers in relation to ICT training for union leaders (Hertenstein and Chaplin, 2005).

The consequences of the 'digital divide' between the rich and poor worlds, was seen by all interviewees as being a very problematic aspect of the impact of ICT. For example, 20% of affiliates of the PSI were not 'on-line' as organizations at the time of these interviews. Several staff officers pointed out that the digital divide is, in effect, a participation divide. 'Participation' was seen differently by different respondents to this question. For some it meant that affiliates in the developing world were having even less impact upon global union policy than in the past.

For others it was seen as affecting the involvement of Third World national affiliates in mobilisations insofar as it affected the availability of campaign material and of up-to-date information required to mobilise worker-members. The opening up of a 'digital divide' that is, in effect, a 'power divide', has been identified in different settings such as education (Selwyn 2004; Angus *et al.* 2004). The same issues arise in a particularly pronounced way for the global labour movement. The Director of Communications and IT at the PSI was keen to stress that the problem was actually not one simply of hardware. He pointed out that basic, recycled PCs were available very cheaply indeed from a number of sources, including through the PSI itself. The key obstacles lay much more in the areas of: basic infrastructure such as telephone systems; installation; maintenance; training and educational levels; costs of software; and language. Such obstacles bring into question the early optimism regarding the impact of internet-based forms of communication that was expressed particularly by Eric Lee (1997).

The power differentials that the ICT is causing were also said to be shaping the internal processes of national affiliates North and South. E-forums and closed e-mail lists were thought by some to be creating closed groups of those 'in-the-know' even within the same organizations. At the level of international union affairs this was seen as a cause for concern as some affiliates were left behind by the digital revolution, in the process effectively deepening the divide between the more powerful and less

powerful national unions in terms of their impact on international union policy.

[1] *You see some groups accumulating more and more knowledge. Again you create a gap. You lose the ones who didn't have a telephone line or have a bad telephone line or couldn't find out how to use the system or didn't have the money to get it. You lose them. So you are creating a bunch of people who have a lot of knowledge that they gain from communicating only with themselves. (AC)*

[2] *People who have email want to use it. They will use it because it's just easier and faster. They can more easily get onto our website and dig up the latest document that we've produced. Its impossible for us to write to all of our affiliates. We can't say 'ok everybody, you've got to wait till we've got email addresses for everyone before you start emailing each other so everybody - just wait for a few years until we've raised the money and done the training' and so on. It's never going to happen that way. So in the meantime there's no doubt that affiliates in developing countries, who are not yet using the internet, are not participating as fully in the work of the organization as the others are. And it really is a question of participation, not just a question of the reception of documents. (DP)*

Email, and ICT generally, was seen as facilitating the emergence of specialist policy groups within organizations. This was also seen as problematic in some of its aspects, by some interviewees, insofar as it was creating self-perpetuating and internalised 'expert' processes. The greatest organizational changes resulting from the introduction and use of ICT that were emphasised, however, were, in fact, to do with more networked approaches to policy formation as individuals and groups within organizations worked across traditional organizational, scalar and national divides. The same effect was said to apply to campaigning and political lobbying.

### ***Summary***

Organizational restructuring emerges as having been an important feature of the experience of international trade union organizations in recent years. Its significance for revitalization, however, is less clear. Union merger, for instance, can be interpreted both as a defensive response to declining membership in some sectors *and* as a proactive response to shifts in the boundaries between industrial sectors. Similarly, although the impact of ICT upon the internal processes of the global unions provides some good examples of 'internal restructuring' affecting such things as union democracy, representation and membership participation, it is also the case that it is bringing with it new inequalities.

## Coalition building

The research interviews produced reports of a proliferation of coalitions between international trade unions and a wide range of non-labour partners. These included campaigns over women's rights, work within the UN 'family' of NGOs and campaigning partnerships with global justice, environmental and development groups. Considering the framework offered by Frege, Heery and Turner (2004) the research material matched their analysis in a number of ways. Access to new social groups was certainly a motivating factor for the international unions. This was true, for instance of work relating to young workers and women working in the informal sectors of national economies. The contribution of expertise by NGOs for certain areas of work, as well as for mobilising abilities also emerged as being important. Where 'modes of interaction' are used to classify coalitions, most that were identified fell into the category of 'common cause' coalitions in which all partners, whether labour or non-labour, have parity of esteem. Where 'methods' are used to classify coalitions most of the examples given were clearly of the type in which all partners are 'outsiders' in that they do not have privileged access to government processes, but rather seek to affect government policy with external pressure. Of the factors that promote the formation of coalitions restricted resources, the need to expand constituencies of recruitment, the availability of activists in social



movements and the proliferation of campaign groups seemed to be the most applicable. Political opportunity represented a factor in the negative sense of opportunities for ‘internal’ lobbying within policy processes having been closed off, resulting in a need to engage with social and political forces outside of these. As one interviewee put it:

*Well its inevitable. I mean if we were more locked into discussions with employers then we would be putting more resources into that and less into the civil society stuff. And the opposite is also true. Today its very useful to maintain links with civil society groups and their campaigns. (DB)*

#### ***New alliances: global unions and NGOs***

Coalition building was reported to be a major focus for international unions today. Changes in internal organizational culture that have been partially caused by - and certainly enhanced by - the emergence and application of ICT and the internet. They also overlap and interact with the rise of new movements and political networks. Examples of such networks with which the global unions are engaging include ‘eco-nets’ such as Green-net in the UK and ‘peace-nets’ based in the US. The large mobilisations against such global institutions as the WTO and the World Economic Forum (WEF) have provided the catalyst and the geographical focus for the emergence of an array of new activist networks and

coalitions. Global unions have engaged with these networks to varying degrees at different times and over different issues.

*There is a strong coalition that emerged from Seattle specifically as a result of NGOs and unions coming together. The fact that these bodies – the WTO or the World Bank or the G7 or whatever – are travelling the world to different cities to hold key meetings has unwittingly helped to unleash this movement because it means that each group of local activists gets its day in the sun. That's how the networks and the coalitions build up. (JH)*

The rise of coalitional approaches to trade union work at the international and cross-border levels has been widely discussed in the literature (*e.g.* Spooner 2004). Particular contexts for new coalitions involving trade unions and NGOs of various kinds that have attracted recent attention include: anti-sweatshop campaigning across the Americas (Connor 2004; Traub-Werner and Cravey 2002; Huyer 2004); anti-corporate alliances campaigning for rights-based and ethical company practice (Sadler 2004; Compa 2004); coalitions of trade unions and health service users around specific issues such as AIDS treatment (Lethbridge 2004); human and labour rights campaigns over the welfare and treatment of migrant workers (Ford 2004); and coalition based movements working within

democratising processes under conditions of political repression (Aiyede 2004).

Strong evidence of commonalities and convergences developing between unions, NGOs and social movements emerged from many research interviews at the international level. One area of convergence between unions and NGOs has been around women's rights, sometimes in conditions of political repression in which the fight for women's rights is linked with broader struggles for democratic change, for example in Iran (Povey 2004). Such convergences have often come about 'against the grain', as mental and organizational-cultural barriers and old misconceptions have had to be over-come (Prieto and Quinteros 2004). The Equality and Rights Officer of the PSI gave a particularly striking account of the way in which NGOs and unions were coming together to work far more closely on women's issues than in the early 1990s. At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 there was said to have been very little comprehension amongst NGO delegates of why unions would be present at, or interested in, such an event. A great deal of work had to be done, it was explained, in order to convince women's development organizations that the labour movement was relevant to their agenda. The discussion within the UN on women's issues was reported to have been more to do with development than employment. Since the 1995 conference, the role of unions has been to broaden out the discussion about the role of women amongst NGOs. There has also been a broadening out of the thinking of trade unions to take on board human

rights and women's rights issues that were previously overlooked. Evidence of progress in this area, and of genuine convergence, was obvious at the 2002 UN Commission on the Status of Women that came out of the Beijing conference proceedings. Unions were said to have been accepted as being central to the development work of the commission.

The PSI is now part of a broad coalition of NGOs working with the UN system. This coalition is called the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ). The PSI is now central to the debate about the place of women in society at the level of the UN and amongst the most influential organizations in this area. Again the sense that comes through in these accounts is that of organizations striving with great commitment to shed old ways of working and to embrace new allies and perspectives, identifying and building upon common ground in the process.

The theme of convergence between NGOs and global unions was also stressed by the Director of Employment and International Labour Standards at the ICFTU:

*The attention to union concerns amongst many NGOs is firstly much greater than before. Secondly they are more careful not to oppose our policy. There's an important change there which means that there is no longer any major obstacle to collaborating or discussing things with those*

*groups. They're more sensitive to our concerns. And over the last five years we've moved away from being a single issue movement. The mid-nineties was our narrowest focal point. We were only interested in workers' rights at the WTO and not much else. I think if you go back ten years earlier we were a bit broader. Then we focussed on workers' rights. But since then we've broadened out again and included a lot of development concerns. All that has helped. (JH)*

The benefits of such convergences were said to be various. A key advantage to such networked approaches is the ability to pool expertise and knowledge. One senior Information and Research Officer at the PSI highlighted, in particular, the importance of the PSI's links with the Third World Network, Friends of the Earth, the World Development Movement and the Our World Is Not For Sale Coalition in its work on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) services agreement that are driving through widespread privatisation of public services in many parts of the world. Without such links the PSI would be overwhelmed by the demand for information from its affiliates around the world, as well as the intelligence costs of the research needed to stay ahead of the privatisation agenda. Another benefit was said to be that of relating to young people who are attracted to the dynamism and organizational style of some NGOs. This is a theme that was commented upon earlier in this thesis. Again this can be seen as being one aspect of a wider revitalisation agenda.

The convergences occurring between unions and the Anti-globalisation Movement were described in less instrumental terms by the Deputy General Secretary of the PSI. He stressed the fact that there is a natural affinity between unions and the NGOs within the Anti-globalisation Movement by virtue of the issues of concern that are being raised. There is also the fact that the global institutions that this movement targets in its campaigns are also those upon which the global unions are trying to make an impact. Global unions also see the advantage of having links with organizations that they would like to see taking up a labour agenda. And finally, the observation was made that by engaging with social movements and with NGOs the theoretical and intellectual perspectives of the global unions would become more focussed.

*We cannot possibly take on the international institutions alone. Therefore we see the benefit of forming alliances. A number of the organizations that are involved in the different lobby groups have got expertise that we can't possibly have. So it's helpful for us to be able to participate in some of the debates at meetings. Obviously we've got an interest in getting the labour view into some of those organizations that perhaps hadn't thought before that there was a labour agenda here. They saw it as purely an ecological agenda or just an anti-capitalist agenda. There is also the benefit of the sort of theoretical outlooks and just the general*

*understanding of what's happening around us. It sharpens  
our view. (AL)*

### ***Global unions and NGOs: tensions and obstacles***

Along with a great deal of interview evidence of convergence between unions and NGOs at the global scale, there was also evidence that this convergence is far from being smooth or uncontested. The prerequisites of effective coalition building, for instance was said, by the Equality and Rights Officer of the PSI, to depend on the following four crucial elements: the political orientation of the unions; their ability to articulate their interests in relation to other organizations; the visions of the leaderships; access to communications tools. Differentials globally and across regions, especially with regard to the last factor of communications, was said to be a cause of significant geographical variations of experience in coalition building and networked forms of operating. In the poorer countries, in particular, the picture was said to be 'patchy'. One point to emerge from interviews was the fact that the PSI itself is seen within the international trade union movement as playing the role of 'bridge' between NGOs and the world of global unions.

The difficulties in the relationship between trade unions and NGOs has been explored by some researchers. For example a 'double divide' has been described by Anner and Evans (2004) which comprises the very

different organizational cultures and modes of practice between unions and NGO's and also the hemispheric divide across which union-NGO coalitions are increasingly working. Eade (2004) has drawn attention to the paternalism of the aid work done by the UK based charity Oxfam in support of unions in Honduras in the early 1980s. Criticism has also been levelled at NGOs for the kinds of perspectives with which they frame their activities and the ways in which these can serve as barriers to more fruitful working with trade unions. Roman (2004), for instance has urged that NGOs focus their work less on race and gender and more on class whilst Lipschutz (2004) calls upon NGOs to work towards improvements in the legal, political and social conditions of workers and less upon anti-corporate consumerist campaigning. Despite these issues, however, Hale (2004) offers the optimistic assessment that once unions and NGOs begin to work together differences can be quickly overcome and that such coalitions are providing the basis for genuinely new forms of labour internationalism.

Regional variations in the experience of union-NGO partnerships were accounted for in some interviews by stressing the suspicions with which NGO activities are regarded by unions in the developing world. A marked difference of perceptions of NGOs was described as existing between the rich and poor countries on this subject. In many cases NGOs are seen as bringing with them 'Western agendas', substituting for services that should be being provided by national states and rivalling unions in their influence with government.



*Some of the more Southern, Latin countries in Europe don't necessarily easily work with NGOs. There are some unions in Africa and Latin America that are concerned about the activities of NGOs. They feel that somehow adopting an NGO stance on some things will weaken a trade union position. Or in some cases they just see NGOs as part of the enemy anyway. In some cases they see NGOs as queuing up to win contracts when the World Bank decides to pressure a country into liberalising a particular service and put it out to tender. Suddenly you have NGOs that run a health service and so on. That's definitely a problem. (NW)*

Another area of difficulty is that the agendas of NGOs and unions can be directly opposing. This can lead to an ambivalent situation in which unions will work on an issue-by-issue basis with a particular NGO – working together on one issue and opposing one another vigorously on another. A clear example of this was given by the Deputy General Secretary of the ITF. The ITF's working relationship with Greenpeace has been highly contradictory. On issues to do with maritime pollution, for example, the ITF and Greenpeace have worked effectively together. Over the issue of whaling, however, ITF members and Greenpeace activists have had near physical confrontations on the high sea in which lives have been jeopardized. Some senior global union officers also saw NGOs, especially, of the 'activist type', as being rivals with respect to

attracting the energies and commitment of young people and as a result undermining the potential for youth recruitment in some parts of the world. A further point here was that the activities of many NGOs actually duplicate those of global unions. This leads to situations in which national unions will look to NGOs instead of to the global union to which they are already affiliated, despite that body being involved in the same areas of work. A good example of this was given by the Deputy General Secretary of the PSI who illustrated this point with the example of War on Want.

*I think there is a lack of understanding amongst many of our member organizations, and their activists, on international issues, of what we, as an international union, can do in terms of working on issues. I had an example last week. I got the Fire Brigade Union's magazine - they're one of our members - and they've got a whole article there on the privatisation of water in South Africa. It's obviously a result of War on Want's activities with them. There wasn't one mention of what the PSI's been doing on water privatisation in South Africa. We've done a considerable amount of work and we've had it up on websites. We've been running campaigns against water privatisation in cooperation with our South African affiliates. And here comes a non-governmental organization, which is obviously taking a very pro-trade union line, organizing visits across countries and between Britain and*

*South Africa. I'm now going back to the Fire Brigade's Union and saying 'do you realise that this is an area that we're working on'. They've probably given money to War on Want. And I think there are members' resources that should have come to us. If they'd realised the sort of work that we were doing, then there would be more resources coming into international work. (AL)*

### **Summary**

The picture that emerges here, of the relationship between unions and NGOs and associated social movements is, to a degree, contradictory. Whilst there is strong testimonial evidence forthcoming from these research interviews of new convergences and coalitions, there is also evidence of complicated working relationships and organizational and political tension. Nonetheless, the overall tenor of comments in this area was positive. There was a feeling, sometimes strongly expressed, that the interactions between the international trade unions and various social movements and global campaigns had been fruitful and energising for union work.

## Partnership

Fichter and Greer (2004) in their discussion of partnership argue that they can be revitalizing on the measures of union density and disruptive power when three conditions are met. These are when partnership is 1. institutionalised, 2. used with other union strategies, 3. linked to a wider social vision. The examples of partnership working given at the international level, however, were marginal to the key themes that were developed by interviewees. An example given of the PSI working with the Philippine government on gender equality within the civil service was the only clear case referred to. The account of this example given, however, was not detailed enough for me to properly understand the circumstances under which this work was undertaken, nor to assess its significance for revitalization. Another, less clear-cut, example was that of the PSI working under the umbrella of the UN with NGOs over women's equality issues. The key dynamic here, however, was far more that between this global union and the array of campaign and issue based organizations, than that with the UN itself.

This gap in the research evidence reflects a real decline of opportunities for partnership models of working. In the corporatist era it was more common for national governments to work with the ILO over a range of labour related issues, and thus come into contact with the various ITSs. The fact that there were so few examples offered in this set of research interviews does not mean that this does not happen today. The contrast

between the emphasis on partnership and that given to coalition building, for instance, does suggest, however, that this theme does not loom large as large on the horizons of the trade unionists who were interviewed.

### Political action

The elements of the framework suggested by Hamann and Kelly (2004) on the theme of revitalization and political action that apply to the research material at this level are those of seeking pro-labour legislation and pressing for its full implementation. The forms of action that were relevant to revitalization are lobbying within key policy processes, acting externally as social movements and acting as litigants in test cases.

#### *The 'disarticulation effect'*

A strong theme to emerge from several interviews at the international level was that of the ways in which the erosion of corporatist institutional frameworks has made international trade union bodies more inclined towards mobilising strategies. Many statements on this theme supported the analysis put forward by Burgess (2004) regarding the effects of the dis-articulation of traditional state-labour arrangements in breaking up traditional blocs through which unions had operated, in some cases for generations. Focussing particularly on Latin American case studies Burgess explores the loss of 'voice' for these union movements and their consequent desire to achieve new and effective forms of interest

representation. Moody (1999) captured the international synchrony of this process well:

*The Keynesian regime has been dying for years. In its wake, the European corporatism that sheltered union structures is crumbling, American liberalism has conceded much of the neo-liberal agenda, Canadian social democracy has collapsed, and even the Japanese miracle and its lean export model are unravelling. All the political and industrial paradigms that guided the labour bureaucracy in the advanced industrial world are coming unglued, and a debate over the future is necessarily taking shape within both the bureaucracy and the activist layer on which workplace unionism rests. (Moody 1999:261)*

At the global level Cox (1996) marked the beginning of the end of what he termed the ‘bureaucratic internationalism’ of the trade union movement with the withdrawal of the US from the ILO in 1975. The result has been a dislodging of international union bodies from the position of access that they once enjoyed with the BWIs through the ILO. The ILO today is largely excluded from WTO processes (Wilkinson 2002). As the pattern of disengagement with regulatory systems gathered apace it was replicated at the national level in country after country. Conflict between unions and governments became a hall-mark of labour relations in most parts of the world over this period. Indeed for some the

combative stance of national governments in this era provides the real key to understanding what was going on. In other words the motivations of these processes of disarticulation are seen as having had more to do with aggressive domestic neo-liberalism on the part of governments as opposed to a reluctant but necessary engagement with global markets (Weiss 1998).

Several authors on this subject have highlighted the ways in which trade unions that are embedded within, and are supported by, strong industrial relations regimes and well articulated links with government tend to adopt a non-mobilising and much more conciliatory stance with respect to their negotiating position. It follows that unions that are denied such access to employers and government and that are not well supported by regulatory institutions may be more inclined towards a mobilising orientation. On the one hand, then, unions have been forced out of government policy processes, changing their position from that of 'insider' to 'outsider' status. On the other hand, however, it seems that the reduced ability of unions to engage in political action within such policy and legislative processes has increased their willingness and ability to conduct political action through involvement in social movements.

At the international level in the post Second World War era, the ICFTU was linked into the BWIs, in particular the ILO, through well articulated formal mechanisms and a culture of more informal points of access. The

end of the era of corporatism and the steady degradation and dismantling of national corporatist arrangements has made institutions such as the ILO essentially marginal lobbying organizations with little or no influence with national governments. These shifts have led some to identify new sites of regulation, both actual and potential, at smaller scales of capitalist activity. Such local, or even 'micro-', systems of regulation reflect the need of companies to embed themselves to some degree in the changing economic, political and cultural environments in which they operate (Jonas 1996; Amin 2004). In this, radically changed situation, the once comfortable position occupied by the ICFTU and the ITSs is gone. Instead the ICFTU (as it was at the time of the interviews) and the ITUC (as it is today) and the global unions have had to lobby, with varying degrees of success alongside other NGOs and competing interests, to gain access to senior figures within the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and their associated peak governance organizations. Evidence from interviews revealed a clearly focused picture of this disarticulation leading international trade union bodies to adopt a far more 'activist' orientation than in the past. Several interviewees articulated this perception in definite terms.

Some interviewees made the general point that for unions in the developing world, where traditions of social democracy are weak or non-existent and therefore where articulating institutions between trade unions and employers bodies and government are also weak, already a more pronounced tendency towards mobilisation exists. The fact that many



such mobilisations are orientated upon the goal of strengthening democratic institutions that can lend legitimacy and stability for trade unions or, where they are threatened, defending them, does not detract from the point (Jose 2002).

The perception expressed in interviews is that the institutional density of the environment in which unions operate in much of the industrially developed world, leads them to adopt a position that is more independent of the international trade union bodies. This meant that for Third World unions participation in international trade unionism was more important because of the relative weakness of their domestic situation. This is evidenced, in part, by a greater preparedness to respond to calls for international action and mobilisation by the ICFTU and the global unions.

*I think you can see a difference between affiliates in developing countries and in industrialised countries. I can measure it again with my experience of the youth campaign. The best response came from affiliates from developing countries. There was a really a good interaction between the ICFTU and those affiliates. But it was so difficult to get affiliates in Western Europe interested. It was just like 'actually we don't need it!' ... 'we can do it on our own'.*

**(MK)**

### ***Lobbying for regulation***

Global unions were said to be evidencing increased levels of political vigour and activism in the area of lobbying for pro-union and ‘labour-friendly’ legislation at the global level. Again, this is a well documented area. The multi-strategic fight for minimum global standards has been described by O’Brien (2002). The gendered nature of many of the international trade union campaigns for minimum standards have been described by Elias (2003) as subsuming women’s rights under generic ‘human rights’ and, in so doing, marginalising them. Although poor results of campaigning for labour advocacy rights under the NAFTA are described by Compa (2001), they are nonetheless said to have provided the opportunity, rationale and spaces for fruitful cross-border working by unions across the Americas. Research interviews revealed the ways in which the global unions have been involved in many areas of work towards industry and social regulation at the international level. Along with campaign work for ‘codes-of-conduct’ within industrial sectors and framework agreements with companies, these have included the UN Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative and the sweatshop regulation initiative of the Social Accountability International, SA 8000.

### ***Engagement with IFIs***

On a related theme of the assessments of the degrees of engagement with the peak IFIs that were expressed by senior figures within the global

unions there was ambivalence. Whilst, on the one, hand, there was a common acknowledgement that the levels of engagement with IFIs was far lower than they had been with the BWIs in the corporatist era, there was also a sense that things had improved in this regard since the early 1990s – generally regarded as the lowest point for international trade unions in their dealings with global capitalist institutions. Different interviews highlighted different elements in this picture. For some, the effects of vigorous lobbying and the impact of the Anti-globalisation Movement produced a shift of attitudes within the IFIs. This shift had led to a realisation that public opinion, and the civil society movements that articulated that opinion, could not simply be ignored. It is widely acknowledged now, for example, that workers' rights are at least on the agenda for discussion with many of the peak IFIs (Munck 2002). Similarly the campaign for global labour codes, though having had varying degrees of success with IFIs and MNCs, at least has mainstreamed the language and ideas of minimum standards for workers (O'Brien 2002). Trade unions, it was explained in research interviews, had benefited from this shift in having greater access to IFIs for lobbying purposes and for discussions over issues such as minimum standards and trade regulation.

*I think the main change for PSI is that we are now dealing much more with global institutions than we were a decade ago. That's in terms of the World Bank because of the policy decisions made there with regard to restructuring, structural*

*adjustment programmes, their support for the neo-liberal agenda, privatisation and so on. So we've taken up a much bigger area of work with them and with similar institutions which are part of that Bretton Woods structure. (AL)*

A number of other interviews highlighted the ways in which the ability of international trade unions to talk to the IFIs, as well as the willingness of IFIs to engage on some level with trade unions, has been enhanced by the unions nuanced stances on issues of global policy. The point here was that the international trade union bodies do not, in fact, oppose the peak IFIs such as the WTO or the IMF *per se*. Rather they tend to adopt a differential and selective attitude that depends upon what a particular policy means for trade unions and their members. Underlying this sort of approach is a deep-seated desire for some level of regulation or 'rules'.

*The whole idea is to get a framework of rules that incorporate respect for labour standards in a global economy and you can't talk about a framework unless you're talking about a framework. You can't have for instance, 'rules of labour standards' unless you have rules to begin with. (DJ)*

Historical periodization is especially important for a correct interpretation of the themes discussed here. Whilst there is a clear sense that the IFIs are talking to unions 'at last' this is in contrast to the near complete 'lock out' of the early 1990s. The levels of engagement occurring today do not

in fact compare to those of the high point of the corporatist era when international trade union bodies were locked into the processes of the BWIs through the ILO. Even though trade unions were involved in those global institutions, through what have been described as secondary linkages (Wilkinson 2002), the fact remains that these engagements were non-discretionary. These kinds of contact with IFIs today are more discretionary and prey to the vagaries of the political calculations of the IFIs themselves. This kind of historicizing perspective is urged by Silver (2003) for a proper assessment of developments within international labour. It is in this, longer term, view, also then, that the picture of dis-articulated, and therefore weakened, institutional arrangements for trade unions at the international level stands out most clearly.

### *Summary*

Overall, we can see evidence with respect to political action as a revitalizing strategy for labour internationalism that points in both directions. As we have seen, unions are less able to conduct political action as insiders within global regulatory processes. We have also seen that, as a result, unions are more prepared to mobilise their affiliates in order to achieve political impact through social movements. It is in this, latter sense, that a revitalization perspective seems most relevant.

## International linking

Lillie and Martínez Lucio (2004), in their discussion of international linkages and revitalization, talk about transnational activity becoming more systematic and regularized. This fits well with the picture revealed by the evidence from this research. Inter-union collaboration within MNCs and the transnational coordination of actions are both themes that are highlighted by these authors and that appear in the research data. The efforts that unions go to in seeking to make their international activities internationalist in the solidaristic sense, is also an area where the research findings coincide with their analysis.

### *Global unions and ‘real trade unionism’*

Throughout all of the interviews conducted at the global scale a strong message came through that international unions are more active today, and in many different ways, than in the period of classical corporatism. The meaning of such statements tended to be that international union bodies are playing a role that is, in many senses, more ‘real’ for their affiliates. Whether this was to do with providing the research and information that affiliates need in order to be able to deal effectively with multi-national employers, coordinating trans-national political and industrial activity or engaging in ‘real-time’ solidarity and practical intervention, international unions are active players in the affairs of their member unions.

As part of this process of increasing levels of engagement in the life of national unions global unions seek to 'close-the-gap' between their structures and processes and those of their affiliates.

*How we identify ourselves with the needs of our affiliates more closely is something that we're working on. We are trying to be closer to understanding what their needs are so that we do reflect what they want us to do. You know that's why we have our congresses, our policy-making, our programmes of action and so on. It's all to try to get that identity closer but it also does mean that the national unions in their strategy, in their work have got to say 'right, this is how far we can go on solving this problem nationally and this is where we have to engage our international organization'.*

**(MK)**

### ***Tensions and obstacles***

National unions also, were said to be far more aware of the importance of the role that global unions can play in their activities. These broadly optimistic assessments for the prospects of international trade unionism, were, however, qualified by a number of countervailing factors. One issue was that despite a professed understanding of the importance of the international level of trade union activity on the part of many national

unions, it is still the case that, in practice, the centre of gravity of trade union activity remains largely at the national level. Various reasons were suggested for this. One reason given is that unions are more embattled today under aggressive, anti-union neo-liberal governments, and that valuable resources are taken up increasingly by domestic struggles. The demands of responding at the international level add to already overburdened agendas for most national unions. One response was said to be that of unions becoming far more selective than in the past as to which international issues to respond to. This introduces a new complexity into the ways in which unions relate to challenges at the international level. The Assistant General Secretary of the PSI explained that this extended to questions of international solidarity.

*In the past I think the way we ran international solidarity was that we put requests out to all affiliates to help a union that was being harassed by a repressive government or whatever. It was often something to do with trade union rights. Although we would put it out to everybody the reality was that we expected that it would be the unions in the North that would put pressure on those governments. That difference has gone and so now North and South will help North and South. On the other hand you can see unions saying 'look – we can cope with you sending out one urgent action once a month but we can't cope with a continuing stream of them. So we are going to have to make choices as to whether we think this*



*is really going to pay off. It's a question of 'will an intervention really make a difference or is it one of those basket cases like Columbia where it doesn't matter how many messages you send it doesn't seem to make a bloody bit of difference?'. (MW)*

The Deputy General Secretary of the PSI also expressed this contradiction succinctly:

*You've got two conflictual things taking place. On the one hand you've got the whole globalisation debate and the reality that workers are facing in terms of how they're affected by that - including public sector workers who might not have been a decade ago. But then on the other hand you've got unions with declining memberships, with less resources and greater demands at a national level. Therefore the amount of time and energy and money they can put into working internationally - perhaps taking solidarity almost for granted - is less not more than it was a decade ago. (AL)*

Finally, language was seen as a major limiting factor holding back the development of a deeper level of genuinely international trade unionism. This was said to be true particularly in relation to communications technology.

*The most fundamental problem is the language problem. If you speak English you can do anything. If you don't speak English the internet is almost closed to you. (DC)*

### ***Summary***

Once again a distinct ambivalence runs through the interview material on this theme. On the one hand most, if not all interviewees reported increased levels of interaction between their organizations and national affiliate unions. On the other hand there were frequent caveats and qualifications given as to the real depth of internationalism that this represented. Whilst active interaction between global unions and their national affiliates does seem to be becoming revitalized, it is also true that new obstacles, issues and impediments are frustrating the potential of what this revitalization can achieve.

### **Key themes at the global level**

This chapter has tried to demonstrate that since the early 1990s, when the mind-sets within the world of international trade unionism, indeed of trade unionism at all levels, were characterised by defeatism and a sense of malaise, a distinct shift has occurred. Assessments of the prospects for international trade unionism, whilst still realistic and grounded in an appreciation of the seriousness of the challenges being faced, by the early 2000s, nonetheless seemed free of the gloomy prognoses that had gone

before. It was not the case that the international union organizations were mechanically repeating old and tired formulas in a radically altered environment. Rather the stories that were told and the reflections offered evidenced a willingness on the part of those organizations to engage with their changing environment in ways that were imaginative, creative and open to new influences. There is a high degree of awareness within the global unions of the danger of not responding to change and so becoming irrelevant to the experience of their member organizations and ultimately supine before the onslaught of political and economic neo-liberalism.

There are many complicating factors that make the processes of adaptation difficult and painful. Old habits do die hard. Generational turn-over does take time. Cultural obstacles do exist in the interactions between international unions and social movements and campaigning NGOs, for instance. Barriers still exist that are to do with ideology and language. It is also the case, however, that new convergences are making alliances possible, that new forms of communication and models of working are emerging and that there is a seriousness within the family of global unions about the need to reach out to new terrains in the issues addressed and in the constituencies they seek to represent.

In reality there is a flux of debate and experimentation occurring that, when regarded in its totality, amounts to a huge revitalisation effort. This work is generating fresh challenges and contradictions. It seems clear, for instance, that enormous obstacles still exist to a transition from the trade

union *inter*-nationalism of previous eras in the history of the international trade union movement, to any proposed *global* and *solidaristic* trade union practice. Not the least of these obstacles is the ongoing weight of trade union work that is structured below the global level.

## ***Chapter 6: Revitalization and labour internationalism at the European level***

The research that was carried out at the level of European trade union structures revealed a contradictory picture. Indeed the themes that emerged at this level, more than any other, were often those of organizational and political tensions between competing forces.

The ETUC, since it was established in 1973, has shadowed the development of the institutions of European convergence (Dølvik 1999). Its *raison d'être*, has been to accommodate to, and seek trade union friendly regulation and policies through and from, those structures. There is an inbuilt contradiction then, at the heart of the ETUC and the history that it embodies. That is the fact that it has developed, not as a mass movement that is comparable to the way that national unions grew and became established in Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century, but rather as an elite body dependent upon resources from, and political access to, the peak organizations of European integration themselves (Imig and Tarrow 2001).

The European Industrial Federations (EIF), with variations to do with sectoral dynamics and political traditions, have worked towards the same purpose. These efforts have been conducted through the Social Dialogue process that has sought to bring together government bodies of the EU through its various commissions, employers and trade unions in tri-partite

arrangements. An important vehicle for this dialogue has been the 1994 EU directive that introduced European Works Councils (EWCs) bringing together representatives from companies and trade unions. It is through such instruments that a putative system of European industrial relations is emerging (Hoffman 2002; Sadler 2000). These developments have led to optimism for the ability of trade unions to be effective actors at the European level.

*In recent years significant changes have occurred ... indicating that a new dynamism may be taking hold in the international union movement. These changes have been most salient in the European context, where the new pace of European economic and political integration from the late 1980s prompted institutional reforms that paved the way for social dialogue, European Works Councils (EWCs), negotiation of framework agreements, and a strengthening of the trade union structures at the European level. (Dølvik 2002)*

The research interviews, however, revealed a great deal of ambivalence in assessments of the progress of trade union Europeanization. Whereas some interviewees described a growing sense of a distinct European trade union identity that was emerging from these processes, others placed far more emphasis on the obstacles to the emergence of a meaningful European trade unionism. Indeed none of the interviewees were entirely

consistent in their comments on this theme. This ambivalence is also present in the literature pertaining to trade unions in Europe. Some have been pessimistic for some aspects of European trade unionism but optimistic for others. Hege (1997) for instance, presenting findings from a survey of the European trade union scene, was downbeat about the prospects for any convergence of industrial relations systems and therefore of European collective bargaining, but was optimistic about the representative role for trade unions at the European level.

A major issue that begins to explain these tensions has been the view that the Social Dialogue has delivered very little for trade unions in recent years. This is relevant to the question of revitalization insofar as the establishing of new forms of partnership is one form that revitalization is considered to take. The pull away from traditional social democratic and welfarist models of social organization and towards neo-liberal and market driven models, has frustrated trade union hopes in the ability of European level institutions to deliver progressive social reform or even in the political will of these bodies to do so. Trade union anxieties in this area are compounded by the enlargement of the EU. The concern here is that as countries with considerably inferior conditions for workers enter into membership 'social dumping' will produce powerful downward pressures on those of workers in the more affluent member states.

Whilst the accommodationist instincts of the European trade unions continue to centre their primary activities, counter-tendencies are

emerging that pull in the direction of mobilisation and member-engagement (Rigby 1999). Interviewees did speak about patterns of increasing trans-national activity and interaction at levels nearer to the grass-roots of trade union memberships. The ease and cheapness of communications and of travel, according to these figures, are enabling trade unionists to work directly with one another across national borders. The rise also of alternative political poles of attraction around the Anti-globalisation and Social Forum Movements is interacting with these developments in ways that were said to be producing new forms of activism and intellectual debate. Revitalization perspectives, then, understood as being to do with greater energies of grass-roots activism, do seem to be relevant to this area of trade union work.

### **Union strategies**

In the framework laid out by Heery and Adler (2004) some elements do match with the picture that emerged from research interviews. A shift in the allocation of resources was pointed to by a number of interviewees. Some explained that whereas previously the bulk of the work of the European trade union organizations had been to do with the circulation of information from European policy processes to national affiliates, there was now a greater tendency to be engaged with the work of national affiliates *at* the European level, for instance through company EWCs or within European legislative processes. Targeting for recruitment was also said to be a priority for some European labour organizations and their



national affiliates. This was meant in the sense of ‘distant expansion’ whereby trade unions seek members in areas in which they have no previous record of organizing. This applies, for instance, to the work being done by the ETUC to improve membership amongst migrant workers and some ‘hard-to-reach’ groups. European unions are also engaged in work that would come under the definition of ‘depth organizing’ whereby unions seek to strengthen their bargaining position with respect to employers independently of levels of member recruitment. This definition could apply, for example, to the efforts of some EIFs and their national affiliates to build trade unions in the accession countries entering the EU.

Although there were examples that suggested shifts towards a new, European level of trade unionism of the kinds mentioned above, there was also a great deal of stress placed upon problems and obstacles. The difficulties of mobilisation in an environment where few organizing opportunities occur within formal policy processes, the very uneven experience of EWCs for national unions, issues to do with language and industrial relations cultures and the difficulties of establishing workable bargaining comparators were all said to be significant factors that worked against organizing at the European level. Indeed the emphasis given to these difficulties usually characterised the interviews at this level far more than those accounts that pointed in the direction of trade union revitalization.

## Mobilising

A contradictory picture emerged in relation to the ability of trade unions to mobilise at the European level. Indeed there is tentative evidence that the process of European integration itself has negatively affected union membership. This is a slight effect when comparison is made with other non-European OECD case studies and exceptions exist within Europe itself. One such exception is in those countries that operate the Ghent system by which unemployment benefits are administered by labour organizations. Here, union memberships have been maintained at consistent levels despite rises in unemployment (Blaschke 2000). Nonetheless it seems not to be the case that European integration is aiding unions. It was acknowledged, for example, that it was difficult to mobilise where the structurations of union-employer engagement were weak. Mobilisation tends to require a concrete focus that often presupposes a structure in terms of policy processes and moments of political articulation. Where these are under-developed, as tends to be the case within the industrial relations processes of the EU and as was revealed in interviews, it is difficult for unions to get a purchase on developments that will affect their members.

This said, a number of interviewees were also keen to stress that the profile of the European unions was presently very high, compared to ten years ago and that this had a lot to do with higher levels of mobilisation amongst national affiliates and their members. These took two forms. The

first was at the level of intra-company trans-national organizing. Within a range of MNCs a vibrant worker-activist culture of face-to-face interaction, bi-lateral and multi-national cross-border organizing and mutual solidarity was said to have arisen in recent years. Rising levels of cross-border industrial action – of ‘Euro-strikes’ – was noted in the literature by late 1990s (Breitenfellner 1997). Many authors, also, have highlighted the proliferation of cross-border arrangements between national unions in Europe (*e.g.* Towers and Terry 2000). Such a development does point to a revitalization of the energies of worker activism within the world of European trade unionism. The complexity of this phenomenon should also be noted, however. Whilst European trade union bodies seek social partnership with the European Commission on the basis of an ‘abstract’ European citizenship, worker-activists seek the concretization of those rights in the form of substantive gains and concessions from employers. The tensions that this introduces are widening the divisions within the European trade unionism between its political and economic roles (Taylor and Mathers 2002b).

A good example of the ways in which EU structures could be enabling for European level trade unionism came from the European Metal Workers (EMF). During the crisis of the Vauxhall plant at Luton that was threatened with closure in 2001, stewards and activists across those European countries where General Motors had production plants, organized solidarity strike action to support the workers at Luton. Key to the ability of these stewards to lead well coordinated walk-outs from

factories across these EU countries was the fact that the General Motors EWC has been one of the most effective with regard to employer recognition and trade union participation. This EWC has therefore brought together union activists from all those countries where General Motors and its subsidiaries have a presence. In so doing it has made possible the formation of networks of activists who are in regular contact with one another and who were therefore in a position to organize these trans-national solidarity actions.

*The GM works council had a good history of pulling activists together to create a network of people who are communicating and who know one another. This is how they could respond so quickly and how they could make it [the solidarity action] happen. In fact that one also shows that the role of the coordinator from the EMF is important. We have a very active coordinator there who knew how to do it. (BSa)*

The last remark in the quote given above, points again to the subjective element of the role of individuals who are both in strategically key positions and who are committed to acting trans-nationally when the need arises. This was an aspect to the story that the Assistant General Secretary of the EMF was keen to emphasise. It needs to be appreciated here that the presence of such individuals is also dependent upon an organizational culture that is conducive to their emergence and supportive of their activities.

### ***Variance in national trade union culture***

Despite the emphasis given to the themes of convergence and Europeanization, obstructing factors to the process were also highlighted. This was, again, in keeping with the paradoxical picture that emerged at this level. Differences in union national culture were said to be ‘all too real’, and were seen as a hindrance to the formation of European trade union policy.

*The Dutch trade unions are always saying ‘we can act on our own’. The others are a little bit more flexible. Some are saying ‘we are not use[d] to making political statements’. In the Netherlands they say they are just concerned with the defence of the employee at work. So issues like globalisation or the war against Iraq, you now, its ‘we leave this to the political parties because our members can if they want be members of a political party’. That is their tradition. From Belgium to the South – totally different. Those trade unions have a tradition and a culture that they have always [given] clear statement[s] on political issues. (BSa)*

The obstacles to a more thoroughgoing European trans-nationalism identified here coincide with those found by other researchers in the field. Gennard *et al.* (2000) for instance, in their study of the graphical industries in Europe gave the following list of significant obstacles:

employment law; trade union differences; employee apathy; employer opposition; and resources. It seems, that, again, those developments that can broadly be characterised as ‘revitalizing’, whilst present, must also be understood as being complex, contested and problematic. This is also a finding that gives some evidence for an emphasis on national factors in framing the labour internationalism agenda for trade unions.

For actors at the institutional level, and especially those occupying senior positions and with responsibility for processes of communication and accountability differences in industrial relations regimes across the EU are a significant barrier to closer working amongst European unions. This problem was considered by some to be especially serious in relation to EU enlargement. In former Eastern Bloc countries national institutions have been shaped by communism, the collapse of Stalinism and then by accelerated marketisation during the 1990s and 2000s. Trade unions in these countries for much of the post-War period had been, at best, paternalist and state dominated bodies and at worst organs of labour repression. In other words they had often not been trade unions in the recognised sense prevailing in liberal democracies. A corollary to this was that for most of this era there had been little in the way of industrial relations regimes, traditions of bargaining or worker representation.

*The problems are not so much to do with differences in industrial relations systems. The problem is that there are often no industrial relations systems at all! They [the*

accession countries] *don't have employers' organizations. They don't have structured trade unions as we understand them. So the problem is more usually a complete lack of any sort of system. It is something that we are trying to address through the Social Dialogue. We are actually saying to employers 'look it is in your interests to have your own organizations', and many of them do see the importance of having unions to talk to rather than chaos. But the transition that they have been through is just huge and so they have nothing in place at all. It's hard to even know where to begin.*

**(BT-S)**

Commonalities in industrial relations regimes have been identified across the EU (Ebbinghaus 2002). Even where tri-partite, semi-corporatist industrial relations regimes have prevailed in the CEE countries during the 1990s however, whilst they have been credited with achieving relative industrial peace (Iankova and Turner 2004), they have tended to be state-imposed with very little organic connection to work-place realities (Galgoczi 2000). The pace of change through economic restructuring within the accession countries, as well as the legislative changes resulting from the adoption of EU law in its entirety – the *acquis communautaire* (Vatta 2001) - has also created an unstable, indeed 'turbulent' environment that is quite unlike that in the established member states (Keller and Bansbach 2000). Some authors have, also, strongly emphasised the ways in which industrial relations systems in

Europe are embedded in national cultures and ideological traditions (Yruela and Del Rosal 1999; Candland and Sil 2001). As early as the mid-1990s there was recognition that, though the problems being addressed by trade unions might be the same across the EU members states, these commonalities served only to highlight differences in response and union culture (Prince 1995). This was especially true of the contrast between the unions of the highly productive industrial countries of Northern Europe in the German zone of economic influence and those of the more agrarian Southern European countries (Waddington *et al.* 1997).

One significant issue, here, in relation to the wider question of the possibilities for a convergent European trade unionism, is the fact that the differentials introduced by the entry of the CEE states may impose greater fragmentation on industrial relations systems across the EU (Vickerstaff and Thirkell 2000; Berndt and Bansbach 2000). If this proves to be the case then it adds one more centrifugal force to an already complex and contradictory situation for trade unions in Europe. All those interviewed at the European level stressed the challenge posed by EU expansion. At the heart of this issue was, again, the threat of 'social dumping' whereby huge differences in working conditions and wages between established member states and newcomer states would lead to a downward pressure on those of workers of the richer countries.



[1] *Enlargement is finished really. But the big issue is still the difference between the EU countries and also the differences between them and the new member states. Then are the three candidate countries behind them. Bulgaria, Rumania and Turkey. All of this increases the differences within Europe. Our position is that this creates the need for more integration, more minimum standards, more distribution of resources. But of course there are those who say the opposite – that this is a reason to do less and not more. (BSa)*

[2] *There are many, many issues that are to do with EU expansion. The biggest one of course is the pressure on wages. There is also the pressure on social protection and the fear of illegal immigration. There is a transition period of seven years during which time people cannot move freely but of course in neighbouring border areas people are still going to move across those borders. I mean from Vienna to Bratislava its just 45 minutes and the salaries in Vienna are maybe ten times higher. So you can see how the pressure on wages in the EU will be down and not up unless we can do something about it. (BT-S)*

The problems caused by deprivation across the expanded EU will become all the more serious if the EU continues in its aim of meeting the ambitious targets of 3% economic growth per annum and full

employment by 2010 set out at the Lisbon Council in 2000. Such targets are likely to worsen inequalities with respect to the CEE countries (Goetschy 2002).

Some have characterised the situation for industrial relations as representing a tension between convergences of economic development and divergences of national and organizational culture (Smith 1999). The increased and intensified inequity of union representation and recognition, if left unchallenged, would serve only to undermine the prospect of unions within the EU operating on the basis of trans-national, European region solidarity.

### ***European Works Councils (EWCs)***

In 1994 the Works Council Directive was lauded as a great break-through for unions in Europe. It was seen by many as providing an institutional framework that might work for unions at the European level, including for the unions of the newer member states. Where employers were reluctant the instruments of the EU and the Directive could apply pressure in order to bring them around. The research conducted for this thesis, however, reveals a much more downbeat assessment of the performance of the EWCs. A general view from these interviews was that the experience of the councils has been mixed, varying from one company council to the next and also in terms of different levels of commitment amongst national trade unions. Whereas institutional factors

play a role in constraining the room for manoeuvre for those working within EWCs (Gilman and Marginson 2002) in some cases, nonetheless, it was pointed out that key individuals could make a huge difference. Where enthusiastic or talented coordinators existed this could go along way to producing an effective council.

*The European Works Councils – that's a very mixed picture really. Some of them can be very good. Some of them are disastrous. Disastrous because there is no trade union presence. We still want to work with them and our attitude is that we have to make them work. The problem that we have at the European level though is the lack of resources. A lot depends on having just one person with the job of coordinating things. That can make all the difference. This is one thing that we are doing. We are creating coordinators for each EWC who can network with other coordinators so that they relate to each other and support each other. (BT-S)*

The issue of union commitment was highlighted by the interviewee from UNI-Europa. Her comments were significant in that she brought in the earlier discussed themes of language, culture and proper understanding amongst the national unions of different countries. It illustrates the real difficulties still caused by this old problem in a contemporary context.

*Part of the difficulty in working through the EWCs is that there are still communications problems on our side – between the unions. So if you want to understand what the Swedes are saying in an EWC when they speak, or the what the Spanish are really saying when they speak, you need to understand where they are coming from. It not just about translating the words. It's a cultural thing. That is key. If that is not grasped it can lead to big mis-understandings. (BT-S)*

What was stressed here was the fact that the issue was not primarily one of technical translation. Rather the most important factor, according to this official, was culture and context. Some authors working in this area have stressed that EWCs do not exist separately from society but rather operate within 'interactive fields' that are not only governed by formal structures but are also cultural (Herman and Jacobi 2000; Traub-Merz 2001; O'Hagan 2005; Hall *et al.* 2003). Language was seen as carrying political overtones related to differentials of power. Insensitivities to do with language by British officials in particular, were seen as compounding the difficulties in an already problematic area.

*One should not forget that context is everything. Languages carry culture and ideology. My English is quite good but I think very carefully before I say a word sometimes because I might use a word when I don't really understand its cultural links and so on. You have to understand that. It's a very*

*sensitive issue with the Nordic people. They want everything in their own language full stop. Otherwise its imperialism - you know the sort of thing. 'Why should we accept it' and so on. Native English speakers really need to take this seriously. They are at a huge advantage. (BT-S)*

This official went on to explain her strong feeling on this question. As she pointed out, what she saw as the dismissiveness of the British officials towards their colleagues in Europe, apart from being objectionable in and of itself, was also unwarranted when one compared the mobilising power of the respective union centres.

*These people are powerful in their own countries. Just look at what the CGIL in Italy can do. It puts the TUC in Britain to shame. (BT-S)*

On the account given thus far it would seem that the EWCs do not typically provide a stable platform for the development of strategies of labour revitalization.

Some authors writing on this topic have, however, pointed to what they see as ambivalence in the potential of EWCs. There is, on the one hand, a clear danger that, through their involvement in EWCs trade unions may become incorporated into arrangements with employers' organizations that are to the detriment of the proper representation of their members'

interests. On the other hand, however, some see the possibility of subverting these structures to the benefit of more mobilising modes of practice that may bolster the position of trade unions in many respects (Weston and Martínez Lucio 1998). Turner (1996), also, pointed to the ways in which European industrial relations structures had emerged ahead of any kind of worker-militancy or cross-border action. Nonetheless, for Turner, they had provided a ‘superstructure’ for such actions that had, in fact, unwittingly, served unions well. Others have seen a potential for linking the development of EWCs with the growth of international trade union policies and practice beyond the European level (Steiert 2001).

An optimistic assessment of the contribution that EWCs may be making for trade unions came from the Assistant General Secretary of the EMF. He explained that all union business, including that carried out on the EUCOB@ internet platform discussed in the previous section, was conducted in three languages, those being English, German and French. These three languages between them were said to provide a sufficient range to allow most national trade unions to participate at some level even if none of them were native to their country. The EMF also has shifted to an arrangement of coordination for its EWCs such that all coordinators are from the EMF itself, rather than being from one of the national affiliate unions. This arrangement locks the EMF and therefore European perspectives for this sector, into its affiliates’ activities within their respective EWCs. It also means that the EWC coordinators who are

based within the EMF rather than within a national union are in a position which, in terms of political authority and strategic control, supersedes that of national officers.

The sector within which the EMF organizes contains the auto-manufacturing sub-sector, in which many companies are familiar to working with trade unions and have been committed on some level to engaging with them through EWCs. How representative the experience of the EMF is in EWCs is therefore a moot point. In fact this EMF official, having given the most upbeat account of trade union experience within the EWCs, then went on to describe, in some detail, the enormous obstacles involved in achieving any meaningful results in areas such as bargaining or social and labour market regulation.

### ***Problems for European collective bargaining (ECB)***

A key issue, according to EMF official interviewed, is that of the difficulties surrounding the establishing of comparators that are meaningful to all national affiliates for ‘whole value bargaining’ across the EU. This is crucial for the emergence of common agendas and unified actions across the European trade union movement. It is significant, for example, that the first properly coordinated action by the EMF was that over the Working Time Directive in 1996 where some common aims could be identified for European unions in the sector. It nonetheless took

two years of internal debate and negotiation to achieve a common aim that had the support of all national affiliates, reflecting the highly complex nature of the process.

*A wide range of subjects has to be taken into account, merely in the area of wages and salaries, including, hourly and monthly wages or uniform collective agreements on pay for blue- and white-collar workers, holiday and Christmas bonuses, asset formation, bonuses for overtime and work on public holidays. In addition there is the highly varied domain of qualitative areas of coverage, including working time policy, health protection, continuing training, equal opportunities and so on, not forgetting the existing differences as to whether collective bargaining or statutory arrangements take priority. (Schulten 2001: 325)*

A traditional view within the trade union movement has been that, whereas workers in different countries are separated by different levels of remuneration, the one thing that meant the same thing in every national context was time. To put it in the colloquial, a shorter working week means the same in any country. As this interviewee explained, however, this is not the case for different countries across Europe. The stress again, as for language, was on context - both of social and cultural environment and of bargaining regimes. In the 1970s the aim was to achieve a 35 hour week for all workers in the sector. But, as the Assistant General Secretary



of the EMF went to emphasise, the reality of working time cannot be simply read-off from a figure like this. So in Germany, for instance, after 1994, the 35 hour week had been won. The national agreement that had been agreed, however, included caveats around worker flexibility that in many cases would, in effect, mean that workers worked longer than this. Also, importantly, the 35 hour agreement referred to working time in the most literal sense. In other words it did not include time during which machines were being started up, break times or washing and changing time. He went on to explain that in other countries, such as in France, Spain and Italy the national agreement on hours did include elements that were additional to actual working time. He illustrated his point further by reference to the Belgian case.

*In Belgium, the national agreement says 38 hours. But 38 hours in shift work means that all shifts are included in the 38 hours – night and day. Manning levels and work-patterns change [for different kinds of shift]. It means that if you are looking at this in reality you are working 35½ [hours] in night-shift work. In day work it is about 37½ hours - but still less than the 38. Also this is a national agreement. Most companies, are lower than 38 hours in Belgium. In most companies the average in the Belgium metal industry is 37 hours. So the Belgians are saying to the Germans, actually we have better deal than you. It explains quite a lot of the debate we have been having. Another element [is] flexibility*

*which plays an enormous role and there are other different cultures and traditions there. (BSa)*

This last point regarding flexibility was illustrated by reference to Finland and Spain. In Finland, for example, there is a tendency for employers to want to push as much production towards the middle of day. In conditions of short day-light these hours tend to be the most productive. This is very different than the situation in Spain where they tend to be the least productive for reasons to do with climate, culture and, he suggested, national temperament. Such factors have a bearing upon how and during which part of the day employers are prepared to allow for flexible working and upon what meaning they have for workers. It was not possible to say then, from a trade union point of view, that a normal working day should start at 7am. for day work and should be between 7pm. and 4am. for night work. Such an arrangement would not be acceptable in the countries of Southern Europe where workers would expect to have two or three hour lunch-time periods.

Another factor that made the setting of minimum standards by European trade unions difficult was that some national agreements had reduced working time to meet the Working Time Directive, but had done so by increasing holiday entitlements, thus reducing average working time across the year, rather than according to the working day. It was also recognised that variations in retirement age, as well as the option of early retirement in some countries, reduced working time across a working life

making a minimum standard based on average working time even more difficult to calculate. For example, in Belgium the retirement at fifty-seven is possible for workers, making the average working week in fact around thirty hours for many workers.

Such complications have meant that the EMF has adopted an annualised minimum standard of 1,750 hours a year. This means a working week of thirty-eight hours. 1,750 hours a year, then, or thirty-eight hours a week is the absolute minimum standard that European trade unions in this sector are now prepared to accept whereas thirty-five hours a week is their aim. Similar difficulties have been experienced by the EMF in establishing agreement amongst national affiliates on the question of wages. At the 1998 EMF congress a decision was made to accept wage coordination across the EU. The EMF official explained that two debates had occurred around this issue. At the time of this interview in 2003 only one of these debates had been resolved. The situation would not have been helped by the ‘crisis’ of the solidaristic wage policy that had tended to reduce wage differentials and spread wages ‘thickly’ around an average (Shulten 2001). The ‘solidaristic’ model was one that became embedded in the corporatist-welfarist era of the 1960s. Its demise is one, very specific and conspicuous, manifestation of the morphing of the EU into an essentially neo-liberal entity. Moreover, it is far from being the case that the unions of different member states have responded in a uniform fashion to the move towards neo-liberal reform (Bieler 2003). A further difficulty is simply the lack of reliable data available to trade unions in relation to

comparators and harmonization requirements (Hoffman and Mermet 2000).

The debate that was still ongoing within the EMF after five years was that of the minimum wage. The EMF official made the point that it is not the case the one Euro has the same value in Finland and in Spain. Factors such as cost of living and average purchasing power are important variables that have to be included in any attempt to establish comparators across different countries and regions in Europe. At the time of the interview consensus was said to settling around the idea of establishing a minimum wage, on which European trade unions could agree, as being a percentage of each country's average industrial wage.

One concern within this debate was that of the danger of employers using a minimum standard on wages based upon the principle of average earnings against unions and their members in certain anomalous situations – in other words of averaging down. This led on to a second debate that had been less difficult. This was around the question of the basic principles of wage coordination. The first principle that had been agreed was that all wage settlements had to increase earnings for trade union members in relation to the inflation rate of each country. Even if the rate of increase was very marginally above the rate of inflation then purchasing power would still be raised.

Another principle that was agreed was that the total value of any deal that was struck with employers had to be considered and also had to represent an overall improvement for workers. This resulted from the fact that deals struck with employers covered many facets of the employment contract including retirement schemes, training, working time reduction and so on. The principles agreed, then, were designed to ensure that the overall direction of all bargaining with employers was towards an upgrading of employment conditions in this sector across the EU, and towards an averaging-up rather than down for national affiliates.

This account of the difficulties of establishing agreed comparators amongst national affiliates within the EMF is contradictory. On the one hand it does indeed present a picture that reveals the complexity involved in the emergence of a European trade unionism in any meaningful sense. Such technical complexities have also been evidenced through the experience of unions working in the European graphical sector (Gennard 2004). On the other hand it is also the case that, of all of the EIFs, the EMF is the furthest ahead in forging precisely such a European identity. Indeed the fact that the EMF has encountered the difficulties that it has with this work, merely reflects the degree to which it has engaged with this project. The Assistant General Secretary pointed out in his closing comments on this theme, that the process of debate and disagreement within the EMF on the issues of working time and wage coordination had also raised questions of shifting some national autonomy towards the European level. In the process of setting out an essentially European

framework on these issues it had become clear that some national affiliates were uncomfortable with the prospect of losing sovereignty over their affairs. This has been recognised as a significant obstacle within the European trade union movement since at least the mid 1990s when the issue of whether trans-national strategies could be employed to defend national structures became pressing (HK/INDUSTRI 1997). Within the EMF this problem is being tackled with the response explained in the following quote:

*We are saying to those affiliates 'look, we will work within the frameworks that we agree, but we will leave enough flexibility for you to set your own priorities'. For instance if in one country they prefer to negotiate about early retirement and in another about training then that is fine – we will not restrict [them]. All we are saying is that this is the framework. (BSa)*

### *Summary*

As has been stated, the overall assessments of organizing at the European level were often ambivalent and sometimes even contradictory. Whilst there were accounts that pointed to a dynamic culture of activist interaction across national borders in Europe, there were also accounts that emphasised the enormous difficulties involved in achieving harmonized working at the more official levels. With regard to

assessments of the reality of revitalization it would seem that a disaggregation of the higher, official levels of union activity from the more activist levels is necessary to achieve a more clearly defined picture.

### ***Organizational restructuring***

On the theme of organizational restructuring, the research interview data presented a picture that corresponded to the analysis put forward by Behrens, Hurd and Waddington (2004) in some limited senses. Firstly it is true that structural adjustment, a factor that is emphasised as being relevant to this union revitalization strategy, does feature in the general environment within which the European trade unions operate. This is simply by virtue of the fact that the EU itself has been through numerous phases of restructuring as it has moved towards Continental convergence in the post-War era. There was also some evidence of internal change to European trade union organizations that did have significance for union governance, administration and resource allocation – akin to one aspect of the ‘internal restructuring’ identified by these authors. There was little, if any evidence, however, of the kinds of ‘aggressive’ or ‘defensive’ restructuring by which unions seek to respectively either absorb smaller organizations or merge in order to survive in a situation of membership decline. In one case, that of the EMF, there was strong evidence provided by the interview data of a creative use of ICT that was said to be taking pan-European trade union working to a new level. This, latter case, can be seen as providing one exceptional, though nonetheless important

example of the kinds of transformative restructuring that these authors regard as representing ‘real’ revitalization.

### ***The prospects of European trade union convergence***

With regard to the ETUC as an institution in itself the theme of restructuring has been a largely continuous one since its inception in the early 1970s. As commented at the beginning of this chapter the ETUC has developed in ways that have followed, more or less, the same line of development as that of the European economic and political institutions themselves. Throughout this history the ETUC has also taken on functions that are increasingly recognisable as those of a trade union body.

*We have been in existence since the early ‘70s. We began as a kind of lobby. Little by little we developed different aspects of trade unionism in our work. You can see it in how our statutes have developed. We started off saying that we should lobby the institutions and then we added that we should form relationships with employers, then came Social Dialogue and then more recently that we should develop some trade union strategies. Its been an incremental process really. (PC)*

This interviewee went on to explain that the turning point had come in 1991 when the ETUC won its right to negotiate agreements at the



European level and the right to implement European policy either independently or through directives issued in conjunction with employers. Indeed, at the time, this seemed to be a breathtaking development. Officials from the Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations (UNICE), the European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest (CEEP) and the ETUC, the chief organizations involved in social partnership protocol negotiations, were surprised that the framework that they had agreed between them was adopted almost wholesale by the Maastricht Treaty of that year (Falkner 2000). From 1991 onwards, then, the European processes of the ETUC were steadily refined with proper mandating, systems for reporting back to affiliates, systems for monitoring progress and, most recently, policy approval by qualified majority voting. This kind of view, suggesting an onward march towards ever greater degrees of union convergence and coherence at the European level, has also been supported in some of the related literature (Dølvik 2000).

The process of an increasing concentration of trade union functions within the ETUC, however, was thought by some to be losing momentum. The sense being expressed here was that the more these processes developed, the more real questions regarding the relinquishing of power became. The view was that as this happened more serious resistance to transfers of sovereignty also began to emerge. The tensions that resulted were played out over issues to do with the sharing of

information amongst other things. Capacity, also, was said to be an issue here. The staffing level of the ETUC at the time these interviews were conducted was around sixty. Compared to the secretariats of the EIFs and of the larger national affiliates this represents a very small organizational capacity. This issue of low capacity for the ETUC meant that it was unlikely to be able to overcome the deeply embedded obstacles to the further Europeanization of trade union functions. This, more problematised picture, resonates strongly with the view put forward by Goetschy (1996) in whose opinion the ETUC had remained a political vehicle for reconciling national differences between unions. On this view it has achieved institutional, rather than material progress for worker-members and remains removed from the routines and experience of its national member affiliates.

The resistance to higher levels of European integration at the national level was put succinctly by an EPSU officer who gave one of the most downbeat assessments of its prospects.

*The bottom line is – and we keep coming round to this again and again – is that the national leaders are the gate-keepers to any more European trade unionism. And by and large they won't budge. (BSy)*

Language was said to be one of the main barriers. This was a point that was made repeatedly in interviews. One interviewee at EPSU, however,

gave the point an added dimension in linking it directly with a tendency towards bureaucracy within European level processes. Whilst cross-border working remained bi-lateral this tendency was not so evident. Once people began to meet together from several different countries, he explained, however, the complexities of interpretation meant that formalised processes were required for any kind of rational and purposeful dialogue to occur. Moreover, when differences of national organizational culture were taken into consideration, as they had to be, then institutionalised ways of working became even more necessary. This problem was also something that was said to limit the effectiveness of European trade unionism in relation to its impact on EU policy. The view was that institutionalised ways of working reduced the ability of unions to be innovative in their approaches and strategies and meant that they continued to rely on established policy instruments that could be understood by all parties. This brought the matter back to the question of the control of policy processes. The point, he explained, was that the trade unions tend to have very little control over the policy instruments of the EU which anyway, from the point of view of the trade union interest, tend to be weak.

The most optimistic assessment of the prospects for the emergence of a pan-European trade unionism came from the Assistant General Secretary of the EMF whose comments on bargaining convergence we have already seen. He did foresee potential difficulties in terms of articulating policy with respect to the ETUC, but nonetheless saw them as surmountable.

Discussion around the theme of the involvement of the EMF in the Anti-globalisation Movement, for instance, revealed significant shifts in the levels of autonomy with which that organization determines its policy in relation to the ETUC. The EMF, it was explained, had, in previous years, been involved in social movements, including the Anti-globalisation Movement, through the ETUC. In other words the EMF had always acted within ETUC policy and committed itself to such social movements insofar as the ETUC was also so committed. This inter-relationship between the EMF and the ETUC, however, was said to be changing. As the EMF itself became a more integrated European body, shifting in the process from being a federation to becoming a more coherent sectoral European trade union, so it was prepared to take more independent policy stances on any given issue. This was not to say that policy conflict had occurred or was likely. It simply meant that the processes by which policy was developed and expressed were becoming much more autonomous of the European confederation. It was also explained, however, that the internal policy instruments of the EMF were inadequate when it came to really delivering a unified EMF policy across the EU member states. Nonetheless, the Assistant General Secretary was confident that this was the direction in which things were moving for his federation. Within this process the interrelationship between the EMF and its national affiliates was also said to be changing with sovereignty shifting in favour of the federation.

*Now we are moving towards a number of issues where we are saying it is the EMF who takes the decision ... and you more or less have to follow that. There are still not enough instruments to make this become policy. We know that. But still it is definitely going in that direction. If you are looking at it in that sense, it means also that you are moving towards some kind of European trade union. Its the same change-over as we saw 100 years ago in most other countries from locally based to national trade unions. So it's an evolution. So for us a part of that evolution is also that the ETUC has to make that same transition and they are doing it on a pace which is just a bit slower than ours. But it means also that we saying that we have to act as, for instance, the Transport and General Workers [Union], in Britain would act inside the TUC. In concert with that but with their own policy. (BSa)*

Some of the sensitivities that have opened up within the EMF in relation to the Europeanization of policy have continued. On the one hand, the EMF was said to be playing a pioneering role in this area with other EIFs following its lead, for example on European-wide wage bargaining coordination. On the other hand, it seemed that on more political issues the EMF leadership was not comfortable being 'ahead' of the ETUC, preferring, wherever possible, to be seen to be acting with and through it. The policy of the EMF in opposing the Iraq war was given as an illustration. As this official put it, once the policy decision had been taken

to oppose the war on the principle of the lack of a second UN resolution, the next priority was to ensure that the EMF was acting in step with the ETUC.

*We decided to work 200% to make sure that we were not doing anything different from the ETUC. We were a little bit more reluctant to do it in the sense that we said this is a bit difficult because we are running in front of the ETUC. We would have in fact have preferred that the ETUC was running a bit in front. We said we still have the right and a duty to take a position on that issue. So in that sense yes, we are working together in general civil society. But we are mostly working with a policy of trying to co-ordinate that within the ETUC. (BSa)*

The EMF again stands out as an exceptional case. Considering the structural changes needed to meet challenges in the federation's changing environment, it is responding with vigour and imagination. It seeks, however, to limit these developments, in policy terms at least, within the confines of the ETUC. This self-limitation suggests an awareness of the relative isolation of the EMF in forging ahead as a European trade union body and underlines the fact that it cannot be seen as typical.

Whilst all interviewees stressed the difficulties and obstacles involved in establishing a pan-European trade unionism, it was clear that equally the

issues had been explored and debated within these organizations. In other words some efforts had been made to move in this direction. One interviewee, as we have seen, who stood out as an exceptional case in his optimistic assessment of the question, was convinced that this was, nonetheless, the direction in which things were moving within his union sector. Indeed, his view at this time has since been vindicated with the establishing of a 'super union' that brings together unions in the engineering and manufacturing sectors in the UK, Germany and the US.

### ***The impact of ICT***

An important change in the environment in which trade unions operate has been the rise of electronic forms of communication. There are different aspects to this development for trade unions. One is that the emergence of ICT has, in effect, introduced a new employment sector that has grown rapidly within EU member-state economies. This represents an important area of recruitment in the software, computer design and manufacture, retail and call-centre companies associated with it. There is also the fact of the displacement of old industrial methods of manufacture by new information technologies especially in the printing industry. Indeed ICT has had a major impact upon employment patterns in many sectors including banking and commerce. Another aspect is the changes introduced in the dynamics of work, with an increasing separation of work from the work-place in some sectors. Again these are particularly significant issues for the developed European industrial

economies. They are also areas that are generating possibilities for unions to engage with new social layers through innovative modes of cross-border practice. A good example is that of students employed in call-centres working for Citibank, Germany. These part-time student workers used their ICT skills to communicate with workers in Citibank's call-centres in other countries in a campaign that won concessions from the company over working conditions (Kahmann 2003). It is the significance of the internet for organizing across national borders, its impact upon the ways of working employed by European level trade union organizations and its potential for revitalization, however, that is the main focus in this research.

Views of new forms of internet-based communication fell across the same spectrum as for those that were found at the level of the global unions. Several interviewees explained that in their opinion the internet, whilst useful as a tool for disseminating information and indispensable for a modern trade union, nonetheless could not replace traditional face-to-face forms of communication and member interaction.

[1] *I don't think it [the internet] has had much of an influence ... trade unionism is still very much a face-to-face affair and about being present. IT can help – it has helped. But there is a limit. (PC)*



[2] *I don't think that internet has radically changed things for us. We are working faster because of it that's for sure and also with less people. It has also helped us to get rid of some useless meetings. But not the important ones. You will not get rid of the executive meetings or the management committees. For really important stuff you have to do it face to face. You can send it ahead electronically and get comments and so on. But to come to a position you have to meet. It has made communications more efficient certainly but it hasn't changed what we are or what we are doing. (BT-S)*

The hint in the quote given above that the internet had intensified the work processes within trade unions, as it has for many types of organization, resonates with a consistent complaint, to do with information over-load, that was expressed by several interviewees. This was said to be certainly true of the European level of trade union work where geographical distance made e-mail communication especially important.

A number of interviewees were of the opinion that the impact of the internet could not in fact be summarised in a simple manner. Rather it had to be considered in its different aspects. One view offered was that trade unions in Europe had not been effective in developing capacity and organizational management systems. The traditional strengths of unions, it was explained, were more those of mobilisation and representation. The

introduction of internet-based communications tools, in this view, came under the general area of developing internal capacity and this suggested one reason why unions may have under-exploited the full potential of the internet in their work so far. This reported under-exploitation of ICT may be a peculiarly European phenomenon within the OECD countries. There is evidence, for instance, that US unions are developing a far more proactive and imaginative relationship with new communications technologies (Pinnock 2005; Stevens and Greer 2005; Newman 2005). There is also evidence that variations in internet use exist across the unions of the EU member states (Walker 2002; Aalto-Matturi 2005).

Another important variable identified for assessing the impact of the internet, was difference according to sector. In some sectors, such as education and government services levels of ICT literacy are far higher than in those sectors that are less information and knowledge based. Within this, another factor was differentials in work-force turn-over from one sector to the next.

*In some sectors – catering and retail for example – the turn-over of staff is so high that you just cannot build up that level of organizational capacity and in-house skills to be able to really exploit things like the internet to their fullest potential. Really to have good communications you need stability and even when you have stability IT cannot substitute for more traditional forms of communication. (PC)*

Ambivalence was apparent in many of the responses given to questions about the impact of the internet, and interviewees sometimes gave contradictory opinions within the same interview. The ETUC official quoted above, for example, went on to describe the way in which electronic communications systems had transformed the organization of conferences. Far more information is disseminated before conferences and in between conferences than in the past, she explained. The outcomes from conferences are broadcast far more efficiently. Conference business has been improved by electronic forms of interactive dialogue. For this interviewee the impact of the internet was best understood as having coincided with a cultural change in the ways in which trade unions seek to relate to their members. As she put it:

*I think that unions have understood that there is a need to involve people who have other things to do with their lives than sit in meetings all day. (PC)*

One striking innovation was identified through the research. Within the EMF an internet-based forum has been established that allows its participants to converse confidentially and with the security of knowing that only authorised individuals will be able to access the exchanges occurring. This system, known as EUCOB@, is essentially an e-forum similar to those becoming increasingly familiar commercially in the worlds of business and on-line social networking. The particular

significance of EUCOB@ is that it coincides with, and is facilitating, shifts in the direction of European level policy formation as well as efforts towards European collective bargaining. This is an important development. Up until such innovations began to appear the prospect of a real European trade unionism was limited by the logistical problems of geographical distance and entrenched national level policy processes. As has already been described, several interviewees in this research project were of the view that for policy decisions face-to-face contact was indispensable. The Assistant General Secretary of the EMF, however, explained that what EUCOB@ offers is a vehicle by which sensitive information can be exchanged, issues can be vigorously and confidentially debated and broad policy positions reached. The formal making of policy through this on-line platform was seen as being the next logical stage in this process.

*We have got what we are calling EUCOB@. It combines the necessary principles and tools for European collective bargaining. It is simple and is in all languages that we would normally use. [It] is an internet-based system - namely email because we want to keep it a bit confidential ... each trade union is affiliated to the EMF - that is, for the moment, 58 - can have a correspondence on EUCOB@. This was the start of it. Now we have a similar network for the EWCs and we will create a similar one for the economic database. It has evolved, but this was the first that was established - and it*

*doesn't always work in the same [way]. The one for the EWC's works in a different way than the one for collective bargaining. The principle remains the same. For EUCOB@, there are only three or four organizations missing which are not participating for one reason or another. We are still trying to convince them, but sometimes it is also a matter of making clear [the necessity of being involved]. For instance we still [do not have] Malta and Cyprus. They don't see the usefulness of it at the moment. We want to include them but there are still some missing. All of the others have a correspondence. You ask about European trade unions. Yes. And this is how it happens. (BSa)*

EUCOB@, it was reported, has hugely enhanced the ability of the EMF to intervene in support of affiliates in negotiations with employers, to respond to events and to disseminate vital information that has a sensitive content but which is nonetheless required urgently by an affiliate. In situations that require the rapid dissemination of information that would otherwise become out of date before it could be used, the issue of language was seen by this official as being of secondary importance. All unions, he explained, had someone in their office whose command of English was sufficiently strong to send and receive information for their organizations. This does confirm the view referred to earlier that the internet is increasing the dominance of the English language within European trade union practice. A clear finding, however, was that the role

of the internet for trade unions at the European level is inseparable from issues to do with language. The largely Anglophone nature of the internet was commented on by many interviewees who saw it as an obstacle to European level trade unionism. The problem of language is an old and familiar one for European unions. Some, however, saw the internet as having reinforced the dominance of the English language in their own internal affairs. This point was put strongly by an official at UNI-Europa:

*One problem with the internet is that most of the things we are putting onto it – onto our web-site are in English. They won't be read by people from the South. So how can you expect someone who has been elected for their ability to negotiate and not for his ability to speak English to take part in internet dialogue. It just isn't going to happen. (BT-S)*

In her view an over-reliance on internet communications could actually be damaging to the process of trust-building between unions that were trying to work together trans-nationally across the EU. On this view the presence of the internet could deepen national divisions, undermine trust and, in reality, become an impediment to the revitalization of European trade unionism. Such a possibility resonates with speculation upon a 'dark-side' to information technology in the literature around the use that trade unions are making of ICT (*e.g.* Chaison 2005).

Contrary to the business-like attitude to the issue of language that was expressed by the EMF official quoted earlier several interviewees stressed the point that language remains a considerable barrier to the convergence of trade unions at the European level. Indeed this was a commonly expressed view. It does seem, on the strength of these interviews, that despite the trends of EU expansion, new communications technologies and institutional convergence, that difficulties to do with translation, interpretation, cultural context and political sensitivities around the issue of language, pose a major, if not *the* major, obstacle to higher levels of political and practical unity. The interviewees who commented in this way were all reflecting on the possibilities of a more unified institutional framework for trade unions at the European level. Their concerns were more to do with the processes and structures of the European trade union bodies themselves, rather than face-to-face contact between activists and worker-members. Nonetheless, the institutional dimension of European trade union structures is crucial to the mediation and articulation of any trans-national trade union identity and practice. The ongoing problem of language then, serves as a counter-weight to optimistic assessments of the potential for a more thorough-going European trade unionism to emerge.

*The old problems of language aren't going to go away – at least not for a very long time. Doing everything in one language is not going to please everyone of course. A lot of people are left out if we do that. But then again the more*

*languages you are working in the more complex your translation systems have to be. This is an enlargement issue actually. It is a technical barrier. (PC)*

The upbeat assessment of the contribution of the internet to European trade unionism from the EMF official interviewed was again not typical. Moreover, the example given of a genuine innovation that was made possible by the internet – an on-line discussion forum, EUCOB@ – was an exception to the rule, albeit an important and impressive one.

### *Summary*

The overall tenor of the interviews was that of a downbeat assessment of the prospects of European trade unionism for most sectors. Despite the significance attached to this level of trade unionism by Behrens, Hurd and Waddington (2004), most of the trade unionists interviewed emphasised the problems for any proposed emergence of a truly ‘Europeanized’ trade unionism. The sorts of difficulties highlighted included those of national union sovereignty, language barriers with respect to face-to-face communication as well as on-line dialogue, a lack of adequate policy instruments to facilitate engagement between trade unions, employer organizations and the commissions of the EU, and variations in national cultures of industrial relations and trade union practice. In one, exceptional case, that of the EMF official interviewed, a much more optimistic assessment was given. This seems to have



reflected a particular pattern of sectoral development and a political history that created a greater potential for convergence than was the case for other sectors and EIFs.

### Coalition building

The approach that Frege *et al.* (2004) adopt for an understanding of coalition building identifies five sorts of resource that they bring to unions. One was directly applicable to a strong theme in the data which was that of changing membership compositions. This was relevant at the European level insofar as European trade unions, as we have seen already, were reported to be currently proactive in seeking to reach and recruit amongst migrant workers. This was often a key motivation for forming coalitions with organizations that had contact with such otherwise marginalised groups and which could lend credibility to the unions' efforts.

This framework offers two ways in which coalitions can be characterised. Firstly, there is the nature of the relationship between the union and its partners. The examples of coalitions that were mentioned for the European level tended to be what these authors characterise as 'common cause' coalitions through which the unions conduct their lobbying strategies within EU political and policy processes. The second means of classification is that of the nature of the coalition's interaction with the state. This approach reveals a significant change at the European level.

Perhaps even as recently as the mid-1990s, unions were reported as having been involved within coalitions as ‘insiders’, accepted by governments’ and by the European Commission as legitimate players in the policy arena. Most of the trade union officers interviewed, however, suggested in their responses on this theme that this was less and less the case. Most expressed scepticism regarding the status of unions as ‘social partners’ in the Social Dialogue process. These union officers saw themselves as being increasingly pushed out of meaningful partnership roles and being forced to act more and more as ‘outsiders’ along with their coalition partners. This, several of them pointed out, went some way to explaining the presence of European trade unions at the European Social Forums that have occurred since 2002.

### *Issues of organizational culture and policy*

The question of the relationship between unions and social movement organizations is important for considerations of labour internationalism in that so much of the innovative political practice that has had a trans-national dimension to it has been within such movements. This has been especially true of the Anti-globalisation Movement and, emerging out of it, the Social Forum Movement. The European Social Forums in 2002 in Florence, in 2003 in Paris, and 2005 in Athens especially, drew together activists from across the EU member states and beyond.

A spectrum of opinion on the question of coalition building with social movements and NGOs was revealed by the research interviews ranging from the enthusiastic through to the sceptical. Some degree of ambivalence characterised all of the interviews, even those who gave generally optimistic assessments of the working relationships that have been built. All those interviewed at the European level made some comment at least, on the very different kinds of organizations that populate the most notable and recent social movements as compared to trade unions. This may explain the slowness of European unions to act on their awareness of the potential of social movements (Behrens *et al.* 2003). There is also the fact that the Social Forum Movement, in particular, is highly fluid with discussions of purpose and strategy occurring continuously at organizing forums and amongst activists (Rioufol 2004). A point made frequently was that unions are democratic and accountable organizations and are responsible to their members. The fact that many social movement organizations, though often far more dynamic and innovative, were not formally accountable in the same ways, was seen as a major difference of organizational culture and something that, at the very least, complicated their relationship with trade unions. This problem for coalition building between Anti-globalization Movement organizations and unions has also been documented in the literature on the subject (*e.g.* Féron 2004). The following is a typical comment on the issue from an interviewee:

*The question of the movements is never straight-forward for trade unions. They are a different type of voice. We have different responsibilities as well. I still think that it's important to keep the general picture clear and to set up good democratic structures which can organize and be accountable. The unions are different from the movements in that respect. Lots of people in the social movements think that that is boring, traditional and so on. But I think that it's also a strength. (PC)*

Difficulties in relating to non-union organizations were not only to do with structural and cultural issues, however. It was also the case that real differences of policy, politics and interpretations of interest existed between unions and some elements, at least, of current social movements. An interviewee at UNI-Europa, for example, pointed out that unions in Europe are “not in favour of closing the borders”. With this in mind, she explained, unions could not take a simple, or unqualified ‘anti-globalisation’ position. This stance did set the European unions apart to a degree from some political tendencies within the Anti-globalisation Movement.

### ***Converging agendas***

A counter to the above analysis came from the ETUC officer interviewed to the effect that, despite differences of organizational style,

convergences are possible today that were not possible even a decade ago. One reason she cited for this was that unions today, across the EU, are reviewing and changing the ways in which they seek to engage with their memberships. These changes are motivated by a number of different, though often related needs. These include the need to increase levels of participation, the need to reach out to new constituencies of potential members and the need to halt the decline in union memberships in most EU member states. This also complements calls to establish new forms of solidarity that were being made by the mid-1990s. The increasingly heterogeneous composition of the memberships of European trade unions, the argument went, called for new forms of representation and strategies of ‘coordinated diversity’ (Valkenburg and Zoll 1995; Hyman 1999 (a); Hyman 1999 (b); Waddington 2000; Waddington and Hoffman 2000). The ETUC officer went on to explain that note had been taken of the ability of recent social movements to attract high levels of active support from young people and from a diverse range of social groups. There is then, a feeling at the European level, that unions do have something to learn from movements such as that against globalisation and neo-liberalism in the EU. On the theme of relating to contemporary social movements it seems that strategies of revitalization are, at the very least, a part of the overall motivations of the European trade unions.

Several interviewees reported that there are many examples where they are working in coalition with NGOs and social movement bodies. These

were usually focused on work around single issues and tended to be labile alliances formed on an occasional 'as-needs' footing.

*We work a lot with NGOs at the European level more on issue based rather than structural areas of work. On corporate social responsibility for example where the Commission has set up a multi-stakeholder forum which the NGOs, the trade union and the employers are in. We do a lot of activities with the social platform. We have done some work recently as well with the European environmental bureau on environmental issues. On women's issues and gender ... and on more global issues – Porto Allegre and so on, we work closely with NGOs. (PC)*

This reference to the World Social Forum also points to something that was mentioned earlier in this thesis on a different theme which is that European unions seek to shape the policies of the global regulating institutions. The generally positive assessments of the alliances with NGOs and social movement groups at events like the Porto Allegre and Mumbai World Social Forums, suggest that, whatever the difficulties, mutually beneficial alliances are being formed that are beginning to enable the European unions to play an effective role at this level.

Interviewees who were based within public sector union bodies were particularly positive in their assessments of the degree of influence that

unions are exerting on positions and policies adopted by campaign coalitions at the global scale. In the following quote this point is made by reference to the impact of the PSI, through which EPSU works. Significantly, this positive assessment also highlights the fact that coalition partnership has been based, not on oppositional stances, but rather on the basis of positions that are about trying to reform the institutions of global capitalism and to ameliorate their policies.

*On the whole WTO, GATS thing, I think that our own international, the PSI, has carved out a very influential role in formulating strategy and response to the GATS negotiations. I think that has worked as an alliance between the PSI and the sort of 'there is another way' coalition rather than the outright 'anti' camp. I think that was reflected in the World Social Forum in Brazil. We've had delegations to Porte Allegre for the last two years and its worked really well. Another example would be the PSIs involvement in the World Water Forum where we have had a similar impact.*

**(BSy)**

This same interviewee also made clear his disagreement with the argument that unions needed to engage with movements such as the Anti-globalisation Movement because of their youthful composition. Although this attitude was born of a very real concern with the rising average age of trade unionists world-wide, it was nonetheless he believed, a mistaken

one and, moreover, one that under-played the importance of that movement. It was seen as damaging insofar as it perpetuated a stereotype of the movement that came from the political Right. This was the notion that the Anti-globalisation Movement was *only* youth based and that it would quickly dissipate – “like in the ‘60s”. The conclusion that could be drawn from this, he felt, was that this movement therefore had very little to say of relevance to the world of trade unions and that it therefore should not be taken seriously. His concern was that the great potential of the Anti-globalisation Movement - as a galvaniser of public opinion and as something that could bring new energies into the trade union movement - might be allowed to slip through their fingers.

Again, ambivalence characterised responses to questions for this area of inquiry. Suggestions of labour revitalization are present in the remarks made here. There was a clear recognition that the Anti-globalisation Movement, in particular, was very important for trade unions in terms of the issues animating it and the energies that it has harnessed. There was also, however, repeated hesitation as to how to relate to that movement given the differences in style and organization and over issues of representativity.

### *Summary*

The shift from ‘insider’ status within policy processes to that of ‘outsider’ status, informed many of the responses given on this theme. As for



several other areas of inquiry, the fact that unions had lost influence with institutions of government and governance was seen as being important for understanding the greater tendency of unions to engage with social movements. Difficulties resulting from differences of organizational culture were frequently referred to. Some comments did suggest, however, that such problems were also surmountable and that unions were, in fact, engaging fruitfully with a range of coalitions.

## Partnership

Fichter and Greer (2004), as we have seen, argue that partnership approaches by trade unions can be revitalizing only in certain, very specific conditions. They stress, in particular, the importance of institutional factors, combination with other strategies and linkage with a wider social horizon.

### *Assessments of the Social Dialogue*

The institutionalisation of sectoral partnership has been of historical importance for European trade unions. The existence of twenty-seven sectoral partnership arrangements, at the time of these interviews, that included trade unions, would seem to indicate that it is of ongoing importance. Testimonial evidence from other themes within this research,

however, suggests that the institutional support for such arrangements is being steadily eroded.

On the basis of the interview data relating to this strategy, we can say that this pessimistic assessment is true of cross-sectoral partnership working. Indeed the comments on this presented a clear picture of trade union efforts to achieve agreements being systematically, indeed institutionally, thwarted. No interviewees explicitly linked their comments regarding Social Dialogue with other union strategies. No interviewees linked partnership either with any wider social vision, social democratic or otherwise. All the interviewees restricted their comments to the aspects of Social Dialogue relating to labour market regulation and economic governance.

In assessing the levels of progress with union-employer partnership deals a distinction needs to be made between the sectoral and the cross-sectoral domains. Sectoral European bodies have a history that goes back to the 1960s with organizations such as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). These bodies also shaped trade union practice within their sectors. The establishing of the ECSC, for example, was one of the motivating factors behind the founding of the EMF.

The form that sectoral arrangements took from the 1960s onwards was that of quadri-partism. This involved trade unions, employer organizations, national governments and the European Commission, and

consumer organizations in dialogue over the first European policies in sectors such as agriculture and transport. These were essentially consultative bodies. In recent years a move away from consultative structures and towards more independent, policy forming social partnership bodies has occurred. Sectoral committees in the new structures now cover many more areas including service sectors that were not previously involved.

At the cross-sectoral level, however, there is not the same history. Up until the early 1990s there were no agreements at this level, according to the ETUC officer interviewed. Cross-sectoral dialogue began very cautiously in the mid-1980s with encouragement from the European Commission which helped in providing some regulatory capacity for the processes involved. In her assessment this dialogue, and therefore the prospect of meaningful cross-sectoral agreements, had been blocked by two things. These were, firstly, the obstruction of the UK government and secondly the absence of effective decision making mechanisms within the Commission for this sort of work.

The progress that has been made is of the form of broad framework agreements that flowed out of the Maastricht Treaty, and then into the Amsterdam Treaty, after the UK had lifted its veto on the Social Chapter. The ETUC officer addressed the question as to why the employers had made this important concession at that time. Recalling the political atmosphere following the end of the Cold War, she explained that there

had been an expectation that the political Left would enjoy a resurgence. This was the reason, she felt, that employer bodies were prepared to make concessions to the trade unions at the official level in order to encourage conciliation on their part.

*Many people believed, at that point, that the Left would see a resurgence. That wasn't what happened but that's what people thought. The employers saw a need to incorporate the unions into regulatory processes rather than pushing them out completely. (PC)*

The key employers' bodies with which the ETUC has worked in establishing cross-sectoral agreements are the Union des Industries de la Communauté Européenne (UNICE), the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (UAPME) and the Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest (CEEP). Since 1991 agreements have been negotiated on parental leave, part-time working, fixed term working and tele-working. A 'framework of actions' now also exists covering training issues. A 'framework' agreement lays out broad principles but leaves evaluation and monitoring to implementation plans that are established nationally. Indeed, throughout this period, the establishing of a culture of EU industrial relations practice has been seen as being as important as the material interests under discussion (Falkner 2000).

A major impediment to the establishing of cross-sectoral agreements is that not all of the employers are members of the employers-side organizations. On the trade union side all of the EIFs are represented as is the ETUC. The problem of recalcitrant companies which show no interest in Social Dialogue is one reason why cross-sectoral arrangements are still very few in number and modest in their scope. The rather ‘patchy’ reality of employer engagement in Social Dialogue processes, however, conceals a more systematic employer avoidance of engagement with organized labour. As Stevis puts it:

*This situation reflects, to a significant degree, differences within capital. It also, however, reflects a conscious strategy to avoid formalizing pan-European corporatism. (Stevis 2002)*

This downbeat assessment was supported by an evaluation of the results of the Social Dialogue process carried out for the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) in 2000 (Dølvik 2000). This report highlighted the problems of employer resistance and the lack of progress on cross-sectoral partnership or legislation. For some, this disappointing situation might have been tackled through the use of alternative models for achieving social legislation. In the late 1990s, for example, a ‘corridor model’ was proposed by which the major effort would go into the harmonization of industrial sectors where progress was thought to be achievable. Member states that already had similar conditions across a

designated sector would be grouped together into ‘corridors’ to maximise the prospects of success.

One EPSU officer, however, saw a more cynical and active form of obstruction to progress on European social partnership on the part of the European Commission itself. The EPSU officer is here describing the experience of trade unions in their involvement in the Social Commission and its submission to the drafting of the European Constitution.

*You can see the problem when you look at how the convention operates. They have 100 members from the different governments, national parliaments, the European Parliament, a couple from the Commission and from the applicant countries and from some of the satellite institutions. They have working groups on agriculture, security, the internal market and so on. But it took a huge push from the trade union movement and NGOs before they had a social working group at all. And that was set up only six weeks before the other working groups were due to present their results. The other groups had 20-30 members. The social working group had 60 making it unworkable. And when it came to it the social group was pretty much ignored. It was a polite way – well no a brutal way – of completely side-lining the social agenda. Now twenty years ago that would have caused up-roar. In fact it wouldn't have been countenanced. But today the 'social' is an after thought. So yes, the unions are defensive in Europe. And*

*really, even if we had a clearly defined vision it would be ignored.*

**(BSy)**

This perception of a systematic exclusion of trade unions from Social Dialogue processes was confirmed in an interim assessment in 2000. The researchers involved discovered that an ‘asymmetry’ in terms of access to policy instruments meant that unions found it very difficult to get any purchase on those processes. They saw this as one important reason why economic legislation tended not to ‘spill-over’ into social legislation (Berndt and Bansbach 2000).

Another aspect to this sort of sectoral trans-national interaction is linked with the attempts being made by the European unions to bolster trade union strength in the accession countries. This was also related to themes of social partnership. It had proved to be the case, for instance, that employers in the new member countries who were not used to dealing with unions had been reassured by social partnership models for recognising and working with trade unions. A good example given by the ETUC officer interviewed was that of the partnership between the retail union, USDAW, and the supermarket company, Tesco. This model, she explained, had gone along way to persuading employers in the CEE member states that recognising trade unions was not to invite industrial strife into their area of business operation.

### ***The ETUC, the EU and global policy***

In a comment that underlined the extent to which the strategies and perspectives of the European trade unions have been and still are intertwined with the EU, one interviewee described the global horizons of the ETUC itself. She pointed out that the ETUC looked increasingly beyond Europe as it sought to influence the global policies of bodies such as the WTO and the IMF. What she made clear, however, was that whilst the ETUC works with global unions, it also seeks to act through the EU itself as a social partner. In this, latter, role the ETUC is seen as essentially shadowing the EU as this body extends its economic, cultural and political influence. This observation suggests that any expanded international horizons on the part of the ETUC are, to a large extent, a continuation of the accommodationist orientation that has characterised the ETUC from its inception (Dølvik 1999).

*We have a more and more global perspective. As Europe becomes an entity on world issues then the ETUC follows – especially where there is a social dimension. Other parts of the world look to Europe as a model – something to be aspired to. We don't do it alone of course. We do it with the global unions, the ICFTU, the different ITSs etc. For example, at the moment, we are preparing for Cancún. We will be working with the ICFTU and the WCL there. (PC)*



This theme was elaborated by pointing out that the degrees of global governance represented by the WTO and the IFIs, as well as the rules by which that governance is conducted, are changing rapidly. She commented further, however, that the influence of the EU and its various commissions upon these institutions is also changing. This influence, she felt, gave the ETUC a means by which it could exert some leverage upon global policy, especially where social issues were at stake. So, whilst the ETUC is willing to work with a range of social actors and other trade union bodies in attempting to have some direct impact upon global institutions, it also seeks to work within its partnership with the EU to do the same. This is relevant to the revitalization effort of the ETUC insofar as it does seem to represent a new model of partnership or, perhaps more precisely, of partnership at a new level. It should also be recognised, however, that the question of ‘interests’ is one that ought to be foregrounded here. The purpose of the involvement of the ETUC in the global reform agenda cannot be taken at face value as something that is ‘progressive’ or unproblematic. Jacobi (2000), has pointed out, for example, that the interest of European trade unions may not be identical to those of workers in the developing world.

### *Summary*

Overall, whilst partnership has been the organizing principle of much of the activity of the ETUC its performance in recent years was reported to have been of no great benefit to trade unions and their members. In terms

of results, then, the experience of efforts to achieve partnership were said to have been disappointing. But more than this, the experience of partnership working itself was reported as having caused similar frustration. From a revitalization perspective the general view seemed to be that partnership through the European Commission, far from being a benefit in this regard, had actually been detrimental.

### Political action

Hamann and Kelly (2004) emphasise the erosion of the institutions of industrial relations systems based upon social democratic corporatist arrangements. This, they say, has undermined the organizational basis of certain forms of trade union action. This view did resonate with many of the comments made about the political aspect of the work of European trade unions. Comments upon the relevance of politics for trade unions and the ability of trade unions to influence policy and regulation were imbued with a pessimistic and even somewhat defeatist mood. The most directly relevant elements within Hamann and Kelly's framework included that of working towards achieving legislative improvement for trade unions and their members as well seeking to ensure its proper implementation. Some comment has already been made on this theme under the discussion of coalition building. The authors also point to the ways in which unions act as political lobbyists within policy processes. Again the assessments of this sort of work at the European level were downbeat. A brighter note, and one that pointed towards some evidence

of revitalization for this union strategy, was that of mobilisation in response to various pieces of EU legislation that affected particular sectors.

### *European trade unions and the Social Dialogue*

With respect to reliance on institutional relations with government bodies and with the institutions of the EU such as the European Commission, it is unions in the public sector that have the most to lose from neo-liberal economic and political orientations. Unions in this sector, certainly in many of the older member states, are also more familiar with partnership modes of working with their own national governments. Comments on responses to employer strategies therefore tended to more about the Social Dialogue that has been encouraged by the European Commission. Direct contact does occur between public sector unions and companies, however, and some comments were forthcoming on this theme.

As we have already seen in relation to ‘partnership’ as a revitalizing strategy, responses on the theme of the Social Dialogue were highly sceptical. One statement on this came from an EPSU officer who was tempted by the view that Social Dialogue had, after all, been a strategic diversion to trade unions by governments and employers. The suspicion here was that whilst EWCs and the Social Commission had maintained a façade of ultimately illusory engagement the real agenda, that of neo-

liberal state reform, had gone ahead with relatively little real resistance from trade unions at the European level.

*When we ask each other what has the Social Dialogue achieved for trade unions there is a fairly embarrassed silence. And that's after three and half years of really hard work of trying to extend the process into new areas. It makes many of us ask whether Social Dialogue has really been a dialogue at all or just a massive way of stalling the galvanising of trade unions at the European level. (BSy)*

A despondent note was struck by this interviewee also on the issue of regulation to prevent 'social dumping', or the lack of it, delivered through the Social Dialogue process. Without raising the standards of living for workers in the entrant countries, this interviewee explained, regulation of any kind would not in and of itself stop the erosion of the superior wages and conditions of workers in the more affluent countries.

*There has been a lot of lip-service and good policy documents produced. But I'm not sure if we are providing real answers. We have tended to rely on economic regulation – seeing that as the answer. But that is just not so reliable today – if it ever was. We need to be piling on the pressure for meaningful social regulation way ahead of the entry of the applicant countries. We talk about it but the action towards that is thin on the ground. The truth is that you can have all the*

*regulation in place that you want. But in reality workers will travel and employers will take them on at reduced wages. Regulation just doesn't stop that. Whilst wages are low in the new countries, workers – and especially young workers - will move. The solution lies in stronger unions and better conditions in those countries. Easy to say, but harder to achieve. (BSy)*

### ***Mobilisation and EU legislation***

The other form of European-wide mobilisation tended to be around political and policy developments emanating from the European Commission. These were often to do with competition law and with moves designed to lock national governments into de-regulation and privatization programmes. A good example here was that of the electricity workers who have held rallies drawing together thousands of activists from across the EU. What should be noted, and this is highlighted in the quote given below, is that observers point to the ideological position being taken by workers involved in these actions. In other words the actions are being staged before any detail has emerged as to what this deregulation might mean in their own country or within their own work-places. Rather these actions are designed to oppose neo-liberalism *per se*.

*There have been actions and mobilisations that have been Europe-wide – in the electricity sector for instance. There have been actions against the whole liberalising project and there is evidence to show that this has been done from an ideological point of view – against neo-liberalism I mean. That's the up-side. (BSy)*

The contradictory nature of this situation was captured well in a quote from the ETUC officer interviewed. It brings together some of the key themes in this area:

*There is definitely more visibility given to trade union action. These actions are linked to trade union rights and a lack of regulation on freedom of association at the European level. This is one reason also why there has tended to be less trade union action at the European level – because most things still happen at the national level. You need something to attach trade union action onto. But yes, through our EIFs we have been able to mobilise in quite large numbers more recently. I think its quite important to have those things happening and they do help to bring a sense of European identity. But I think they tend to be used quite wisely because they're are a lot of hassle to organize and they are quite costly too. I think where you really see it though is at the company level where our EIFs have a strong presence and do mobilise quite a lot. (PC)*

Amongst the public sector trade unions especially, levels of worker mobilisation by unions were reported to have been high. This has been a pattern across Europe since the late 1990s (Mikkelsen 1998). As one interviewee from EPSU explained, there had been high levels of activity across the Southern European countries. Also in the Nordic countries and “even” Germany and Holland, she went on, there had been higher than normal levels of trade union action. In the Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Spain, she felt, these mobilisations had been obviously related to the right wing policies of their respective governments. The job of EPSU, then was to turn the energies of these waves of action towards the real source of the problem – Brussels.

*But it is our task here in EPSU to try and Europeanize that and tap into the energy of those movements and to really get the message out that it is not just the right wing governments that are pushing the neo-liberal offensive – it is the European Commission itself. It is being driven at the European level.*

(NS)

From the EMF examples were given of joint mobilisations which had brought together union members from many different parts of the EU. Most recent to this interview had been a rally of 20,000 steel-workers in Brussels. This was said to be quite typical of the sorts of mobilisations that are regularly occurring within this sector. Delegations had come

from most countries in the EU. Joint EMF/national affiliate banners were carried. The EMF itself had a very high profile with key-note speakers and campaign literature. Similar events and days-of-action had been organized amongst auto-workers, ship-builders and ICT workers. All of this was indicative of a growing desire, and a perceived need, to 'act together' rather than acting only on a traditional national basis.

The sorts of actions in which different national unions pull together across Europe does suggest that at a level below that of the ETUC there is a desire to engage in coordinated cross-national action. Insofar as these facilitate the participation of activists in greater numbers and in different ways such developments would suggest that revitalization is occurring at the levels they affect.

### ***The question of 'social vision'***

The question of what, if any, social vision lies at the heart of European trade unionism today, drew comments on: the centrality of the values of the processes of European engagement; the legacy of Social Democracy and welfarist models of social development; the role of the EU in the world; the relevance of ideology; and the reality of an emerging European identity for trade unions. A trenchant statement on the urgent need for such a social vision for the trade union movement in Europe came from an EPSU officer.



*The big problem is how you get past the defensive stance. We sometimes just seem to be sitting there with our fingers in the dam. Where's our proposals, where's our bright ideas, where's our shining future that we are shouting from the roof-tops. That's the problem with the purely national perspective too – leaders only see what's being lost at their national level and so they focus only on that. That's one source of defensiveness. (BSy)*

The interview with the senior staff officer within the ETUC revealed a view that a social vision did indeed still exist within European trade unionism, albeit of a somewhat changed character from previous generations of trade unionists. The vision of those generations was very much to do with ideas about what role the state could play in promoting the welfare of working people and their families. For most of the twentieth century the thinking and actions of the trade unions in Europe had been to do with the vision of a welfarist model of protections and guarantees for working people. Such a model was, importantly for the contrast drawn on this question, essentially state-based. The view put forward in this interview premised the notion of 'social vision' not on state policy, state provision or welfare, but rather on the processes of engagement within the EU.

*I think that the vision is in the process. The outcome, whatever it is, should reflect the process. We stress the*

*'social' at every turn. But there is more to it than that. The vision is also pluralist, democratic, representative. Its about Social Dialogue with employers, about balancing interests, negotiating change. So there are a number of inter-weaving strands rather than one simple vision. We wouldn't want paradise to be imposed on anybody! (PC)*

In such a vision no particular institutional model is striven for. This 'vision' is entirely non-prescriptive. The vision is in the process - in the manner of a pre-figurative anticipation of an outcome that would benefit trade unions and their members.

This, process-based, view was not the only one given in response this question. The traditional welfare-based model did inform some of the answers given. One version of this envisaged the possibility of shifting elements of traditionally based welfarism to the European level. The Assistant General Secretary of the EMF speculated that a new vision for European level trade unionism might be precisely such a system of European level welfarism combined with a framework of minimum standards around wages and working conditions. Such an aim would also, he thought take European trade union practice beyond the essentially defensive battle that it has been forced to fight over the last decade and enable it to be far more offensive in its strategies.

Crucial to the ways in which trade unions conceptualise their situation, the challenges they face, and the options open to them by way of response, is the question of ideology. A discontinuity was apparent in the responses given at the global level and those offered at the European level. At the global level interviews revealed a common opinion that the relegating of ideology to a more marginal position in the world of trade unionism since the end of the Cold War, was a very welcome development. On this view the end of divisions to do with ideology had cleared the way for a much more pragmatic *modus operandi* in the world of international trade unionism and one that made the emergence of a unified world trade union movement a tangible prospect.

At the European level, the ETUC has made significant progress in drawing together national unions across a wide range of ideological traditions (Hoffman 2000). A commonly expressed view, however, was that ideological questions do remain of importance to trade unions. One interviewee who articulated this sort of perspective was the Regional Secretary of UNI-Europa. For her, ideological questions were as important as they had ever been. She expressed frustration at what she saw as the lack of interest of her British colleagues in such questions. By ‘ideology’ she was referring to the values, norms, principles and overall vision that could answer questions as to how society ought to be organized. She saw this, not as a kind of ‘add-on’ to the otherwise essential business of trade union bargaining. Rather, it was something

that made a real difference when it came to negotiation at the European level.

*I still believe passionately that we need to have some reference to ideas and values if not ideologies. It's not that I want to sit around all day discussing philosophy. But I do think that we need some vision. It makes a real difference as well when you are sitting face to face with Commissioners for example. You have to have something that guides you. Pragmatism is not enough. I need to be clear on what I believe in those situations. (BT-S)*

The question of what social vision is needed for the trade union movement was one that was of real interest to these interviewees. Its significance, however, seemed somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand the decline of ideology as a barrier to unity was welcomed by some interviewees. On the other hand some saw the new pragmatism referred to in interviews more negatively. For these interviewees ideological questions remained of critical importance, and even the basis of deeper levels of unity and of genuine solidarity.

### *Summary*

In a general assessment of the strategy of political action we can see overlaps with the previously considered strategy of partnership. Unsurprisingly strong similarities existed between partnership and the

Social Dialogue, for instance. In both cases the comments were negative and did not suggest a picture of revitalization. This said, it is the case that European trade unions have mobilised in response to EU legislation, especially when it threatens deregulation or privatization. Such actions have indeed brought activists from different parts of Europe together in opposition to a neo-liberal Europe. We again see a contradictory picture for revitalization on the theme of political action as a revitalization strategy. At the official level the experience has been uninspiring. At other levels, however, there is a sense of trade unionists seeking to have a political impact as ‘external’ actors to the policy process and, in so doing, bringing new and revitalizing energies into the movement.

### International links

The framework put forward by Lillie and Martínez Lucio points to increasingly systematic forms of transnational trade union action. They identify six dimensions to what they describe as a new labour internationalism. A number of these were directly relevant to the research data, though to different degrees, and in both positive and negative senses. Evidence was forthcoming, for instance, of intra-company transnational action though, as we have seen in our discussion of ‘organizing’ at the European level, this was qualified by the realities of job competition. Many of the interviewees did discuss the possibilities of the rise of a European industrial relations regime. Again, however, this was qualified by comments on the problems of employer avoidance and

the very variable experiences of EWCs for trade unionists in different companies. The importance of the changes introduced by the end of the Cold War was touched upon in discussions of ideology. Interviewees responded with different emphases to this issue with some regarding the collapse of Communism as having made new inter-union collaborations possible and others stressing the importance of ideology for the European trade union movement.

### ***The shift towards a European trade union identity***

The UNI-Europa Regional Secretary was of the opinion that there was a more tangible European trade union identity amongst unions within the EU compared to a decade previously. She compared the atmosphere around European issues in the 1980s with the present situation. In the 1980s she explained, within Euro-FIET, the EIF for commercial and technical sectors, where she was working, there was very little concrete focus on work at the European level as opposed to work that was essentially providing a service to national affiliates. Indeed there was outright hostility from affiliate unions in the Nordic countries. In her experience such hostility had evaporated. There was, she felt, far more understanding of the importance of developments at the European level as an area in which unions had a real stake. Certainly, she believed, this was true at the level of national leaderships. She was more ambivalent about whether such an understanding had percolated down to the levels

of regional structures and work-place activists. The story here, in her view, varied enormously from country to country.

*In terms of the middle layers – the stewards and so on – I think that it still varies from country to country. If you go to Belgium or to France or to Italy or Spain you will find what I call a very high awareness of the impact of Europe. I'm not so sure that that would be the case in Germany and in the Nordic countries. In the UK as well I think we are very long way from a European identity. I could give you examples of where we try to pass on information about really important developments and its like we are communicating from a different world. They just don't know what we are talking about. (BT-S)*

In what were referred to as the 'slowest countries', where unions are still relatively strong in relation to national institutions and recognition, there was a common assumption of self-reliance. Where such attitudes prevailed the view of Europe was often that it was an irrelevance at best and a distraction at worst. Even in these countries, however, shifts were said to be occurring at all levels. In the previous two or three years, she explained, there had been an increase in the number of requests from officers and activists in the 'middle layers' of national unions asking for information on European matters.

A similar assessment was given by the Assistant General Secretary of the EMF who also had a cautiously optimistic view of the trend towards a more integrated approach amongst national unions. Whilst acknowledging that differences of organizational culture still existed between the national unions and that these differences did cause difficulties for cooperation, he also felt that a definite convergence of perspectives was also occurring.

*... the traditional differences are starting to get less. If you are looking at the co-operation difficulties in France and sometimes also in Spain and in Italy between the traditional trade unions then you can definitely see that there are co-operation difficulties. But the visions, if you really analyse it, are getting closer to each other ... the main differences of opinion are relatively small if you compare that to the past. But I think the overall view of a social Europe is emerging slowly and is going in the same direction – basically. (BSa)*

According to the Assistant General Secretary, there are concrete steps being taken towards a genuinely European trade unionism within the EMF. Structures have been established within the EMF that are able to develop and agree mandated policy at the European level. But, significantly for our theme, there were also reported to be shifts amongst activists and delegates to the conferences of the EMF. In 1999, he explained, a motion to the EMF conference that called for the creation of



a European trade union received 55% of delegates' votes. This was not a sufficient majority to change EMF policy on the issue. It was not the case either, it seems, that all of those voting for this position necessarily wanted to move immediately to dissolution of national affiliate status and to the establishing of a full-blown, fully integrated European trade union. Rather, this official felt, the vote represented a commitment to this direction in the overall development of the federation. Indeed, in his opinion, something of this vision had been present throughout the life of the EMF from its inception.

The EMF Assistant General Secretary gave a brief account of the history of the EMF and the motivating factors behind its formation. Although founded in 1971, European unions in this sector had been meeting since 1963. The principle factors had been two-fold. Firstly there was a desire amongst the European unions in the sector which were affiliate members of the International Metal-workers Federation (IMF) to be able to act at the European level. The rise of European capitalist institutions and the emergence of an increasingly unified European market and, with it, European level employers' organizations meant that the European national unions saw a rationale for establishing themselves also into an entity at that level.

Another factor has a resonance with current trends towards convergence that were identified at the global level. This is the fact that the political orientation of the IMF was social-democratic. Within the European

countries there were significant unions and national union federations that were communist. If unions were to be effective at the European level then these communist unions would have to be included. This was never going to be possible if European unions carried on working only under the umbrella of the IMF. Hence the existence of the EMF.

*So that makes it different from some of the other European Industry Federations and it also makes it independent of the IMF, which is still at the moment an issue. We are working together closely, sometimes, but sometimes we are not taking the same actions or same solutions. (BSa)*

He elaborated further that the ideological complexities amongst the European unions made the process of convergence tortuous. The Christian Democratic unions of some countries, for instance, would not at first work with the communist unions at all. In France this was a particular problem, in Germany, less so. Within the communist camp the unions that acted under the direction of orthodox communist parties, would not work with the more social-democratically orientated Euro-communist unions. These ideological complexities gave the European scene for this sector a particular dynamic that the IMF had been ill-equipped to engage with.

### *Difficulties of practical harmonization*

Some interviewees explicitly linked the question of the prospects of European trade unionism to considerations of internationalism more broadly. It was common for interviewees to stress the difficulties of establishing genuine trans-national solidarity across national borders, even when many factors that would make the conditions propitious for it appeared to be present.

*It's easy to agree principles but the difficulties start when you get down to specifics – money. Then it gets harder. Whether its your own affiliation fees towards your own union structures or whether its your union's attitude to reform of the CAP [Common Agricultural Policy] or an increase in European Structural Funds, national interests are going to come into all of these things. (PC)*

For these reasons internationalism tended to be seen, not as something that would happen spontaneously and of its own accord, but rather would require real organizational and ideological commitment to make it happen. Indeed a feature of trans-national practice amongst European trade unions is that it has indeed had an ideological flavour with a broad concern with government policy in the area of welfare. This contrasts with the labour-rights and organizing focus of the trans-national practice of unions in the US (Burgoon and Jacoby 2004). Without such

commitment what passes as ‘internationalism’ would remain at the most superficial level.

*Internationalism takes work. It takes belief. You have to believe it is important. If the Scandinavian does not believe its important to understand what the French or the Italians have to say then progress will not happen. Everyone will be very polite but they will wait until they have finished, they will clap their hands and then nothing will happen. (BT-S)*

For this UNI-Europa interviewee, the acknowledged difficulties of establishing a meaningfully internationalist culture across the European trade union movement meant that, whilst not having lost the ethical vision and the hope of a unified trade union movement, still her assessment of its real prospects were essentially pessimistic. This produced ambivalence on the question.

*I think that the possibility and I hope the capacity for linking up with other cultures and languages is very great. But there is still a long way to go. I will have been retired a long, long time before I see the end of the process! (BT-S)*

One example of an attempt to take concrete steps towards a more European identity for national trade unions came from EPSU, the European public sector union body. At the time of these research

interviews officials had recently been looking into the possibility of an EPSU membership card. A number of such initiatives have been attempted by European trade unions (Waddington *et al.* 1997). The account given of the EPSU initiative, however, highlighted the difficulties involved. The EPSU scheme would mean that every affiliated union member would have the EPSU logo on their membership card. When the idea was first broached the response from unions was enthusiastic. It was only when the practical issues of how such a scheme would really work that problems emerged. These problems were, in part, legal. Questions of what such a card would actually entitle members to came to the surface. Would it be the case, for example that if a union member went to work in another country that some level of official representation would automatically be transferred to another national union EPSU affiliate in that country. Such arrangements do in fact exist bi-laterally. One example of this sort of arrangement is that between health unions in Finland and Unison in the UK. However, when the attempt is made to replicate this model across the whole of Europe then, again, complexities emerge that undermine the entire initiative. For such a scheme to be workable what it means for member entitlement needs to be consistent across all EU member states. The highly heterogeneous picture across the EU in terms of national organizational cultures and different industrial relations regimes means that such a consistency is, at present, extremely difficult to achieve.

### *The weight of the ‘national’*

Although the basic optimism that was expressed by the Assistant General Secretary of the EMF about the prospect of a unified European trade union in his sector, was shared to differing degrees by some other interviewees in different sectors, these interviews also revealed considerable obstacles to such a development. We have already seen the assessment given by the interviewee at UNI-Europa regarding national variance on this question, pointing to the ongoing preponderance of national business in the life of affiliates. One interviewee at EPSU, however, articulated a further difficulty for this as a possibility. This was simply the mundane work-a-day routine of trade union life.

*There is a kind of cycle working here. Who controls the dissemination of information – and that tends to be at the national level – also controls how things look – news management really. So the national is always seen as more important. It becomes banal really – the national dominates just through the hum-drum of daily practical business – there is no great plan involved. (BSy)*

This union officer felt great frustration with the situation. The problem, he felt, was that policy processes remained largely embedded at the national level and this meant that unions and their leaderships were not grasping a fundamental change in their environment. This was that a

great deal of policy with which they were concerned was emanating, not in fact from their own national governments, but rather from the European Commission. The corollary of this was also true - that national governments would use the 'blame Brussels' trick by which they claimed to be powerless to ameliorate policy for trade unions and their members. This move was, according to this interviewee, disingenuous in that policy coming out of the European Commission had in fact come about with the full cooperation and sometimes the instigation of those very national governments. Either way it was explained, the need for national affiliates to EPSU to focus their sights far more clearly on the European level was an urgent one. It was for this reason, he concluded, that EPSU continued to exert pressure on national leaderships to have a more strategic – a more *European* – view.

The assessment within EPSU, according to the officers interviewed there, is that there is a kind of 'trade creep' occurring by which neo-liberal policies are introduced incrementally within the EU with very little effective, or even attempted resistance. This lack of resistance, he explained, was partly the result of a perception across the many of the national unions that certain core areas such as health, education and essential utilities were protected from marketization under European law. This understanding was, in one EPSU officers' view, "demonstrably not the case".

In terms of the responses of national trade unions to the challenge of Europe the interviews revealed a heterogeneous picture. The unions of the countries of Northern Europe, in particular, it seems are the most resistant to European engagement. Notwithstanding the suggestion of a 'head-in-the-sand' attitude on the real source of neo-liberal policies, one EPSU interviewee explained that this was sometimes combined with a high level of understanding of the relationship between Brussels and national government policy but a rejection, nonetheless, of European level strategic responses.

*There are differences between the unions of different countries on this. For example in Scandinavian countries you would have a very highly developed awareness of how policy is formulated at the European level – plus the threat that that can have from a left wing perspective on society and on public service delivery. So you would think that that would lead to a strategic view that says 'right – we have to fight at the European level'. But that is not what is happening. There has actually been a strategic decision across the Scandinavian countries and with varying degrees across the Nordic countries to say 'no' – we need to bolster the national level. In the Nordic countries there tends to be a strong tendency that says 'this is what we predicted – you can't have a Europe that represents anything other than business ... you're talking against the wind if you think that you can*



*magically set up some kind of equilibrium where the social is equal to the economic .. so all we can do is protect the national house'. So they barricade the front door and we say that that is exactly how trade creep works. Competition policy goes unopposed at the European level in areas that you wouldn't have predicted. That kind of total rejection of the possibility of a social Europe, that is set in stone at the national level in some countries, is a major obstacle. (BSy)*

Overall, then, it seems that whilst there are examples of unions working more at, and towards, the European level, it is also the case that the obstacles outweigh the movement in that direction. If Europeanization is to be regarded as a revitalizing factor then this must also be qualified by positing it as weak, inconsistent and contradictory, in most sectors.

### *Summary*

Overall there was a sense of optimism conveyed by assessments of the levels of interest by trade unionists in 'Europe'. This was said to result from an awareness of the ways in which EU policy was involved increasingly in national government policy. One interviewee, the Assistant General Secretary of the EMF, was very optimistic about the prospects of a unified European trade union for his sector. Nonetheless the overall tenor of the research data for this level was pessimistic for the emergence of a more unified European trade union movement. By way of

explanation, interviewees frequently pointed to the national level of trade union structures, policy and action as representing a drag, or even a block, for this agenda. This is important for our consideration of the framework put forward by Lillie and Martínez in that they focus upon the ways in which national factors mediate transnational trade union practice. They point to the ‘labour rights’ agendas pushed internationally by the US and the UK, the focus upon trade union bargaining positions *vis á vis* government and employers that characterises the transnational strategies of the German unions and the combination of domestic class-combativity and an integrationist attitude towards European tri-partism typical of the trade unions of the Mediterranean economies of Spain and Italy. The interviews that have been discussed here were carried out at the European level and so we cannot straightforwardly ‘read’ the data off against this taxonomy. These interviews did, however, reveal difficulties caused by significant differences between the trade unions of different European countries over questions of political attitudes towards Europe, differences of ideology and variations of industrial relations regimes. The data does, in this sense, support the importance that Lillie and Martínez Lucio place upon national factors in interpreting trade union transnationalism, though in the negative sense of their working *against* it in different ways.

### **Key themes at the European level**

As stated in the introduction to this chapter contradiction, ambivalence and even paradox characterised the findings and themes for this part of

the overall research programme. Whilst most interviewees were clearly of the opinion that national unions were more aware of the importance of engaging at the European level many also stressed the very real obstacles in the way of the development of a more thorough-going European trade unionism. These ambiguities took different forms for different aspects of trade union activities and for different actors. Social Dialogue, for instance, which had been celebrated by unions in the 1990s was thought by most to have been disappointing in what it has delivered for trade union members when measured against its early promise.

The internet was seen as being of great significance for trade unions in Europe. What this was said to mean, however, varied greatly across the interviews. The one example of an innovative use of internet-based communication, that of the use of EUCOB@ by the EMF, served only to highlight the lack of such innovations in other union bodies, at the time the interviews were being conducted, within the ETUC, UNI-Europa and EPSU. Some interviewees were keen to stress the problematic nature of the internet for trade unions around such issues as its Anglophone nature and its limitation as a technical tool. A key issue here was that the internet cannot replace the face-to-face interactions essential to trade union processes.

The issue of language loomed large as an impediment to the Europeanization of trade unions within the EU. For some, language and culture – and therefore genuine communication – were inextricably

linked. Without greater sensitivities to language, on this account, Europeanization would never develop beyond the level of formal structures.

Another area of difficulty was said to be that of European collective bargaining. One difficulty here was that of establishing comparators and norms that could work in all countries. Another was said to be the issue of divergences in industrial relations regimes – something that is set to become more of a problem with the expansion of the EU. The experience of EWCs was also seen by all those interviewed as having been very varied. Whilst some EWCs could be held up as models of good industrial relations practice, employer avoidance, problems of communication and the absence of transparency were considered to be typical of many.

The social democratic vision for European trade unions was acknowledged by all to have become severely attenuated over the last decade. Nonetheless it remained important as an ideological lodestone for unions whilst also changing into a more process-based conception organized around dialogue and piecemeal negotiation, rather than a permanent state-based welfarist consensus.

All of the above notwithstanding it was also emphasised by some interviewees that cross-border worker-activist interaction and networking is a flourishing area of trade union life. Principally this is to do with intra-company and sectoral interactions at conferences, cultural events, EWC

events and picket-line solidarity. It is also to do with union interaction with social movements and new coalitions with NGOs and campaign groups. On this latter point, however, it seems clear that problems exist also that are to do with differing organizational cultures.

Fundamentally it seems clear that in the relationship between European levels of trade union practice and that at the national level, it is still 'the national' that is overwhelmingly preponderant. Burgoon and Jacoby (2004) refer to regional trans-nationalism as having a 'patch-work' quality. The interview data from this research suggest that such a characterisation is indeed appropriate at the European level.

## ***Chapter 7: Revitalization and labour internationalism at the UK-national level***

At the UK national level the interviews carried out spanned the range from national and executive union officers and officials through to officials, stewards and activists within regional structures and local branches. The themes that developed in these interviews, as well as the range of examples given by way of illustration, showed that internationalism is a significant part of the life of British trade unions. Moreover, the picture that this empirical material painted suggests a rapidly changing context and background for trade union activity in the UK, that was consistent with, and in many ways similar to, that given in much of the revitalization literature. Many of the examples were also suggestive of the particular forms of labour revitalization that have been described by recent work in that field.

Transnational perspectives were revealed as emerging under the stimulus of: the rising prominence of MNCs and the experience of working within them; the social and de-regulative impact of world markets on the domestic economy; and changes in communications technology. Associated themes included: the growing importance of Europe in the business of British trade unions; structural changes within and between trade union bodies; the interaction of global and local scales of union practice; as well as some of the factors that mediate and 'frame' the ways in which trade unionists interpret their experience. This latter sub-theme

covered history and political tradition and responses to domestic issues such as the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees.

The internationalist aspect to strategic union responses to the contemporary challenge to British trade unions was shown to include: solidarity in the context of industrial disputes with employers; organizational restructuring across borders; the building of coalitions with a range of non-trade union actors and political movements and causes; and the building of international linkages. This latter sub-theme covered: bi-lateral trade union relations; personal contacts between unions in different countries; cultural exchanges; the sharing of experiences and innovations; and the exploitation of new electronic forms of communication.

## **Union strategies**

### **Organizing**

In Heery's and Adler's (2004) approach to the 'organizing' aspect of revitalization they highlight three components of which two are of direct relevance to this level of research data. The first of these, resource allocation, appeared to be important insofar as unions do find themselves often called upon to provide material support for groups of workers in struggle in many different parts of the world. There were also frequent references to circumstances where trade unions had sent delegations of

activists and interested members to show physical solidarity with striking workers. This was usually on a case by case basis and there was little testimonial evidence of such activity being strategic in a deliberate or formal sense. Still, the willingness of trade unions to respond so positively to requests for support, did seem to indicate a consistent organizational attitude to questions of international solidarity.

Where international action in the context of industrial struggle did seem to be of strategic importance this tended to be with regard to domestic trade union struggles which took on an international dimension. The examples discussed here include those of the lock-out of Liverpool dockers from 1995-1998 and the fight to save jobs at the Vauxhall's plant in Luton in 2000. In both of these cases although the respective unions did invest in international strategies interviewees were ambiguous in their assessments. Whilst, in both cases, the emergence of strong activist networks was seen as being a very positive development, the outcomes were unfavourable to the workers involved.

The motivations given for international linking as it related to organizing were reported as covering such areas as the need to share experiences of resisting neo-liberal policies, commonalities within given sectors as well as a commitment to traditional notions of worker solidarity, especially towards workers struggling in conditions of repression or high levels of exploitation.



The second relevant component identified by Heery and Adler (2004), that of ‘targeting’, did not match the data generated by these interviews well. This does again suggest that ‘organizing’, whilst clearly being of significance for the international dimensions of trade union work, is still not formally constituted as a revitalization strategy. Regarding the ‘methods’ used the sending of delegations in support of striking workers abroad can be considered as a ‘concentrated’ and ‘employee targeted’ means by which links can be created, new activists engaged and genuine solidarity delivered. Where such experiences then feed back into branch and regional union structures then they could be described as being revitalizing in these ways.

### ***Internationalism and industrial disputes***

Many examples were forthcoming from interviews of practical and moral international solidarity in the context of industrial struggle. This resonated with the highlighting of the international dimension to many industrial disputes in the developed world by scholars of organized labour and globalisation (*e.g.* Brecher 2000). The occasion of international solidarity that can be seen as having been a turning point in terms of trade union resistance to neo-liberal government policies within the EU was the French public sector strike wave of 1995. The solidarity generated by these strikes from across the EU was not only impressive because of the scales of mobilisation and the number of European countries whose trade unions sent support. The episode also had a politically polarising effect

within many European trade union movements (Taylor and Mathers 2002b). The Regional Secretary of the train drivers' union, ASLEF, gave an account of how train drivers had responded to the French strikes. A strong lead came from the national union leadership who urged branches to take a supportive stance. Older workers, it seems were the most receptive to the call for solidarity. Given the focus and initial spark for the strike wave – the attack on the pension rights of French rail-workers under the Juppé plan - this is, perhaps, not surprising. In the event, an ASLEF delegation went to take part in the actions around the strikes. The fact that, within the North West region twenty four nominations were received for six union financed delegation places, gives some indication of the levels of active support the French strikes generated. Other delegations for international solidarity that were cited included that of an eight member delegation to the US to support the Teamsters union during the UPS strike which resulted in a victory for that union, and one also to Canada to talk to train drivers there as part of the solidarity effort for the sacked Liverpool dockers.

One significant and much publicised industrial dispute in which internationalism of a very practical, and solidaristic, nature played an important role was the lockout of the Liverpool dockers. The Chief Convenor of the TGWU union for the dockers at the time of the dispute explained how activists were sent all over the world seeking to generate support and active solidarity for the struggle.

*The old principles were still there - 'united we stand'. We involved everybody - everyone who wished to be involved. They went to the four corners of the world. They went over to America, Europe, New Zealand, Australia ... they went all over. (JN)*

He went on to discuss the roots of docker internationalism in Liverpool by way of illustrating his theme of the organic and historical nature of that internationalist outlook amongst this group of workers. Developing an insight that is also relevant to the theme of internationalist political traditions touched upon elsewhere in this thesis, he explained that its roots had a lot to do with the multi-ethnic history and social composition of the dockers and their families. As he put it, they had come from the 'four corners of the earth'. Moreover, many had fled extreme hardship, oppression or discrimination in their own countries and so had an understanding of, and an empathy with, the struggles of others around the world. This seems all the more significant given the relatively low levels of unionisation amongst minority ethnic groups (Waddington and Hoffman 2000). He also cited the particular example of the solidarity – moral, political and material – that the dockers had shown towards black workers in South Africa during the era of the struggle against apartheid in that country. During their own battle to retain their jobs the dockers had seen this reciprocated when representatives from the African National Congress visited Liverpool as an act of solidarity with them. This account is redolent of the dynamic identified by Chin and Mittelman (2000) by

which networks of resistance and tradition, operating through communities and families, can remain hidden or ‘submerged’ until they are revealed in new struggles in which they become relevant once more.

The research data does suggest that the Liverpool dockers’ dispute and the associated internationally orientated activity that accompanied it had a major local impact. Across the North West many trade union officials who were local to the dispute described it as having animated the internal life of their branches and regional structures as well as having been an educating experience for those who got involved. The branch secretary of the Liverpool GPMU, the printing union, gave a vivid account of how members had rallied to the cause of the dockers. High levels of financial support were generated by local trade unionists. He went on to describe the uses to which the money was put into helping to send docker activists around the world as well to provide hospitality to representatives of maritime unions from other countries – the US, Japan and Holland being the countries that he recalled specifically having helped with.

Links formed during industrial disputes between local branches and unions at the European and global levels were frequently referred to by regional officers and activists. An important example was given by the TGWU Deputy Convenor at the Vauxhall plant in Ellesmere Port when he described the solidarity that had been generated around the threatened closure of the Luton plant. He explained how actions in support of the workers at Luton had occurred at General Motors plants all across

Europe. These had ranged from 20 minute work stoppages to whole shifts walking off the production lines. The union demonstration against the closure in Luton itself had been attended by delegations from across Europe and was described as have been ‘very international’.

It is important to note a qualification that was introduced here. This Deputy Conevor was sceptical about the depth of support that these actions represented insofar as he did not believe that the unions at other General Motors plant would actually refuse to take on the work from the Luton plant. It should be acknowledged also that actions such as those in the European automotive sector in solidarity with the Renault workers at the Vilvoorde plant in Belgium in 1997 are the exception and not the rule. Waddington *et al.* for instance, noted the muted response in Europe to the shedding of jobs by the Ford company at their plant in Halewood (Waddington *et al.* 1997). The problem of competition for jobs as undermining transnational worker-worker solidarity has been highlighted in the studies in most regions of the world. French *et al.* (1994) showed how the image of the ‘runaway shop’ - sucking jobs from North America across the border into the maquila zones in Northern Mexico – used by the AFL-CIO union federation - seriously compromised attempts to build unified, cross-border opposition to the NAFTA. Nonetheless this local official was also keen to stress that the lead up to the solidarity actions in support of the Luton workforce, as well as the days following them, had seen a lively exchange of ideas and information between activists by email, fax and telephone. This process had strengthened the network of

activist communication that did already exist, with new contacts being formed between individuals and branches. A significant dynamic is revealed in this story. In the account given, we see an acknowledgement of the support received by this embattled group of workers alongside of the scepticism described above. This carries echoes of the ambiguous nature of trade union internationalism described by Eric Hobsbawm in his 1988 essay on the subject. In that piece he characterises working class consciousness as typically developing with both national and international ideological elements simultaneously. Jane Wills, in her appeal for greater attention to be paid to horizontal work-to-worker relations, has made a similar point regarding what she sees as persistent tensions between “sectionalism and solidarity” (Wills 1998:37).

The Vauxhall’s Deputy Convenor at Ellesmere Port went on to say that the formation of new links between union activists is not restricted to Europe but is happening on an increasingly global scale. Whereas appeals for solidarity, he explained, used to come from “Barnsley, Yorkshire, Tilbury and Glasgow” – referring here to the 1984-5 miners’ strike and to dockers’ strikes – today they come from “South Africa, Peru, India and South America”.

### ***Struggle, international solidarity and inspiration***

As has been commented upon elsewhere in this thesis, it was often the case that the most remembered and appreciated aspect of international

support was the sense of inspiration that accompanied it. Whilst material and political solidarity were seen as important and were obviously appreciated as such, what stood out in people's minds was the emotional aspect of solidarity from abroad. This was sometimes combined with memories of a sense of amazement that others from around the world had taken an interest and of a realization at the time that they were not fighting in isolation. This quote comes from the Chair of the Liverpool FBU commenting on the experience of the 2001 fire-fighters' strike.

*Yes, its the moral boost that the members on the stations, on the picket line, get. An 'all members' circular goes out to the stations and there is a letter attached from Norwegian fire fighters. So everybody knows about it. Its not just a strike in England or in Scotland. We had a support group during our fight last year. There were messages from dockers on the South West coast of America. That's because of the contacts we made when the Liverpool dockers' fight was on. It always lifts people. (NT)*

Other instances of practical international solidarity with workers in struggle in different parts of the world included the industrial campaign waged by the German IG Metall union for a 35 hour working week. This was said to have struck chords with worker-members of the North-West region of the RMT union that covers the rail and maritime sectors. The RMT Regional Administrator, explained that this had impressed

members because it was an ambitious offensive and seemed to represent a marked contrast with the generally defensive stance of trade unions in the UK. He gave further evidence of the tendency of trade unions on the European continent and beyond to look to the experience of unions in the UK when they are faced with privatisation drives by their own national governments. He described, for example, how, two years previous to the interview, national leaders of a rail union in Sydney, Australia had phoned his office, “out of the blue”, to ask for information about the consequences of rail privatisation and to glean lessons learned from attempts to combat transport deregulation in the North West. This exchange, in turn, led to messages of support expressing feelings of solidarity and mutual regard, going from the North-West RMT region to the Australian union. Another example of material support that was said to have been connected to strong solidaristic sentiments, that this region had recently been involved with, had been contributions to the fighting fund of Japanese rail-workers who were resisting privatisation. In the Japanese case the rail-workers, who were based in the southern islands of Japan, had been locked out and were involved in a gruelling and protracted struggle with their employer, the Japanese government. During the campaign delegations were exchanged between the two countries.

One officer from the Unison international office drew attention to the mix of motivations behind the solidarity of members with Columbian trade unionists. Although a major motivation for the very positive response to the plight of Columbian trade unionists was one of sympathy for their



experience and indignation at their treatment, she went on to point out that this was not, in fact, the whole story. Another important motivation, indeed she felt the more important motivation, was that of admiration for the struggles being waged by Colombian trade unionists in the face of such enormous personal and collective risk. It was the fact that the Colombian workers were staging such impressive and heroic resistance to what amounts to a neo-liberal onslaught on their public services that led Unison members in the UK to offer sustained and heartfelt support. It was also to do with the very high levels of awareness of the importance of defending public services that were conveyed by the Colombian workers themselves in their communications with the outside world (Novelli 2004).

*I think there was also that feeling of ‘why didn’t we know about this?’ and ‘why wasn’t anything happening on this before?’ That kind of feeling. So the relationship had been developing for a year and the whole time the anti-privatisation struggle was very strong. They were working hard on building the support in the community for keeping [Sintraem] Cali a public company. Very strong politics about why you have public services. I think that sort of thing really impresses people here. (TS)*

This same Unison officer felt that members had been shocked by the seriousness of the situation in Columbia and by the shocking statistics

regarding the assassination and disappearances of trade unionists in that country (ICFTU 2000: 57-59). The Colombian trade union leader who was hosted by Unison between 2001 and 2003, was asked at a TUC fringe meeting why he was appealing for international support and attention. He replied that international publicity for the struggle against privatisation in Cali, as well as for other struggles, made it more difficult for state and company hired assassination squads to kill him and other union activists. The levels of publicity and consequent messages of support for this struggle were exemplified at the time by stories of the state governor of Cali, Kastrana, complaining of his office fax machine being jammed by faxes from the UK, Canada, several EU countries and Australia. Though expressed humorously, this story conveyed the serious point that such messages were hugely important in giving some protection to those workers and union leaders directly involved in such confrontations.

A National Advisor of the TGWU, gave an account of how practical solidarity during industrial disputes was becoming a familiar part of trade union organizing in the airline sector. He cited the example of the 1999 British Airways dispute that had seen active solidarity on the part of ground staff at airports in Finland, Zimbabwe and New York. This is an important example for the larger theme of labour internationalism and union revitalization. On the one hand this sector has seen a boom in recent years with the expansions in tourism, cheap fares and air freight. It is also a sector which has seen intense price competition between airline

companies. Often cited as being an archetypal sector of globalisation, it might also have been expected to be a sector in which traditional notions of trade union solidarity had been fatally withered by the ravages of inter-firm competition. To hear accounts of what were also very effective actions of international cooperation and support between workers in this sector was therefore a surprising, and for a part of the larger argument of this thesis - that internationalism is itself a revitalizing factor in the life of the trade union movement – encouraging, finding (Blyton *et al.* 2001).

*That kind of syndrome is becoming more popularly accepted - that there are common interests. Our members have become more and more aware of the fact that in many other countries workers are able to do things that we have forgotten how to do here. When workers in an airport in Africa support you can't help thinking 'bloody hell, if they can do that why can't we?' (GS)*

One aspect of trade union internationalism, then, that seems to have stood the test of time, as well as the ravages of thirty years of neo-liberal government in the UK, is that of responding in solidarity to the travails of workers in different parts of the world. Examples given in these interviews included the responses of British trade unionists to: French public sector strikes; worker occupations in Cali, Columbia; and those of solidarity amongst airline workers and amongst European transport workers. The Liverpool dockers' dispute and the Vauxhall Luton dispute

were examples of strikes occurring within the UK that also involved significant international solidarity. These moments of solidarity were often sectional in nature. They were also sometimes accompanied by notes of scepticism regarding the depths of solidarity involved or of their real meaning in relation to worker interest and competition for jobs. Nonetheless, they reveal that in many industrial sectors, active trade unionists are alive to the possibilities and importance of linking with unions abroad whose members are fighting for their livelihoods.

### *Defending the public sector*

The relevance of the impact of global markets on the outlooks of public sector trade unionists was illustrated in an interview with the Regional Secretary at the North West regional offices of Unison. The background here is that of a widely acknowledged expansion of the role of private contractors within the British National Health Service (*e.g.* Shaw 2003). In an account of an industrial dispute in his region, he described the ways in which, through the experience of a dispute with a multi-national employer, trade union members began to see the connections between the workings of trans-national capital and their own situation – and to act upon that insight. The dispute in question concerned health workers in Bolton hospitals working for ISS Medical, one of the big four employers in the National Health Service. These workers, mainly ‘domestics’ and porters, were being paid at the rate of £4.60 per hour. A low pay

campaign by Unison led to a dispute with the employer and to industrial action by the union. The action was successful in forcing concessions from the employer and in raising the pay level to £5 per hour. The importance of the story for this theme, however, is that the union members who took part in this dispute learned that their employer was in fact owned by a Danish company. This led the strikers to make contact with Danish trade unions who have members employed by the parent company in order to make comparisons on pay and contracts. The link with Danish public sector unions has a historical significance in this context. From the late 1970s through to the late 1980s there was a strong coincidence of high levels of large scale industrial action by public sector workers between the UK and the Nordic countries as well as in several other European countries and further afield to the US and Canada (Mikkelsen 1998: Draper 2000). A ‘public sector effect’ was noted in strike statistics, particularly for the UK and for Denmark, also between 1989 and 1993 (EIRR 1998). A synchrony of actions by public sector workers across many European countries was apparent also in the mid-1990s (Draper 2000). The fact that UK-Danish union links became such a significant part of this particular dispute was used as an example by this regional official to show how struggle could play an educating role in drawing attention to the international threads of ownership and control that connect to so many areas of employment – even in the public sector.

## *Summary*

Comments on the theme of international practice that relates to some aspect of organizing activity suggested that internationalism is a very real part of the life of British trade unions nationally and at the branch level. Apart from delegations to various countries during strike situations there were also trips to visit trade unions abroad for the purposes of research and cultural exchange. The theme of historical reciprocity was evident in some interviews, particularly with respect to the struggle against apartheid by black unions in South Africa. The Liverpool dockworkers dispute of 1995-8 stood out as having been of special importance to trade unionists in the North West insofar as it was reported to have galvanised branch and regional activity. In the public sector there was a sense of a kind of rough synchrony of struggle in that unions in many countries have found themselves in anti-privatization and anti-deregulation battles over the course of the 1990s and 2000s. This has made the experience of the trade unions in the UK of special relevance for these struggles and links have been made on that basis.

Some interviewees did stress that the theme of solidarity was complicated by counter-themes such as jobs-competition in certain sectors, particularly in manufacturing. Nonetheless in many sectors the picture that emerged was that of international work connected to struggle being of great importance to British trade unionists. This was true in terms of its

emotional and moral significance. It was also true in terms of the transnational networks of practical cooperation and communication that have resulted from this solidarity work.

### Organizational restructuring

The framework offered by Behrens *et al.* (2004) for analysing organizational restructuring for revitalization purposes was directly applicable to the data in a partial sense. ‘External’ restructuring, for example, can be seen as relevant insofar as a strong theme in the interviews was that of international trade union bodies having a far greater profile in the experience of UK unions at all levels of their work – national, regional and local. This does seem to be an area in which the boundaries of trade union activity are expanding. Such changes could be described as being loosely ‘structural’ and certainly as ‘external’. Most of the examples given are of this ‘loosely structural’ and relatively informal type. In other words, whilst there were few references to formal organizational restructuring *per se*, there were several to less formal organizational linkages and realignments. A belief in the ‘Europeanization’ of UK trade union activity was also expressed in some interviews - and strongly so from one national officer within the TGWU. In the case of NUMAST the Assistant General Secretary was of the opinion that his union would eventually become global in its sphere of activity and trade union influence.

Some of the examples given of structural realignment were also of the more ‘transformatory’ kind as defined by these authors. The proliferation of bi-lateral branch links for instance, the heightened levels of awareness of the European level of politics reported amongst trade union members, the experience of ‘merger’ being seen as a commonality that provides a basis for mutual exchanges and information sharing, the interaction of trade union structures *via* the medium of personal contacts and friendships all suggested a picture of changing structural interactions that are of long-term transnational significance.

As for the previous theme, these assessments were also sometimes qualified by concerns regarding language barriers, jobs competition and some scepticism around the ability of transnational action to deliver real benefits for trade unions and their members.

### ***Relations with trans-national trade union bodies***

One important aspect of organizational change is that international trade union bodies were reported to be playing a much larger role in the life of national affiliates, regions and branches. Although examples of formal restructuring across the different levels of the trade union movement, from the local to the transnational and global were few, nonetheless many references were made to this as a possibility in the not too distant future. These kinds of comments were often made in response to questions



relating to sectoral restructuring and to shifts towards European level policy formulation and EU labour law.

There were many examples given of national and local union structures working much more closely and more frequently with international union bodies. This was illustrated in a number of interviews with union officials in the transport sector. The profile of the ITF, for instance, was said to be very high with informational emails arriving regularly at national union offices and being routinely broadcast to local branches. The days-of-action organized by the ITF that have already been referred to in Chapter 5 of this thesis have provided the opportunity for local branches to take part in action that has been organized at the global level. As the Regional Secretary of ASLEF explained, the Rail Safety Day in October 2003, for instance, saw significant involvement by members in the North West. Many women took part because of the issue of driving under overhead power cables and the hazard that this poses to pregnant women. A delegation from Chester went to Germany as part of this action. They went to lobby the European Association of Train Companies' conference to call for consistent regulation across the EU and for a scientific assessment of the pregnancy issue. The background to this example is that workers in the UK would benefit from consistent EU regulation. It was explained, for example, that rail workers enjoy better protection in Germany than in the UK. Through such initiatives the North West region of ASLEF was now said to enjoy "excellent working relationships" with its sister unions in France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Belgium and

Austria, especially in relation to their joint efforts within the ETF to lobby for harmonized regulation for their sector.

The TGWU Convenor at the Ellesmere Port plant of Vauxhall's explained that European industrial relations work had become important for British trade unionists at all levels. He also emphasised the importance of the Working Time Directive and the difference that it had made, particularly for workers on temporary contracts employed at the plant. He described how, even only five years previously to the time of the interview, most local trade unionists were unengaged with European level industrial relations. The same people today, in his assessment, are highly aware of European legislation and the compliance or non-compliance of their employers with it. This was having, he went on, a profound effect on the level of involvement with European trade union structures and processes on the part of his own union.

*We are involved more now in Europe. We are in constant conversation with our European counterparts, swapping information as much as we can - on a regular monthly basis over some issues. We are trying to get a General Motors European Forum news letter out. There are issues sometimes with sensitive information and we don't always get the cooperation we need. Overall though the relationships are good when things are moving in the right direction. Everyone*

*understands that what we are looking for is a common standard. (PA)*

One aspect to a number of the interviews conducted at the North West regional and branch level was that they revealed that partnered unions in different parts of Europe preferred to link with local union structures rather than solely with national union offices. This was evidenced in an interview with the North West Regional Secretary of Unison, in which he spoke about links between the North West region and the SKTF union in Sweden. This national union contacted the North West regional office for advice regarding a difficult merger process that they were engaged in. Officials at the Swedish union were aware that in the North West the merger process between the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO), the Confederation of Health Sector Employees (COHSE) and the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) that had formed Unison in 1993, had been made difficult by issues to do with status amongst blue and white collar trade union members. Problems of overcoming internal resistance are normal to the process of union mergers and occur not only in public sector unions but also in manufacturing (Morris *et al.* 2001). SKTF union officials were experiencing problems in their merger that seemed similar to those that had been encountered by North West Unison and so were interested in forging links with the region. The recognition of the experience of union merger as representing a commonality for unions in different countries is important and has been identified as such, especially in European

industrial relations literature (Waddington *et al.* 1997; Ebbinghaus, 2002). The underlying motivations in these restructuring processes have usually been to do with retrenchment following a prolonged period of declining membership. Nonetheless, the fact that unions in different countries seek mutual engagement in order to cope with and survive such periods points to an active and strategic response to the challenge.

This theme was developed further. The link between the Swedish union and the Unison North West region, in fact had a history that further illustrated the importance of personal contacts. Unison has a members' advice line called 'Unison Direct'. SKTF had copied the idea and introduced a similar service for their members. In the view of the North West Unison Regional Secretary, however, the Swedish service was superior to the Unison version in that it was better resourced and was staffed by union activists rather than being call-centre based. The North West regional office had therefore sent a small research group to Sweden, the Regional Secretary included, to find out more. He described how he had got on well with the General Secretary of the national Swedish union, and how a friendship, indeed a "comradeship", had developed between them. It was as a result of this visit, and the personal contacts that came from it, that the union leaders in Sweden had known to contact the North West region without having to go through national Unison hierarchy.

*We went out to talk to them about their members' support service. That resulted in them saying 'you have been through*

*this merger we would like to come and talk to you'. So they came here for three days and we had seminars and workshops bringing activists together to share their experiences - so they wouldn't repeat the mistakes we had made in our merger. They were really appreciative of that. They went to ballot and the ballot went down so they didn't go to merger in the end. But they had been through the process with us. (FH)*

Again, in this story, as with the global and European levels of analysis, the theme of language appears. This interviewee explained that the relationship had been helped by the fact that the Swedes tended to speak good English. Attempts have been made, we went on, to forge similar links on a regional basis with Norwegian trade unions. These have been less successful because the two national groups were less likely to speak one another's language.

### ***Obstacles to organizational restructuring***

On a different note there were a small number of expressions of strong scepticism regarding the purpose and efficacy of closer links with trans-national trade union bodies and the benefits of engagement beyond the local and national levels of trade union action.

*You get a lot of these international requests. I am quite cynical about them because I have never known a result of any significant importance. We have all the European Works Councils but its never stopped a plant closing. Its never changed an investment decision. I know unions spend a lot of time going abroad to a lot of places and they all talk about what they are doing. They have contacts – and that’s fine. But I have never seen a real significant effect where we can say ‘well that was really very helpful to us’. (BM)*

This comment came from the Liverpool Branch Secretary of the printers’ union, the Graphical, Print and Media Union (GPMU)<sup>4</sup>. He explained that this view was based upon real experience. Most of the major employers he had to deal with were MNCs with home bases in many parts of Europe. This meant that he had been heavily involved with several EWCs. He made the point also that many large American paper and board companies that had entered the European market in recent years were not covered by EWCs anyway and were often allowed to flout European labour law with impunity. Employer avoidance of labour law, however, was not the only difficulty in his view. He went on to make a point that had been made by others regarding the real depth of trade union solidarity at the international level. This was to do with competition for work. He cited an example of a company that was transferring its production from a site in the North West to a new location

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<sup>4</sup> Now absorbed into Amicus.

in Denmark. Beyond verbal expressions of support for the British workers who were to lose their employment, unions in Denmark, in the opinion of this official, did nothing to practically oppose the move. Asked to give examples of what form such opposition could have taken, he answered that this might have meant instructing union members not to take jobs at the new plant, physically blockading equipment that was being transported from the UK into Denmark, or raising political or legal objections with the Danish government. His point was that, when it came to the question of jobs, trade unions in the 'destination country' were all too willing to take the incoming jobs revealing the fragility of the solidarity being rhetorically expressed.

The scepticism expressed in the above quote regarding EWCs was echoed also by the Education Officer of the GMB union in the North West. He himself had had some very positive experiences of EWCs. He talked enthusiastically about how where EWCs worked well they brought unions in different countries together for the purpose of sharing vital information, training for EWC representatives, joint publications and cultural exchanges. He acknowledged, however, that this was not the only, or even the most typical experience. Many representatives, he went on, had negative recollections of sitting on EWCs. These were often the result of a lack of clarity as to their real role on these bodies. Representatives on EWCs often had the experience of having to deal with reluctant employer representatives who were dismissive of the issues being raised by unions and evasive of their responsibilities in terms of

such things as communication and transparency. Such experiences, then, were said to undermine the confidence of representatives in feeding back to their own branches and regions as well as their interest in doing so. For this official, the great potential benefit of EWCs was that of tying employers into a 'social responsibility' agenda by which they would be obliged to consider the welfare of workers, their families and their communities. The reality, however, in his assessment, was that, overall, EWCs were a long way from meeting this potential, that the experience of EWCs was hugely variable for unions and that the communication of the advantages of taking part in them, to employers as well as to unions, needed to be drastically improved.

*What we are after is a level playing field. I think, for the reasons I have mentioned though, reps are a bit despondent about just how effective the EWC's are. Its always difficult. There is a need to raise the education of managers and even middle managers. The same goes for the unions. We need to educate our people too. Its about a channel of communication. Generally I don't think it works as well - from the information I am getting back - as well as it should do. There is potential to improve it and I think it is a worthwhile project. (AJ)*

These critical comments were all the more powerful in coming from an enthusiast for EWCs. That said, it is also true that the mixed nature of



many of the comments offered on the experience of EWCs, both positive and negative, resonates with much of the commentary found in the literature on the subject. For some the emergence of EWCs has opened up the possibility of “overcoming the limitations of international solidarity” (Hoffman 2000:644) whilst some emphasise the greater supranational role being played by the ETUC (Goetschy 2002) and the possibilities for “transnational co-operation towards transnational integration” (Jacobi 2000:27). Some authors, however, point to the ambiguity of the possibilities of EWCs as potential vehicles either of militancy or of incorporation into employer dominated processes (Martínez Lucio and Weston 2003). Still others have drawn attention to the ways in which unions have generally failed to exploit the opportunities that they have been presented with through involvement in EWCs (Wills 2002). More tangentially, though still relevantly, others have highlighted the UK as an ‘average performer’ with regard to the involvement of its companies within EWCs (Traub-Merz 2001:13).

Continuing the theme of scepticism regarding closer engagement with international trade union organizations, one North West regional officer of the TGWU explained how, what he saw as members’ self-interest, undermined the possibility of international solidarity amongst members outside a tiny minority of activists. By ‘self-interest’ he was referring to both the institutional self-interest of trade unions as well as the private self-interest of members. Elaborating his point he explained that the section of the union with which he was most involved was made of up

largely of male trade union members who were highly skilled and who enjoyed relatively high rates of remuneration. This, he felt, led to an attitude of complacency and self-reliance and undermined any prospect of international affairs - whether of national government or of trade union solidarity - becoming anything other than a minority interest within the union. This view was reinforced for him when he reflected back upon his own attempts to raise awareness of, and organize political action against, the apartheid regime in South Africa when he was a young convenor at the petrochemical company, Shell, in the 1970s. He explained that he had been disappointed at the low levels of support he received for his initiative. This is a striking counterpoint to the note made earlier in the thesis in relation to the era of the struggle against apartheid in forming an enduring internationalist outlook amongst that generation of activists, some of whom now occupy senior positions in the trade union movement.

Of all the interviews conducted with officials who could be described as ‘enthusiasts’ for European level engagement, the most enthusiastic was a high profile and well known ex-General Secretary of the GMB.<sup>5</sup> This ex-official was emphatic that European engagement was of critical importance to British trade unions if they were to survive in the coming decades. He pointed out the range of issues being covered or at least affected by EU policy and law. These included temporary agency working, employer consultation, part-time working and ‘atypical’ workers. These were all described as vital ‘bread-and-butter’ issues for

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<sup>5</sup> He had retired as General Secretary just days before the interview was conducted.

trade unions in the UK. Whilst echoing the highly ambivalent comments by many of the European level officials relating to the results of efforts to obtain sectoral agreements with employers he was still of the view, however, that the performance of European trade union bodies, especially the EIFs, had been disappointing and that they had been “punching below their weight” for many years. He was of the opinion that the tensions resulting from this under-performance, were also, in part at least, to do with an element of trade union ‘imperialism’. By this he meant that some of the larger EIFs were more concerned with expanding their spheres of influence and with ‘taking over’ small EIFs, than they were with improving the institutional framework for European level industrial relations. He related this problem to that of the erosion of the distinction between private sector and public sector spheres of industrial relations referred to at the global level.

*The old distinctions have gone. And so how have the sectors reacted to that? By taking each other over. I mean I’ve had many bruising experiences in this area when I was trying to represent energy workers and there were at least two internationals deeply involved with energy workers. Would they cooperate together? Would they hell? There’s a real problem in respect of services - public and private. But how closely do UNI and the PSI cooperate together? Do me a favour. So I’m saying it’s ‘imperialism’ in the sense that they are trying to take each other over rather than being a*

*cooperative model where they work together in joint committees and so on. In fact the only forum where they are forced to work together is the ETUC. (JE)*

Echoing appeals for a *strategic* restructuring of the international trade unions (e.g. Thorpe 1997), he developed this highly critical view of the European and international trade union bodies. His charge, bluntly, was that the international trade union bodies are less concerned with strategic orientation than they are with issues of prestige and influence within their own circles. He questioned the real motivations behind many of the mergers and restructuring drives of those bodies.

*Take the mine-workers of Europe. They merged themselves out of existence. For a damn good reason too - because they are disappearing. They are becoming a dying breed that couldn't sustain their own international stature because of the reduction of people working in the industry. So its not really mergers from a strategic point of view. Its not putting together, for instance, road transport with a sector like oil. If you put road transport and oil together, you would have got a powerful machine that could deliver some strategic imperatives. That sort of merger is not happening from where I can see. They are driven by other things. (JE)*

Again, these quotes contain a paradox. On the one hand this official is convinced that European engagement is of critical importance for unions in the UK. On the other hand he is scathing about the performance of European bodies in providing the kinds of mechanisms that would allow the necessary levels of engagement. This combination of enthusiasm for Europe with what amounts to a near despair over the ability of trans-national labour organizations to exploit the opportunities presented provides a sharp expression of a feeling that was present in many of the interviews on this theme and at all levels.

### ***Concrete steps towards organizational restructuring***

Much more optimistic assessments of the prospects of UK unions moving towards the European level in their operations were given by some interviewees. Some comment has been made that the EIFs have strengthened their position within the ETUC (*e.g.* Hoffman and Mermet 2000) and even that this has been *at the expense* of national federations and affiliates (Waddington 2000). Nonetheless the European Trade Union Advisor at the London offices of the TGWU was of the opinion that his union would eventually become a European trade union body. He felt that in the 'next five years' this would be something that would have to be seriously considered. As he explained, the TGWU already organizes on a trans-national basis in that it recruits members and organizes in the Irish Republic. The union certainly already had to conduct its business in more than one European language in some areas of its work. Migrant workers

coming from the CEE countries are entitled to become members of the union when they take up employment in the UK and those that do not are still seen as potential members. British TGWU members are also increasingly likely to work outside of the UK for some of their working life or even routine work. This is particularly true of lorry drivers and contract workers in construction and some industrial sectors. In terms of the actual initiative for the emergence of a European trade union body he was doubtful that this would come from UK unions themselves. Rather, he felt, it would come from a union or federation with a stronger political tradition of internationalism such as the CGT in France or the CGIL in Italy – both Left orientated union federations.

The Assistant General Secretary of NUMAST whose account of the ways in which that union is developing on-line models of membership participation has already been discussed, also spoke of the move towards trans-national modes of operation that it is pursuing. In this senior official's view the global reach of NUMAST is such that, as the maritime sector expands and as the union increases its membership, it is beginning to rival and, indeed, collide with, the ITF, an organization that can accurately be characterised as being an effective global union (Breitenfellner 1997:545). NUMAST, according to this interviewee, is not the only national maritime union that this is true of. The equivalent national maritime unions of the Philippines and of Japan are also expanding rapidly and becoming, in effect, fledgling global unions.

The growth in the numbers of workers who are members of trade unions and who work in countries other than their country of origin, is leading to a new and diverse range of issues for trade unions. The European Advisor to the TGWU, who is based in Kent and who deals with migrant workers coming from various parts of the EU and beyond as well as representing UK trade unionists working on the continent, gave some examples. The issues are often to do with various aspects of cross-border regulation or the lack of it. Pension arrangements and social entitlements to things such as unemployment benefit, healthcare and education for children are all areas where migrant workers require advice, information and support from unions. A particular example that this interviewee had recent and direct experience of was that of UK workers being able to transfer their Job Seekers Allowance to other EU states whilst they looked for work outside of the UK.

He went on to describe various bi-lateral and multi-lateral arrangements with Continental unions that have been put in place to facilitate this kind of support. Often these unions are formally affiliated to British trade union bodies:

*With SERTUC [South-East Region Trade Union Congress]  
we have regular contact with these unions. They are all the  
affiliates. You have got four organizations in Belgium –  
including the Christian workers and the Flemish speakers. All  
the French unions are affiliated to the TUC. The type of guys*

*we meet regularly would be either regional officials or people like myself. Our reps are getting a lot of experience in this area now and a lot of contact with our European colleagues.*

Another example that could be included here would be the link between the German union Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, Chemie und Energie and the GMB. This is a formal sectoral link that exists for the purposes of information exchange on bargaining positions, joint recognition of union membership cards where members are working outside of their own country, and joint seminars (Waddington 2000; Dølvik 2000).

A senior International Officer at Unison explained how her union is changing its structures in order to actively embed an internationalist perspective into its routines. The International Committee, she explained, now operates at several different levels of the union whereas it used to be a purely national body. It now operates at both national and regional levels. At the union's 2000 conference, however, a decision was made to encourage branches to appoint international officers as 'core officers' to their branch committees. The regularity of meetings for international structures has also since been increased. Some of the regional international committees were said to be far more active as a result of these changes with particular mention being made of the London Regional Office as being highly active on international affairs. Commenting on the motions to the 2003 conference this official pointed



out that around half of all the motions on international issues had come from branches which meant that they had been debated by members.

### *Summary*

The increased prominence of global unions in the routines of work within British trade unions was a conspicuous theme across many interviews. There were actually many stories that featured the international body to which the interviewees union was affiliated, as an active player in the episode under discussion. The PSI, UNI and the ITF all stood out as organizations that were seen as having important strategic, facilitating and communications roles for various kinds of trade union action and activity.

Bi-lateral links between unions were referred to often, giving the impression that such links occurred frequently between British unions and unions in other parts of Europe and of the world. Often such links occurred at levels other than the national with inter-regional and inter-branch links being described as common by some interviewees. The creation of durable bi-lateral linkages was said to require the identifying of common benefits such as those of learning from one another's experience, personal links and an agreed common language.

Some negative assessments of transnational inter-union linking were present in the interview data. Competition for jobs, the mixed experience

of EWCs, limitations resulting from member self-interest and an absence of strategic thinking behind international union mergers were all cited as barriers to deeper levels of solidarity. Nonetheless, in some sectors progress appeared to be being made towards the emergence of Europe-wide regional trade unions as well as new global trade union organizations. Moreover, there was also evidence of international work becoming normalised within the routines of trade union branch life.

### Coalition building

Of the five types of resource that Frege *et al.* (2004) identify as being made available to trade unions through coalition building the most relevant were those of expertise and specialist knowledge, legitimacy and mobilising power. As we will see, all the research interviewees talked at some length about the movement opposing the war in Iraq and most also talked about the Anti-globalisation Movement. These were described by several interviewees as bringing their union into contact with new social groups and with young people. Where the mode of interaction between unions and their partners was taken as the basis for definition most of the coalitions mentioned, large or small scale, tended to be ‘common-cause coalitions’. There were no ‘vanguard coalitions’ in which the union took the lead. In perhaps one case, that of the work done in the North West around the Sefton Holocaust Memorial Project the coalitions could be described as being ‘integrative’ in that the values of the coalition partner

were incorporated into the culture and routine business of the unions concerned. Where the methods used are the basis of definition all of the coalitions were 'outsider coalitions' in that the main forms of activity were those of public protest and campaigning. There were no examples of unions of their coalition partners being able to exert pressure on the government as insiders in policy processes.

Overall, at the local level, the theme of coalition building with non-labour organizations for the purposes of political campaigning, community linking or 'reach-out' to new constituencies was a strong one. Many examples of such activities were forthcoming. The overall picture was one that suggested that a significant aspect of those developments, that we might broadly consider to be revitalizing, was to do with the ability and willingness of trade unions to look beyond a narrow and sectionalist focus and to seek alliances based upon shared values, commitments and needs. The Regional Secretary of ASLEF, for instance, gave the examples of local work aimed at halting the influence of far-right and racist organizations in the North West, the Jubilee 2000 campaign against Third World debt and involvement in the 'Stop the War Coalition' campaigning against the US and British invasion of Iraq.

### ***Trade unions and the Anti-war Movement***

The example of opposition to the Iraq war was one that was frequently cited with regard to this theme. It was also an example that illustrated the

complexities involved for trade unions engaging in political campaigning that went beyond their immediate remit of membership representation. Again the ASLEF interview was illuminating. On the one hand some ASLEF members, it was explained, had been trenchantly opposed to the war and had raised a strong and loud argument within the union that opposition should be a matter of official national policy. Six branches out of twenty four had sent official representation to the major anti-war demonstration in London in February of 2002. Indeed some Scottish ASLEF members had felt strongly enough on the issue to refuse to move a trainload of military ordinance destined for Iraq risking, in so doing, their own employment. The union, nationally, supported these individuals on the basis of the illegality of the war and the absence of a second UN resolution giving legal sanction to military action in that country. On the other hand, he went on, it was also the case that many ASLEF members had family in the armed forces or were themselves in the Territorial Army. These individuals tended to be supportive of military personnel and to associate this with a broadly pro-war stance - whatever misgivings they may have had about the specific issues around the question of invasion. This made the position of the national union on the question a sensitive one. At the local level then, branches tended to use what is known as the 'silent rule' under which branches merely support national policy without debate rather than risking divisions. Some ambivalence was also expressed by this official, himself strongly opposed to the war, insofar as he saw the dominance of the Iraq issue as having eclipsed many other important international solidarity issues.

Difficulties to do with having to balance official opposition to the invasion of Iraq with strong feelings on the part of some members that the union's position should be to support military personnel by supporting the invasion itself, were also described very clearly by the TGWU Deputy Convenor at the Vauxhall plant in Ellesmere Port. It was also a difficulty encountered by the CWU North West Regional Secretary. It seems that in most unions in the North West, at the very least, serious debate of the issues took place in work-places and in union meetings. This was certainly true in the North West region of the FBU despite enthusiastic official support for the Stop the War Coalition on the part of the local union committee. This quote comes from the Chair of the Liverpool FBU.

*We did support 'Stop the War' campaign - both the Merseyside brigade and the North West region. We supported them financially in the first instance. I think we were one of the first organizations to actually send some money to them, regionally. Once the 'Stop the War Coalition ' started in Liverpool we were asked to financially support them and I think we gave them £500 straight away just to get them started. Certainly the 'stop the war' stuff or the war in Iraq has created some good discussions in stations. Some people say 'well he is a dictator lets get rid of him - I go along with Blair and Bush'. But when you introduce the real issues –*

*'they are going because of weapons of mass destruction so where are these weapons of mass destruction?' they go quiet. Now its very quiet on the stations about it. I think it reflects the national mood. (NT)*

This sort of assessment has echoes of the interaction between the movement against the American War in Vietnam and trade unions in the US. Although the picture that was actively and even aggressively promoted in the North American press was that of a nationalistic and fiercely patriotic support for the war in Vietnam amongst US workers, especially during the Nixon phase, the reality was a great deal more complex. Lannon and Rogoff (2002/3) have shown how, despite the official AFL-CIO policy of support for the war, debate, doubt and opposition ran throughout the broader union movement. In their account the numerous ways in which that Anti-war Movement interacted with and influenced the trade union movement, culminating in the Labor For Peace movement founded in 1972 by 14 AFL-CIO unions and five independent unions, gives a sense of the porosity of trade unions to the ideological ebbs and flows of their wider social environment.

### ***Trade unions and the Anti-globalisation Movement***

Most of the trade unionists interviewed at the national, regional and local levels saw the Anti-globalisation Movement as being relevant to their unions and as something that had been taken up by some of their

members in different parts of the union and in different ways. The Amicus Convenor at Vauxhall's commented on this theme. He associated globalisation with the ways in which his company had become more fiercely competitive on global markets. In the following quote he comments upon what he saw as the avarice of the chief executives of the company whose salaries had mushroomed over the previous five years.

*For our members it [globalisation] means more insecurity. For those at the top it means a pay bonanza. The chief executive's salary has risen phenomenally. Five years ago, when he first got onto the board he was on £92,000 a year. That went up to £292,000 and then to £300,000. The following year it went up to £500,000 and then to £525,000. He gave a solemn pledge at the start of this year that he wouldn't get any more pay rises because he has just got a £17-22 million share option scheme over the five years. Then we found he had also been awarded a £400,000 increase in his pension. So his pension contributions went up from £147,000 last year to £583,000 this year. He also got £3 million in his share options this year. (PA)*

Since the late 1990s there has been debate about the very meaning of solidarity and, by extension, international solidarity. Waterman (1998:8), for instance, has noted the rise of new forms of internationalism that he calls 'subject' internationalisms as opposed to 'issue' internationalisms.

By the former he means movements of international solidarity that are based on the self-mobilisation and self-articulation of groups in society that suffer oppression and/or exploitation. Others writing more in the field of industrial relations have both identified, as well as called for, an orientation away from purely interest based, 'mechanical' forms of solidarity to what might be considered to be more ethical, or 'organic' forms of solidarity (Hyman 1997; Hyman 1999a).

The Unison senior International Officer who was interviewed, drew attention to an example of solidarity that appealed to notions of ethical solidarity and one in which Unison had played a crucial role. This was the Jubilee 2000 campaign that aimed to abolish Third World debt to Western banks. It had created a ground-swell of enthusiastic support in many branches around the UK. Jubilee 2000 groups were set up by branch level Unison members and nationally the union put out a great deal of publicity for the campaign, the petition around which it was organized and the events that had been organized. The local 'Jubilee 2000 networks' that sprang up were also reported to have enlivened debate over other international issues at all levels of the union from the smallest branches, through the regions and up to the level of national conferences.

The National Secretary for Public Services of the GMB union explained how his union, along with and often in conjunction with, Unison, worked closely with a range of NGOs on the issue of Third World poverty and global justice. The GMB, for instance, works with Oxfam over fair trade



issues. This official described how the internal communications system within the union is designed so that Oxfam's policies on fair trade can be easily transmitted to branches for debate and adoption. This often leads to branches affiliating to that organization. Similar campaigns have been those to do with child labour and the continuing problem of slavery and human trafficking. The union has also campaigned over ethical corporate social responsibility. An organization that campaigns on this, latter, issue is called 'Ethical Threads' and was set up for this purpose by the GMB. Policies also exist within the union that ensure that the union does not use any promotional materials, such as T-shirts and trade union identifying bibs for outdoor activity, that have made by child labour or slave labour.

*A colleague of mine here at the GMB was out in Turkey last week talking about child labour in the textile industry. He went early this year, because we ran a campaign against Nike and Addidas. Their footballs are being made by child labour. They went to Turkey to speak on child labour only last week. Five months ago he was in Finland speaking at the conference and he actually mentioned footballs made during the world cup made by kids in the developing world. But he made the point that every time Beckham kicks a football, he might as well be kicking a kid's head. The press just picked it up and the only thing you read of it was '[name of this friend] and Beckham'. We have actually tried to engage some European stars, sporting stars in these campaigns. Its been*

*pretty successful because its one of the things unique about  
the GMB - all the Scottish footballers are GMB members.*

**(MG)**

The research interview with the Liverpool FBU Chair also revealed a local union leadership that saw many points of contact between its members' interests and the aims of the social movements broadly concerned with globalisation and other associated issues. One area that was particularly mentioned was that of the erosion of civil liberties. The fire brigade, it was explained, is a disciplined service that comes under military regulations in times of civil emergency. This was seen to raise special concern for the FBU and its members against the background of the political atmosphere created in the US and in the UK by the terrorist attacks against the US on 11 September 2001. Shortly before this interview protesters had been arrested as they were travelling to oppose an arms fair that was being held in the City of London. The outcome of this episode was that the Home Secretary bowed to an incredulous public reaction and intervened to quash criminal proceedings. Nonetheless the case had generated discussion within the FBU as to where members stood in relation to their personal rights to take part in political protest especially with regard to the Anti-terrorism Act (2001). This dynamic of an encroachment by the state upon the rights of assembly and protest followed by a greater sense of determination within an oppositional movement is interesting in that it was expressed and described by a trade unionist who, though not himself personally involved in the episode

nonetheless saw implications for his and his trade union's freedom of political expression. It also resonates with the links between the campaign for civil liberties in relation to 'anti-terror' legislation and the broader anti-globalisation movement (Cassen 2003:52).

The Regional Secretary of the North West CWU articulated a recurrent theme in the interviews on this topic. This was that he felt sympathy for those who were involved in and were organizing the Anti-globalisation Movement. The source of this sympathy was that whatever people made of the television image of the anti-globalisation protesters the fact remained that they were addressing issues of real importance to trade unions and their members. Specifically he referred to the power of MNCs in determining the fate of workers in the West and in the developing world. His concern – one, he explained, that he shared with the protesters – was that large corporations could shift their work anywhere in the world 'at the flick of a switch'. He was aware of CWU branch members having attended some of the G8 protests either through political groups, through their churches or as interested individuals. It was also the case that CWU national officials had represented the national union at some of the larger anti-globalisation assemblies.

This interview also revealed an awareness of the role of the union's international body, UNI. He was aware, for instance, of regular communications coming from UNI to branches on such things as anti-globalisation campaigning and international solidarity issues. The union

was proactive in encouraging lay members to get involved in international conferences organized by UNI and in offering financial support for transport and accommodation. He cited the example of a personal friend of his who, as branch secretary of a small Rochdale branch, was attending such a conference for the first time with the intention of feeding back his experience to members through a presentation at the next branch meeting.

### ***Global citizenship***

In some cases the issue of globalisation was seen as being a concern for trade unionists, not because of any particular trade union or work-place interest, but because of a general awareness of the importance of global issues for everyone. This sort of internationalism can be seen as a sort of ‘citizenship internationalism’ – or perhaps a ‘supranational citizenship’ (Arditi 2004) - that can be shown by people whether or not they happen to belong to a trade union. The point here is, however, that because trade union members, by definition, have their trade union, through which they are able to express themselves politically, they do so. The Liverpool Chair of the FBU cited two issues that have been taken up by the Anti-globalisation Movement in its different parts and that had been debated within the union to exemplify this sort of phenomena.

*I agree with the anti-globalisation people when they talk about the drug companies. Look at the problem of AIDS in*

*Africa. That should be a priority for governments across the world. It's a human disaster. But the drug companies only see the commercial side [...] The problem with the American companies is that they want to control and it's all about cash. There is the issue of seeds in Africa and India. I keep having this argument in work over GM foods. You know in Africa they used to have national indigenous plants that were grown in Africa. They used to feed off those and when the seeds came they would keep the seeds, sow the seeds and then continue the production for the next year. So I say 'they can't do that now' and they [FBU members with whom the interviewee had had to argue on this point.] say 'what do you mean they can't do that now'. [Answers] 'Because the companies have bought these products and made them their products. These seeds are now their products. The African government have to buy the seeds'. They say 'why do they do that?'. I'm having this argument regularly with people just now. They say they don't understand why they can't just sow the seeds. It's because the technology has designed the seed so it will not produce any new ones. They are sterile. It goes round and round but we do have that debate – and at conference obviously. (NT)*

This notion of a general awareness of issues around globalisation and of a growing sense of public anxiety regarding the state of the world was

shared by the senior officer interviewed at Unison's international office. She explained that, in a similar manner to the regional FBU official quoted above, she saw this generalised public awareness finding expression in trade union forums at all levels. She emphasised also that this new audience for what she called a 'globalisation of solidarity' represented a new generation of predominantly young activists who were in many senses recreating the atmosphere of internationalism that had resulted from the struggle against the apartheid regime for a previous generation of activists. The difference, she felt, was that it was not so much a particular struggle that people were identifying with but rather a "general awareness that what is happening here is having an impact in developing countries and *vice versa*".

The interview with the North West Regional official of Amicus, however, did reveal a strong note of ambivalence on the question of the Anti-globalisation Movement and the family of movements and campaigns for global justice. He emphasised that as a union that had many members in the defence industries as well as having a small number of members employed in the nuclear power sector, Amicus had to represent interests that were at odds with those of some current social movements and that were even the target of their hostility. Moreover, he went on, during some of the May Day protests in the City of London that took place between 1998 and 2001 some Amicus members who worked in the City of London felt themselves to be "under attack". This resulted in motions to

the national Amicus conference from London branches calling upon the national union to adopt a critical stance towards the protests.

One dimension to affiliations between trade union branches and campaign and special interest groups is the way in which some branches will develop libraries of literature that can be accessed by their members. At the Vauxhall plant, for example, the Amicus Deputy Convenor, described how such a library had developed as a resource. He explained that, especially with long term affiliations, pamphlets, newsletters, information packs and special issue publications are sent to the branch and accumulate in the branch office. A decision was made to organize this material into a library for members. It was sometimes the case, he said, that the material was not of direct relevance to members but that it was still kept in order to improve the social role that the branch was able to play for members and for a wider community. To illustrate this he gave the example of publications on maternity rights. Although not an issue that would be raised often as a branch issue in an almost entirely male workforce nonetheless the information contained in such material would certainly be important for members' partners and wider families. Another example he cited was that of pension rights for retired members. This broadly educative function of coalitions and affiliations was said to be important also for human rights issues, solidarity with trade unions facing repression abroad and national union policy over such issues as the Iraq war.

### ***The increasing diversity of trade union affiliations***

The North West Regional Secretary of Amicus gave an account of the range of issues that are today generating interest amongst Amicus members. He explained that interest in linking with non-trade union organizations and causes is at a higher level than it used to be when he started his career as an official in the 1980s. This fits with a more general trend towards increased levels of engagement with NGOs that began to be identified in many countries from the mid 1990s (Bendt 1996). In the quote given below there is also a suggestion that members who have no strong political party affiliation nonetheless see the union as being an arena through which they can voice their political concerns.

*I will show you some of the [conference] agendas. I think the issues have changed and the emphasis would have been mainly CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] twenty years ago. These days its much broader. The motions would tend to be from environmental to global stuff – the big global campaigns. You get people who broadly divide into two groups: the labour party supporters, who I suppose see the issues in terms of UK political party stuff; and those who have no affiliation with any party. We have people with the most bizarre affiliations to organizations that you wouldn't guess. We have a lot of nurses and health visitors through the community branch. They always push their own specialist*



*NGO's that they are part of right the way from child poverty  
through to breast feeding. (KC)*

A similar picture of a growth in the range and diversity of causes that are attracting trade union support was given by the North West Regional Secretary for Unison. He developed his point to give a perspective on this shift. Whereas in the past, he felt, the focus tended to be upon individual countries such as Chile, South Africa and Cuba the focus today tended to be more thematic and more to do with supporting NGOs working on a specific issue. An example he gave was Unison's support for the NGO Water Aid which campaigns over the issue of access to clean and safe water in the developing world.

### ***Social movement affiliation as political expression***

The Liverpool branch secretary of the printing union, the GPMU, made an illuminating comment upon the political context of the changing nature of external affiliation. This was it was principally to do with the decline in allegiance felt by trade unions and their members towards the Labour Party (Ludlam *et al.* 2002). Since 1997, when the New Labour government was formed by Tony Blair, he suggested that disillusionment with Labour had led to a looser practical interpretation of how the union's political fund could be used. Under the rules, he explained, this money should be exclusively used to support the Labour Party. In reality, however, the bulk of the local political fund of around fifteen thousand

pounds was being used to pay for affiliations to things such as ‘Save the Whale’ or Greenpeace. He explained that he, himself, had changed his attitude to questions of external affiliation and engagement. On the question of sending delegates to the European Social Forum his opinion was that this was something that the union would support and finance on the condition that some kind of report-back was given by those union members who were involved.

The Chair of the Liverpool FBU talked about his region’s support of, and involvement in, a local Holocaust memorial and educational project being run by the Sefton branch of Unison and its promotion in the wider region. This project, along with carrying out general educational work through visits to schools, had also organized a number of trips to visit the concentration and extermination camps in Poland. By the time of the interview, the local union had paid for six of its members, including the FBU official interviewed, to go on these trips so that they could report back to their brigades (branches) and take part in school and community based educational work. A major reason for his union’s support for this work, he explained, was the view that this was linked to broader efforts to marginalise racism, especially amongst young people, within communities in the North West, and to support those seeking asylum and refuge in the UK from other parts of the world. He also indicated a dual purpose in that the access that such work gave the FBU into schools and community groups, also gave the union the opportunity to publicise its own political priorities and to explain the reasons, for instance, why

industrial action was being taken at any given time. Some months before this interview was conducted the FBU had indeed been engaged in nation-wide strike action.

He also gave an account of the ways in which shifts in the politics of the FBU at a national level had changed the international orientation of the union. For many years the General Secretary of the FBU, was Ken Cameron, a figure whose political background was that of an involvement in the Communist Party of Great Britain. During the years in which Cameron held the post, the official focus of the FBU's international solidarity work tended to be directed towards the political defence of Cuba. When a new General Secretary, Andy Gilchrist, came into post, this changed. Cuba was replaced as a political focus by Columbia. The repression against trade unionists in Columbia has been well documented and has been referred to elsewhere in this thesis. The feeling was that this country was in many ways a more justifiable and a more urgent focus for the union's international work. The shift was also seen, however, by this official as being symptomatic of a more international political change in the trade union movement to do with the historical end of the Cold War and the demise of the Communist Party as an influential force within the British labour movement.

An international officer at the London offices of NATFHE gave an account of debates that had gone on at the union's previous national

conference on this theme. One motion that had been debated and passed was on participation at the 2003 European Social Forum. Delegates had voted for the motion but not without doubts and problems being aired around the issue of how a union with highly articulated internal processes of democracy and accountability could engage with an event that had been organized by a largely self-selecting organizing committee. This was a difficulty that was presented in several interviews and at all levels of analysis. In the view of this official, a spectrum of attitudes existed within his own union and, also across the trade union movement, between those who focussed exclusively on such problems – in effect opposing involvement – and those who saw in events like the European Social Forum a new means of political expression that was beginning to fill the void left by the traditional political parties. For these union members engagement with NGOs and social movements represented an exciting new political terrain on which they could have a political impact they did not feel they had at the ballot box. This official gave a specific instance of where NATFHE had worked closely with a campaign group that can be seen as one of the broad family of NGOs involved in the Anti-globalisation Movement. The union had been approached by People and Planet as part of their campaigning work against the GATS. A strong working relationship developed when it was obvious that People and Planet were carrying out research that was directly relevant to the union. The organization's research into GATS and public services – including Higher Education – was eventually released in the form of a publication: *Trading It Away*. This publication was valued highly by this official who

explained that it had genuinely helped him in his role as the union's representative to EPSU, the European public sector trade union organization. His view was that it had provided him with high quality information that he would never have had the time to find and organize unaided. Indeed, for this interviewee, this aspect of high quality analysis and expertise was the most important contribution that specialist NGOs could make to trade unions.

### ***Problems in coalition building***

In their classic 1967 paper on the limitations of trade union political consciousness Anderson, Blackburn and Cockburn argued that trade unions could only *express* the experience of class society for the working class. That is, as products of capitalist society, they were structurally unable to *challenge* a system based upon class exploitation in its essence. In so doing they drew attention to what they saw as an inbuilt conservatism within the trade union practice of even the most politically left wing unions. Writing in the late 1960s their main concerns in the piece were to do with questions of socialist strategy and, presciently, the tensions that were building up within the British trade union movement around wage restraint. Nonetheless their analysis does have some application here. The cautious nature of the attitude of trade unions towards movements that are opposed to the capitalist system, especially in the British context, continues to affect the relationship between the labour movement and anti-system movements. This is true also of the

broad swathe of campaigning groups that have emerged in recent years in association with the Anti-globalisation Movement (Spooner 2004). This was a theme that, at the very least, gave rise to tensions over the question of how involved trade unions were to become in that movement. These tensions were present in a number of the research interviews carried out for this thesis.

One difficulty that was discussed in some detail in the interview with the North West Regional Secretary of Unison, resonates strongly with concerns that had been raised at both the global and the European levels for this research. This was the issue of what was seen as being the lack of representativity and accountability within the social movements that are today seeking support from trade unions. This point was made by reference to the 2003 European Social Forum to which Unison was sending official representation. The North West regional secretary was himself to be one of an official delegation of three from the national executive of the union along with further official representation from many regions and branches. This official expressed dissatisfaction at the fact that he had received no timetable of meetings and events and nothing resembling an agenda for the business of the forum that might have given a sense of the purpose and aims of the event. He also expressed some bewilderment at the scale of the event and the degree of openness to anyone who wished attend. This raised questions in his mind as to what the European Social Forum could be said to represent by way of social

constituencies or of what status any emerging policies could be said to have.

*I have only been finding out about it in the last few weeks and the way it is set up. There are about 250 meetings over three days. There is no registration for those meetings. Most trade unionist are used to going to things that have a programme about six months in advance and you know who the speakers are. In this union we are very participative and we encourage participation. We have always gone in a representational capacity to anything. We have to go the Labour Party as a delegation. We go to conference as a branch delegation or a regional delegation. We are accountable to the people who send us. So its not only you who you represent - it's the people who can say 'you went there on my behalf'. There are three of us going to Paris and we will report back. But at this stage nobody knows what seminars we are going to or what workshops we are going to. Some people like me, who have a long history of trade union activity, have a problem getting our heads around that. (FH)*

A senior International Officer at the Unison international office made a comment that can be seen as an answer to this sort of complaint. In this official's opinion the British trade union movement is far too cautious in its attitude to NGOs and campaigning bodies. She felt, for instance that

the TUC had an ‘all-or-nothing’ position on NGO’s whereby once affiliated the union was stuck with that affiliation. In her view, whilst there were clear and important differences of culture, purpose and internal processes between NGOs and trade unions, she also felt that the two types of organization could and should work together on the understanding that if serious difficulties arose then the working relationship could end without compromising either party. This sort of understanding of the potential for positive working relationships between unions and campaigning groups has also been articulated by reference to the Clean Clothes Campaign and the Ethical Trade Initiative that have brought together British trade unions and NGOs involved with issues of exploitation in the global garment industry (Hale 2004). Hale found that once unions and NGOs began to work together on a particular campaign that differences tended to disappear. This Unison officer felt that the kinds of union objections raised in this area were more to do with a wariness of the radical political stances taken by some NGOs and reflected a conservatism on the part of the official layers of the British trade union movement. This also has echoes in some of the literature on recent social movements. Drainville (2001) for instance, writing on the experience of the Summit of the Americas held at Québec City in April of 2001 described the porosity of the boundaries between the quite different sorts of organizations present:

*Some groups involved in Summit politics ... did cross the divide ... the People’s tent was more open to protestors than*



*had been originally planned ... some unionists did join the CASA/CLAC [Comité d'accueil du Sommet des Américues / Convergence des Lutte Anti-Capitalistes – both anarchist groups present at the Summit] march on Friday; and a few who started Saturday's march away from the security perimeter did double back towards it, to support direct action ... After the Summit the Travailleurs Canadiens de l'Automobile (the Quebec branch of the Canadian Auto Workers) did help organize legal support for political prisoners ... (Drainville 2001)*

Nonetheless, within the Anti-globalisation Movement, the role of trade unions has been complicated by issues and tensions around the charge of protectionism as a motive for labour movement involvement. This principally means that trade unions are accused of seeking to protect the jobs of workers in their own sectors and countries at the expense of workers in the poorer countries. On this point the former General Secretary of the GMB who was interviewed, made an observation. This was that, taking the example of the textile industry, in which his union has many members, as a prime example of a sector affected by global markets, protectionist stances on the part of trade unions could result in sectoral irrationalities. His argument was that to defend the UK manufacture of low quality garments against competition with the developing world was unrealistic. On this view, in an affluent society like the UK with a high technological capacity, it would be far more

appropriate to produce high quality goods for the more expensive end of the high street market.

*I mean, one of the difficulties we've had in the GMB is that our textile clothing industry in this country is just awful and we are producing exactly the wrong things and we're producing things with a very high labour content - which is entirely inappropriate to an affluent society like ours. We should be doing the leading edge stuff – very high quality designs and so on. We should be at the top end of the market. But what we do is we defend industries and companies who are at the bottom end of the market where it is absolutely impossible to compete on a world-wide basis. If you go down the protectionist road then you're dead in the long run. (JE)*

There is an attempt here to pose a solution to a question that has obstructed closer working between labour organizations and contemporary generation of global justice movements from their origins in the early 1990s. Given as a response to questions regarding the relationship between the Anti-globalisation Movement and the trade union movement this comment can be interpreted as being motivated by a desire to see such a relationship develop. This interpretation was confirmed by the comments that followed in this interview responding to further questions regarding the Anti-globalisation Movement. On a more general note this influential trade union leader was strongly of the view

that whatever the difficulties involved, still trade unions ought to be seeking to cultivate a constructive relationship with current social movements.

*I think we go for it. I was one of the few trade unionists on the May Day March in London, which was, you know, 'let a thousand flowers bloom'. Yes, I think we go for it and think there are going to be organizations who are going to do strange things and have strange beliefs - trade unions haven't generally got much in common with anarchists and so on. But I think as far as possible we have to strike a common cause because we have to make the events more important so that they become the subject of public debate. Now, as I've got older, I've got much less prissy and precious over all this. My enemy's enemy is likely to be my friend and at least he or she should be given the benefit of the doubt. (JE)*

This official went on to argue that although there are clearly practical difficulties to do with financing delegations to large mobilisations as well as problems to do with cultural differences between trade unions and social movements, these should not be seen as being insurmountable or a reason not to try to engage with such movements. Indeed he was of the view that the difficulties in this area were essentially to do with a failure of imagination on the part of the trade union movement itself – and particularly in the UK.

At global level of analysis what the internationalisation of trade means for trade unionists was shown to be contradictory in some areas. Interviews with international officials in the maritime sector, for instance, revealed that commercial shipping had expanded enormously as a result of dramatic increases in the volume of goods being traded around the world. This was confirmed by interviews in the same sector at the UK national level. The Assistant General Secretary of NUMAST, the ships officers' union, made the same point in relation to how his members saw changes in the world economy. His own view was that, on the question of attempts to impose some regulatory accountability upon institutions such as the WTO and the IMF or to include a social clause in the GATS, he was strongly in favour both because of ethical-political concerns about the state of the world and the plight of the poorest, and also because NUMAST members would benefit from minimum standards of safety, contractual stability and remuneration. He was at pains to stress, however, that this was not something that was coming from the membership. His assessment was that members were not concerned with issues such as whether China should be allowed entry into the WTO – an issue that was current at the time of the interview. Rather, he felt, that the fact that the rapid expansion of China as a world trader was creating a fresh boom in shipping as it sucked in raw materials from around the world and pushed out its manufacturing exports globally, meant that members were benefiting in terms of contract and employment

opportunities. This was especially true, he explained in the container and bulk-shipping sectors.

### *Summary*

From this research it is clear that engagement in coalitions of various forms is important for the international work of British trade unions. Nearly all of the interviewees made some comment upon their union's involvement in the Anti-war Movement. This took the form of debate at union meetings that were addressed by outside speakers, formal affiliations, financial donations to local anti-war groups and membership attendance at anti-war events. Similarly these interviewees usually had a lot to say about the Anti-globalisation Movement. Again there was a sense of active engagement, albeit it to varying degrees, with the motivating issues as well as the activities of that movement. Previous involvements in other types of economic justice campaigns, and especially the Jubilee 2000 anti-debt campaign, were also discussed in a number of interviews. Several interviewees described their union's support for a range of human rights campaigns, notably those connected to the plight of the Palestinian people. Affiliations were also said to be growing in number and diversity as they came to serve as a conduit for political expression and as they came to play an increasingly important role in membership education. Problems in coalition building were discussed. These included differences of organizational style and culture, membership opposition over some issues, interest differentials connected

to sectoral positioning within global markets and trade union conservatism. Nonetheless the overall impression that these interviews gave was that coalition building and engagement with social movements has become central to, and revitalizing for, trade union internationalism.

## Partnership

The theme of partnership in relation to international work was not a strong one in the interviews. No interviewees, for instance, placed emphasis on this as a factor for revitalization. Nonetheless there were some accounts given in which partnership, either with government or government agencies or with employers, was a background theme. With regard to the framework outlined by Fichter and Greer (2004) the partnership element in these stories was never presented in terms that suggested institutionalization in any strategic or systematic sense. Rather, the accounts tended to be of ‘one-off’ projects. Overall then, these examples were weak in relation to the revitalization framework being used for this thesis.

### ***Working with government***

Hale (2001), in her overview of the range of NGOs involved in the Ethical Trade Initiative with which sections of the British trade union movement are engaged, draws attention to the ways in which government

perspectives can shape the character of aid work. She makes the point that many of the organizations involved in the initiative – Christian Aid, Oxfam and the World Development Movement, to name just three – are ‘developmentalist’ in character and that this is connected to the fact that the Department for International Development (DfID) of the UK government also offers them significant levels of support. Union support has also tended to be non-sectoral, coming from the International Department of the TUC rather than from particular unions.

One example of what might be termed ‘charity’ or perhaps ‘humanitarian solidarity’, was given during the interview with the North West Regional Secretary of the CWU. In an annual project that involves the regional office of the union working with a range of NGOs, union members organize an aid convoy to a particularly troubled part of the world each year. In recent years the destination of this material aid had been Bosnia. The focus of the campaign does change from year to year and has included aid for homeless children and aid to war refugees. Other years have seen the union organizing trips to support earthquake victims in India and to provide agricultural products for peasant farmers in Mongolia. There is a historical precedent for this sort of model of internationalism, although in a more dramatic historical context. During the Spanish Civil War of 1936-9, British trade unions opted for a policy of sending material aid Republican forces. This has been interpreted as having been essentially depoliticising to the efforts that were made to

support the struggle against Franco within the British labour movement (Brown 2002).

The specific history of this programme sheds light on the relationship between this trade union and senior figures in the ministerial ranks of the Labour government in the UK. The Minister for Higher Education at that time, Alan Johnson, is a former General Secretary of the CWU. Against a backdrop of escalating crisis in Bosnia Johnson asked CWU regional offices to meet and host a delegation from the area. This was a mixed Muslim and Christian and Serbian and Kosovan group. Two regions of the union responded - the North West and the Midlands. After having met the delegation there was reported to have been a feeling that, as the situation in Bosnia deteriorated, more ought to be done by the union. This led to a decision to write letters of protest over the issue of 'ethnic cleansing' and to take aid and messages of solidarity and unity to the country. It also led to the founding of 'CWU Humanitarian Aid' with Johnson as patron.

The group raised money from CWU branches and purchased vehicles for the convoys and also obtained some vehicles on a loan basis from supporting organizations. The response from CWU members was said to be "unbelievable". At the time of the interview the group, working with the Midlands regional office of the union over eight years, had organized twenty three convoys, six of which were to Bosnia. The work was reported to have "taken over some peoples' lives". Non-union supporters



are also involved. These include the partners and spouses of union members. Some managers are also involved and have travelled in their own vehicles provided by British Telecom and the Royal Mail. All who get involved travel at their own expense. Those who have been on the convoys report back to branches on request. At the next regional meeting this official explained, one of the twenty five trustees of the group would be reporting back from a recent trip to Bosnia.

This group, in fact, tends not to work through trade unions in many of the countries in Eastern Europe to which they travel. Indeed, whilst in their countries of destination they do not advertise themselves as being a trade union based initiative. This interviewee explained that they saw many of the labour organizations of Eastern Europe as still being in transition from the Cold War era and as not being wholly reliable as partners in such a venture. Rather the group have tended to work with NGOs that have some experience and track record of operating in a region. They work closely with an organization called 'Everychild' that works to improve the fostering rate for orphaned children, so removing them from state orphanages where they often live in quite primitive conditions. Other significant contacts for the group have been the Mongolian ambassador who came to meet the regional officials involved in the North West and who then spoke at the national CWU conference in relation to this work. Other speakers from organizations in Eastern Europe have been invited to the region and have come at the union's expense.

*We are not a political wing but we will put pressure on governments. That is done by our headquarters internationally because what we found out is that if we want to help needy children and families to get out of the poverty trap or whatever we have to play the game a bit. Its not that these children in the orphanages are actually orphans. Their families can't afford to keep them. What you find is that unfortunately in a lot of these Eastern European countries is that communism failed them and capitalism has failed them even more. So you go into these countries and you find that there's wealthy and then there's nothing else - just poverty. I think one reason people like to get involved is that we don't get into the politics so much. We deliver direct. Also all the contributions go to help. We don't employ people. It's all done on voluntary basis. No one is getting any honoraries out of this. (CW)*

### ***International links and partnership at the local government level***

One purpose of active bi-lateral union links is the sharing of experience and ideas and the export of models of practice that can provide solutions to common problems. The National Secretary for Public Services for the GMB described one example of this. The GMB has a sister union in Sweden. This union has responded to the threat of public services being

privatised by establishing its own company that can intervene to run services in partnership with local councils or even take them over completely rather than allowing them to close. The GMB sent a delegation to gather research information about the scheme. Once back in the UK the team worked up the model for the British context and trialled it in the City of Nottingham. One outcome of the experiment was that Nottingham City Council were persuaded not to embark upon a wholesale privatisation programme for refuse and street cleaning services. Instead, working with the GMB and, influenced by the model that the union had presented them with, the council restructured the service in partnership with the union. This model was run on an experimental basis for two years, over which time figures from the Swedish union visited in an advisory capacity and to gather information themselves in order to develop their own partnership practice in Sweden.

In an account of an initiative that linked Unison with a government funded Youth Inclusion Project, and unemployed young people from Oldham with youth in the Matanzas region of Cuba, the North West Regional Secretary described how an initiative had helped to create transnational community links. The union had worked with the probation service, the Princes Trust and the Oldham Youth Inclusion Project to reach 14-16 years olds in an area that had seen inter-ethnic conflict and rioting as well as a significant rise in far-right extremist political activity and racism. Through the initiative the youngsters had been trained in vehicle maintenance in a workshop that they set up and ran themselves.

They then restored a number of ambulances up to working order for shipping to where they were needed in Cuba. The purpose of this project was described as having been: to bring youngsters of different ethnic backgrounds together in area of the North West where racism seemed to be on the rise; to give youngsters skills to improve their employability; to provide material assistance to a poor community in Cuba; and to provide a cultural experience for these youngsters that they would not otherwise have had. As this North West Unison official put it:

*So we had taken a mixed of group of kids off the street - white and Asian - who didn't have anything to do with each other before. Kids who have been excluded from school. They reconditioned ambulances for Cuba. So the connection was that you were working in your community with Asian, black and white kids all working together but you were also doing something for a developing country. We got extra money and sent fifteen of them to Cuba this year. So these kids, who had never been to Presatyn, are suddenly in Cuba. They met heroes of the revolution - people who fought in the 1959 revolution. They had three football matches with the kids in Cuba, and made real links with people in Matansas. They've kept the link up. Its been life changing. I think that is an example of international development work that also pays off back here because these are kids that I think, if there were any more riots in Oldham, without this project these kids*

*would have been right in there. I think that is a good example of how international work pays in the community – and that was through our union. (FH)*

Although this was not explored in this interview the choice of destination for this aid, Cuba, does seem significant. Cuba has, for some time, featured as a solidarity cause in some quarters of the British trade union movement, particularly since 1989 and in the era of a new ascendancy of American global power. Some of the assessments of the success of this initiative created the impression that one of the purposes of the trip for the organizers, was that of political education.

### ***Summary***

As we have seen partnership working for revitalization purposes was not an area of strong or consistent findings. Where some element of partnership was present it tended to be more circumstantial to the account rather than as something that was foregrounded as having significance for revitalization. Work that involved some level of cooperation with DFID was mentioned occasionally. The case of the CWU humanitarian aid convoys was a striking and exceptional example of direct solidarity involving considerable personal investment on the part of those taking part. The example of the North West Region of Unison working with the Oldham Youth Inclusion Project suggested a concern to link international work with community development in a deprived and troubled part of the

country. In some cases, also, exchanges between a UK union and a sister union on the continent was clearly related to domestic partnership strategies. Overall, however, examples of partnership *for* international work did not feature prominently.

### Political action

Whilst Hamann and Kelly (2004) note the ways in which the institutions that have enabled trade union engagement with political processes in the past have become attenuated, this has not stopped UK unions seeking to influence EU policy. The results have been variable. Over issues to do with protecting jobs the examples given tended to be negative insofar as the unions were unsuccessful in their efforts. In such cases the unions had tried to act as ‘insiders’, working within the policy process alongside ‘legitimate’ partners. In some cases UK unions had been approached for their experience by sister unions across the EU, who were fighting privatisation at the political level by opposing the legislation driving it forward. In those cases where unions had acted as litigants in the European Courts system the reports were more upbeat, and a particular case involving the Aintree Unison branch discussed below, was presented as having been a great success for UK unions. No interviewees spoke about the sponsoring or lobbying of Members of the European Parliament as individuals or as a group. This does not of course mean that such work does not go on but simply that it was not significant for these interviewees at this time.

### *Lobbying to protect jobs*

One account that drew attention to changes in British manufacturing and that highlighted the profile of Europe in the minds of British trade unionists came from the Regional Secretary of Amicus. He described the process by which a French company called Rodea had bought up a chemical plant in West Cumbria. This plant, that had once been the well known Albright and Wilson company and before that Imperial Chemicals, was a production site for phosphate based products designed for use in washing powders. A by-product of the process involved was sold to the Coca-Cola company for the manufacture of its commercial products.

Environmental concerns regarding the damaging effects of phosphate based products, environmental lobbying through the European Parliament, replacement by a non-phosphate based equivalent known as 'Sealights' and world phosphate over-production of the product led the French company to close production in Cumbria in February of 2003 with the loss of three hundred jobs. Rodea still maintained a commercial interest in supplying the Coca-Cola company with the part-processed ingredient for its soft drinks, however. This led to the company opening a plant in Mexico to produce this intermediate product at three times the total cost at which it had been produced in West Cumbria. Despite lobbying for continued production in West Cumbria and using what

appeared to be sound economic argument, the union was unsuccessful in its attempts to save jobs in its region.

The main lessons in this story, according to this Amicus official, were the ways in which environmental policy at the European level and decision making outside of the UK had created a chain of decisions that led to a total loss of jobs where some, at least, might have been saved. This had led the North West regional Amicus office to engage more seriously with questions regarding the position of North West manufacturing within European and world markets as well as the position of the union with respect to decision making processes within MNCs and European political institutions. One immediate consequence of this story was a much more serious engagement with the North West Regional Development Agency on the part of Amicus. This account resonates with that given by Beukema and Coenen (1999) in their study of the impact of global economic forces on a company in the Dutch chemical sector. This study detailed the close imbrications between international and local factors in determining the relative balance of power between company owners and company employees. It also emphasised the importance of local labour relations for company's logistical operations.

### ***Engagement with European legislation***

The Education Officer at the North West office of the GMB drew on this theme to highlight the ways in which active stewards within his union are



much more aware of EU law than a decade ago. It is quite normal, he explained, for union stewards to raise questions relating to the EU Working Time Directive or employment contract issues that are covered by European law. This has led the GMB to tailor some of its education programme to this area.

*I had a seminar here last week, about the information on consultation regulations that we can expect in 2005. They are draft regulations right now about how companies in 2005 that have 150 or more workers in the undertaking will be expected to consult and inform unions. Its UK legislation but it is coming from an EU directive and its now transposed into a draft legislation and hopefully in spring next year we will see the final text of those regulations and any implementation date will be sometime in 2005. I think there is much more of an awareness about this sort of thing now amongst reps. At that seminar there were three reps from multi nationals. (AJ)*

Another example of trade unionists engaging at the European level and, in the process, working more closely with EIFs, included a delegation of health workers sent from the Aintree branch of Unison to take part in a lobby of the European Court of Appeal during a significant test case regarding the European Working Time Directive and relating to employees of an Irish company called Dines. The same branch had also been involved in a similar test case to do with the rights and remuneration

of employees transferred to a new employer following the privatization of a previously publicly run service. This case led to the creation of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) EU legislation of 2003.

### ***Working to influence policy***

A number of interviews carried out with regional trade union officials from the North West explored the status of the region within Europe. Several officials at this level were concerned with the provision and destination of development funds from the EU. The Amicus Regional Secretary expressed some unhappiness with the ways in which European 'regeneration' money is allocated. As he explained, Liverpool was, at the time, an 'Objective 1' area and was categorised as being an area of high social need, whereas Manchester was an 'Objective 2' area and Cumbria an 'Objective 3'. The problem, he went on, was that Cumbria, across which his union has many members, was and is an area where the large number of wealthy people pushes up the average levels of income in a way that masks the large pockets of social deprivation. Unions, then, are involved in the lobbying process for European support for their regions. This official described the ways in which his own union works through the TUC's special committees on engineering, aerospace and shipbuilding to this end.

Several UK trade unionists said that they had had the experience of trade unions in other parts of Europe coming to them for their experience of privatization. Visiting trade unionists were concerned with the effects of the selling off of public utilities as well as the experience of resisting moves towards deregulation. This sort of interest had also resulted in UK trade unionists being invited to speak in countries across the EU.

*I was invited over to Oslo, last year to speak at a major conference on globalisation by the Austrian municipal workers because they wanted our experience because Oslo City Council are now talking about privatisation of a lot of their services. (AJ)*

Research interviewees were also keen to stress the significance of European restructuring for trade unions in the UK. The involvement of Poland as an ally of the US in Iraq and the developing links between the US and the 'new Europe' of the CEE countries, was seen as being significant by the European Advisor at the TGWU. Decisions by major MNCs to open plants in the CEE countries – such as the decision by General Motors to open a plant in the Czech Republic - were also highlighted in this interview.

## *Summary*

These British trade unionists spoke about the ways in which awareness of the effects of global and transnational policy processes have been raised in recent years. Usually this referred to an interest in policy and legislative developments emanating from the EU. Examples that illustrated this theme included some accounts of lobbying over company closure and over funding for area and social development. These accounts also featured EIFs as being bodies with which British trade unions had worked closely over specific issues. Another important theme was that of economic change resulting from the incorporation of the CEE economies into the EU. A principle concern here was that of jobs competition within the Western European economies and the erosion of wage levels.

Overall, then this involvement in European political, institutional and bargaining processes included themes such as engagement with European employers' bodies, political lobbying, greater involvement with EIFs, sharing experience with European trade union counterparts and engagement with issues of European funding within the North West region. A mix of assessments of the effectiveness of these sorts of involvement was evident. For some they constituted an entire strategy for British trade unions – 'the way forward'. For others, often pointing to the increasingly neo-liberal flavour of EU legislation, they represented a catalogue of disappointment as well a distraction from the much more

difficult task of building trade union strength within the UK itself. This, latter view, fits with a perspective that the British TUCs interest in the ETUC has reflected a decline of its influence within the UK that has barely recovered from the Thatcher period (Rigby 1999:30).

### International links

The data from the UK level of research work is, in large part, supportive of the analysis that Lillie and Martínez (2004) offer. This is an analysis that stresses the role of national factors in mediating international perspectives and practice. Many of the themes of interview discussion revealed experiences in which factors that were peculiar to the British context played a crucial role. One that was obvious for the UK national level was that of language. The relative advantage that English speaking confers in transnational inter-union working has already been commented upon. The emergence of NUMAST, for instance, as a union that boasts an increasingly global reach in its operations, was connected to the international dominance of English. Another example was that of the ease of access to e-lists and internet-based sources of information for UK trade unionists. This also attested to the less hierarchical modes of activist networking referred to in Lillie's and Martínez's model. This finding was, however, qualified by the fact that most of the UK trade unionists interviewed also only spoke English and recognised in this an obstacle to their own international practice.

The comparative size and wealth of trade unions in the UK, compared to those of most other countries in the world, meant that activists and trade union officers have good access to the means of practical internationalism. Access to ICT and being able to afford air travel, means that trade unions in the UK are able to finance delegations in support of workers in struggle abroad and that activists are more able to form international personal trade union links. It also means that the British trade unions enjoy high status in the world of international trade unionism and that many senior British trade unionists go on to become officials in the international trade unions after giving up their positions in the UK.

The political and broadly institutional realities of the UK for trade unions was also a factor. The background context is that of a weakening of trade union ties to the British Labour Party. Lillie and Martínez Lucio do point to this as a national mediating factor in the UK context in that such a situation can create leeway for more grass-roots initiatives and activist directions, as well as a proliferation of affiliations and coalitions. The research data does indeed strongly support this analysis. Many interviewees talked about the wide range of political affiliations and member interests relating to international issues being expressed through trade union processes. The issue of the status of British trade unions with respect to the law was also relevant here. In the case of the Liverpool dockers' dispute the laws against secondary action meant that their national union, the TGWU did not officially support them. This was one

motivation behind the dockers' international campaign. In relation to intra-company transnational action the fact that, compared to other EU countries, companies found it easier and cheaper to make their British workers redundant was also a factor behind the Luton car workers strike that saw solidarity action across the EU. The fact that British trade unions had been through thirty years of neo-liberal governments made their experience relevant to the trade unions of many other countries. This was also a driver behind a number of transnational bi-lateral union working relations that were discussed.

Other important national mediating factors that fit Lillie and Martínez Lucio's framework are those to do with Britain's place in the world and its place in history. A major focus for internationalism has been that of Britain's involvement in the invasion and occupation of Iraq and its support of US foreign policy. The impact of the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre also gave Anglo-American trade union links between fire-fighters a distinctive dynamic that is discussed further below.

The intermediate political position of the UK between the US and the EU was a factor in influencing activist links for the GMB. The historical legacy of the British empire is also apparent in the ways in which trade union branches twin with the unions of other countries. The examples given below of a Unison branch in Tower Hamlets, where a large minority of union members are of Bangladeshi origin, twinning with

unions in Bangladesh is one example of this. Another is that of a Unison branch twinning with a sister union in Nigeria *via* the personal links of an individual activist who was himself from Nigeria.

As mentioned earlier, then, national factors appeared in this research data to be important in mediating – usually in a positive and facilitating manner – the ways in which UK unions address issues of international and global significance.

### ***Union-to-union links***

The Chair of the Liverpool FBU explained how a new emphasis is being given to forming international links by that union. Strong links have been formed with French fire fighters. These links began to develop after the 1995 public sector strikes in France. French fire-fighters visited Britain and members of the FBU heard at conferences and local branch meetings how their French counterparts were not allowed to join a trade union because they came under military regulations. Cultural and sports links already existed but in the context of struggles to defend public services in France these links began to transform into more political relationships. This Chair told a story about how one important contact for his region had come about through sporting links with a locally based French fire-fighter. An invitation had come to the North West regional office of the FBU to take part in a marathon race. This officer had replied that although he was not interested in taking part in the marathon he was



interested in forming a relationship that was based upon common areas of trade union concern. His French counterpart responded by emailing an article from a local newspaper giving an account of direct action that had been staged by French fire-fighters who were opposed to changes in working practice being imposed upon them. They had gone to the local town hall and pumped expanding foam into the building. They had later blockaded a major high way. These dramatic actions greatly impressed this regional officer who then circulated the article widely throughout his union with the argument that something of this style of action should be introduced into practice of the British union. This example shows that what began as a non-political, cultural communication could develop in a particular context into something that was far more grounded in questions of strategic orientation. It also confirms a point made by Waterman (1998), commenting upon the historical significance of cultural trade union links, that they cannot be free of the sociological and political context in which they operate.

*As for the cultural internationalism of the labour movement (sport, nature, literature, tourism, youth etc.), whilst it might be true that it was both wider in implication and deeper in impact than the political variety, it could not escape the politicization and stratification process. (Waterman 1998:26).*

The North West Regional Secretary of ASLEF was more sceptical. His view was that, although the union enjoyed active links with sister unions

in Mexico, the Czech Republic, Rumania and Hungary and although policies on Third World related issues did exist, these aspects of union business did not permeate through to ordinary members to any significant degree. He speculated that this may be connected with improvements in pay and conditions for his members that he felt had led to a de-politicisation within the union. This was said to have produced a lower level of interest in international issues than in the past. The theme of membership apathy has, in fact, been identified as being a significant barrier to international linking with unions operating within particular sectors (Gennard *et al.* 2000). The fact that examples of internationalist solidarity action were also forthcoming in this interview does not necessarily contradict this point. Different kinds of international issue can lead to quite different responses by any given trade union group. The response of trade unionists to international political issues - such as those to do with Britain's foreign policy and the war in Iraq - may be quite different than that given to more ethical appeals to do with the condition of the poor in the developing world, for instance.

The interview with the North West Regional Secretary of Unison produced an example of how that union is continuing to forge links beyond the EU with trade unions in the developing world. A public sector union in Zimbabwe had written directly to the North West region of Unison requesting financial help. The Zimbabwean union had not been able to hold its general council for three years because financial problems. A delegation of two representatives came from Zimbabwe to a

Unison conference in Bolton and North West regional officials were able to meet with them and form personal links. The Regional Secretary had already met these individuals when he was on a trip to their country. Indeed the reason they had contacted the North West region was because of this personal link. The outcome of these exchanges was that the North West region of Unison voted to send £1008 – the amount that the union had suggested was needed to allow the general council to go ahead. At one level the model here is of the more traditional donor-recipient variety of trade union solidarity familiar from a previous era. One key difference, however, is the personal interactions that accompanied and facilitated the donation of the material support, made possible by cheap communications and more affordable air travel. This was a point made also by the ex-General Secretary of the GMB, reflecting upon the links that were being forged by his union with trade unions in the developing world and in countries to which work from sectors in which GMB members are employed is being lost.

*I think that better communications helps ... enormously, but I mean, not just the internet. The fact that you can now travel around much cheaper than you could in the past makes all the difference. We've had in this country, in the past six months, a couple of groups of Pakistani trade unionists who have come and explained to us their own views on fundamentalism and the effect it has on trade unionists in their own country and so on and so on. Very powerful stuff –*

*it's the face-to-face again. I mean, all of this is, it seems to me, is obviously helpful. I do think there is a real wish to find the common ground. (JE)*

The Chief Convenor of the TGWU at Vauxhall's in Ellesmere Port in the North West, was emphatic about the increased frequency of communication with trade union colleagues across Europe. The following quote gives evidence of the higher levels of intra-company transnationalism amongst union activists within the auto-sector and certainly within the EU:

*Yes. Look at the correspondence that I get from all over - Germany, America - asking me questions about different things. Sometimes I don't have any chance to answer them during the day. Before, it was a phone call or a letter. Now I have to go on [to the internet] three or four times a day. When I come back from a meeting or if I leave it a couple of days I have about sixty or seventy emails. Some of it is general knowledge that they are sending me from all around Vauxhall's in the UK and Vauxhall's in Europe. Others will be asking about recent events - have we reached agreements? That sort of thing. (PA)*

This interview also revealed that, at plant level, intra-company rivalry exists that frustrates the building of solidaristic cross-border interaction.

This was said to be due principally to competition for jobs around the manufacture of particular models of car. The interviewee went on to explain how union officials, though interacting far more frequently than in the past, could also “keep their cards close to their chest” in their efforts to ensure a relative advantage for their own national union members with respect to the employer. This was further complicated by differentials in national labour law and industrial relations regimes. In Germany, for instance, the employer is obliged to share information with unions regarding strategic decisions to do with production and investment. This is not the case within the UK. This was seen as conferring a relative advantage to German trade unionists in their negotiations with the parent company, General Motors. The result was a situation in which British trade unionists were, in fact, quite vigilant regarding the actions of their German colleagues.

*I was there in September in Brussels, with our German colleagues. What you find is that at one level they all want to be one. They all want to be supporting each other. But at the same time they don't want to be seen to do things first. Because of the different legislation in different countries agreements can happen where we will have more difficulty. They don't give a thought to how this is going to impact in Britain or Poland or Hungary ... When I look at my German equivalent, there is no comparison really. The whole relationship is different. He finds out things well in advance*

*of us and he doesn't necessarily tell us. That's the advantage  
they have over us. (PA)*

Several interviewees commented on the fact that language remained a conspicuous barrier when it came to networking with colleagues from other countries. There were also expressions of embarrassment at not being able to speak any other language than English in comparison to their more linguistically able Continental counterparts, many of whom could, at least, speak some English. When discussion and debate was not being conducted in English a number of interviewees described the experience of having to rely on colleagues from other countries to interpret for them.

Furthermore, the problems of communication compounded the low levels of trust amongst union officials across European borders within General Motors over issues of intra-firm competition for production volume. This local officer went on to illustrate the seriousness of this problem by recounting a story of recent manoeuvrings by company bosses over sites of production for the Vectra – a Vauxhall model. As this interviewee put it, the company had come to the unions at the North-West site with a 'gun-to-the-head' injunction. This was that production for the model would be moved to a site in Germany within three months. If the unions did not agree to this then the production of all models made in the UK plant would be moved to Poland. The site at Ellesmere Port would then have become a 'prop-up' plant working only to absorb peaks in demand

and without its own production volume to rely upon. The lack of advance intelligence from the German unions, who had prior knowledge of this decision, was described as having been a source of irritation to the UK officials in the North West.

Some within Vauxhall's saw this situation of distrust between union officials in different member states as being the result of a deliberate strategy on the part of General Motors. The Deputy Convenor of Amicus at Vauxhall's expressed this view directly.

*They have got something like thirteen plants in Europe. They have factories in England, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Portugal and a couple of other countries. That is just Europe. Plus there's North America, South America and Asia. At any one time there may be two or three sites that can build any given model or a variant of it. So then they [General Motors] are saying 'we have got options ... what we build here we can build somewhere else'. (DM)*

This assessment complements that given by Hyman (1999b) in his survey of the then current literature on the subject of cross-border organizing. There he cited the difficulties of articulating common agendas and employer 'divide and rule' as being factors that continued to undermine the potential for cross-border solidarity between workers.

Further evidence of transnational intra-company industrial links, however, was provided the Chief Steward the at Marconi's plant in Liverpool. In the context of an unfolding financial crisis in the company, trade unionists at the plant developed a dialogue with their counterparts in Germany. Through this active link a conference was organized in the UK for union activists across Europe. The conference, held at the Coventry plant in 2001 was attended by activists from Germany, Italy, France and Spain. A simultaneous translation service was provided. The outcome was a set of agreed common priorities and principles by which to organize communications and negotiation with the company over such matters as information sharing and representation. A similar purpose was attributed to the transnational activist networks that have arisen in the auto manufacturing sector in recent years. The Deputy Convenor of Amicus at Vauxhall's explained that the network he was involved with had built upon previous networks such as the Transnational Information Exchange (TIE) that emerged in the 1970s and linked union activists across Europe. By the 1980s the TIE, which had begun life primarily as a research service network, had adopted a much more activist and political orientation centred around an oppositional analysis of the intensification of labour exploitation in the form of modern production regimes such as that represented by 'Toyotaism' (Stavis and Boswell 2000). The internationalisation of capital was identified as the background dynamic to the TIE (Press 1984). Today, as this process has intensified in certain sectors and within certain geographical regions of trade, these networks have come to play a vital role in enabling activists access to information



by which comparisons can be made regarding conditions of employment in different plants. By this means the case can be constructed for uniform 'best practice' models of industrial relations to be applied throughout the company.

The Liverpool docks dispute gave a good example of how international links could form in the context of industrial struggle. In the interview with the convenor of the dockers' branch of the TGWU, the role of the ITF was also highlighted. This interviewee spoke highly of the ITF in its role as facilitator of international contacts and networking. The national affiliates of the ITF, world-wide, were said to have given "maximum support" both financially as well as "physically" in the form of strike action. Support was especially forthcoming from the US where the Longshoremen of the West and East coasts staged solidarity action for one day that had an impressive effect upon trade and a caused considerable loss of commercial revenue. As was expressed strongly in the interview, however, this was not enough to persuade the General Secretary of the dockers' own union to give official backing to the strike.

### ***Personal links***

Transnational activist and personal union links were revealed as emerging from the transnational nature of the production chain in some sectors. This theme was evident in an account of the international nature of production in the aero-space industry given by the North West Regional Secretary of Amicus. Talking about the example of the Airbus he described how production was split across three countries – France, Italy and the UK. British Aerospace, he went on, was manufacturing electronic systems for Nimrod, the Hawk Fighter and Euro-fighter military aircraft, which are all produced across a number of different countries. Stewards, as well as following the fluctuations of international politics as they affect the military priorities of national governments, also actively network across national boundaries.

*So in terms of our shop stewards, they are highly motivated in that regard. We have had a number of lobbies in the last few months, particularly in regard to Nimrod and getting additional orders to pull it out of the current crisis. We heard only a couple of weeks ago that the government have placed orders for the Hawk Jet Trainer, which were a significant investment in this region and internationally within Europe. There is a lot of international work to be done just in getting people talking to one another. Long life friendships emerge out of that as well. (KC)*

The Liverpool Chair of the FBU gave a vivid account of the experience of playing host to Indonesian trade unionists in which the themes of formal trade union solidarity and more personal and even emotional solidarity intermingle. During this official's attendance at a TUC training course in London he met six Indonesian trade unionists – two men and four women - who were guests of the TUC and with whom he had been in personal communication by email for some months. Having met up with them he realised their difficulties in just getting around London during their stay. This was brought home to him when he witnessed the group deciding to walk back to their hotel after finding that they could not afford the bus fare. This would have meant walking for an hour and a half through unfamiliar streets. As he explained, one of the group, a nurse, earned between 50 pence and 60 pence a day. A fare of £15 for the group to travel that night was therefore a prohibitive sum. The official, embarrassed for the group and angry that they had been left in this predicament, insisted that all of his own expenses as well as those of the rest of his regional group be used to provide proper hospitality for the visitors. He explained further that this episode had prompted a lot of discussion about the low wages for workers in the developing world and the extreme levels of exploitation of those workers by the companies who employ them. During this discussion one of the Indonesian trade unionists explained that they worked for the Nike shoe company. The FBU members took this individual into a shoe shop the next day to see a pair of Nike training shoes on sale for £70 for the manufacture of which, typically, a worker in Indonesia would have been paid £1.50. These

stories, as they circulated around the TUC event meant that ‘exploitation’ became an educative theme of discussion amongst those attending.

*It helped them understand the economic argument. It was like ‘hang on, they’re being trodden on there’. The exploitation was just like kids were exploited in this country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: putting kids up the chimneys as chimney sweeps because it was cheap labour.*

(NT)

In the interview discussed above the FBU official also talked about direct links that his region had formed with American fire-fighters following the terrorist attacks on New York in 2001. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks world attention had focused on the bravery of the US fire fighters many of whom lost their own lives attempting to save the lives of others in the collapsing buildings. Subsequent reports revealed the chaos that had prevailed within the emergency services during the disaster and the failures of communication and coordination. This official explained that British fire-service trade union members drew connections between their own situation and that of the US fire-fighters in that, in their assessment, they also were expected to take significant risks with their lives and health for what they regarded as insufficient recognition and reward. This feeling was expressed on the occasion of International Workers Day when the FBU unveiled a commemorative statue outside their London office to remember those fire-fighters who had lost their lives on 11

September 2001. The day was also used to make a larger point that no one should be asked to risk their lives in order to protect property. US fire-fighters travelled to the UK at the FBU's expense in order to attend the unveiling of the commemorative statue. This was the first time that this had happened with the American union.

The Liverpool FBU Chair went on to describe the personal links that had been formed through more accidental contacts. In the St. Helen's branch a link was formed through a local Labour Party councillor who had contacts both with the local FBU and with a New York branch of the International Association of Firefighters. Through this link an exchange was organized between a surviving US fire-fighter and his family, who visited the North West as a guest of the regional FBU, and visits by North West FBU members to New York.

Accounts of activist and union officer links for this theme often appeared to mean a lot to the individual. Sometimes these were stories involving powerful or testing experiences that were never-to-be-forgotten by the person recounting them. Such stories are important in that they are often of formative experiences that have shaped that individual's outlook for many years after. In the following quote the Liverpool FBU Chair captured something of the importance of informal and personal links that carry with them an emotional content that it is difficult for accounts of merely formal trade union linkages to convey.

*They [FBU members in St. Helens] have created an international link - more on personal level than on a fire brigade union link. I don't know what the reason is, but I think everyone, especially fire fighters, were affected by 9/11. The emotional impact was massive. Individuals were doing their own thing and that was fine by us [...] One station we linked with I think there was only one fire fighter there [who] survived and he was the driver. We have made the link with a little station that nobody would have bothered with because they would have gone to the big stations where there were lots of people who died. We were lucky to have a local councillor who had contact over there - with Engine Company 2.30 based in New York. We have had two visits over there and we had a collection in St. Helens for John and his family. He was the guy that survived and we brought him and his family over to St. Helens to stay over for a week. He was also supported by donations by the local community. We have had two trips over there. On the first trip, the mayor – Guillian – gave them his limo to ferry them everywhere and they went on the fire boat. It was very moving for them and I think that link will stay now for along time. (NT)*

The North West regional official of Unison told a powerful story of personal inspiration from his own experience. This involved a solidarity delegation to visit trade unionists working under conditions of repression

in Zimbabwe in 2001. It provides the background also to the account just given of the financial assistance going to the Zimbabwean union from Unison. The trip had been organized by the PSI in the guise of an educational trip. This official, who was a delegate on the trip, explained that at one meeting they attended with trade unionists from Europe and South Africa, security police had broken into the building and made moves to arrest the Zimbabwean labour organizers who were present. A South African delegate had confronted the police dramatically, informing them that they could not act with impunity and that anything they did to interfere with the meeting could and would be reported to the PSI for broadcast around the world. This personal intervention was successful and the police withdrew. This union officer explained how much he had admired this individual's stand and how it had brought home to him both the risks that trade unionists in some countries were forced to take and the courage that it took for them to do their job. It also, once again, revealed the importance of a global union in being able to offer the protection of world-wide publicity to such activists.

In an account of the development of his union's political stance over the Iraq war the North West Regional Secretary of Amicus revealed that some of the union's own officials themselves had backgrounds of having had to flee from countries where they had experienced repression as trade unionists. Specifically he referred to two officials who were Iraqi exiles and one former official who had spent twenty three years in a South African prison. Yet another official came to the UK as a political refugee

from Chile in the time of Pinochet. Such individuals were said to have deepened the union's knowledge of international issues enormously.

Stories of face to face cross-border encounters were often emotionally powerful. They contained themes of immense respect for individuals and the enjoyment of meeting others from different cultures with whom there was also a great deal in common. These sorts of encounters come about through: bilateral links organized by national trade unions; cultural exchanges; affiliations to campaigns and political causes; accidental personal contacts; initiatives by international union organizations; and through NGO initiatives such as the Global Workers' Forum organized by War on Want (Simpkins 2004).

### ***Websites and activist links***

The European Trade Union Advisor at the London offices of the TGWU gave an example of how international links had been formed through an activist website. This story also illustrates the ways that different routes into trans-national activist networking can feed into one another. A link was formed with American trade unionists when a UK company called First Group began to bid for contracts with cities in the US connected to the 'bussing' of children to schools out of their neighbourhoods. The members of one US transport union were especially threatened by this move and their union therefore contacted the British union. They did this through a First Group shop stewards website that had been established



just one year before. The site had a chat room facility and the Americans were easily able to join in the exchanges that were ongoing and publicise their situation. The outcome was a visit of American labour activists to a solidarity conference that had been organized for them. Delegates to the conference realised that they needed to become much more educated about how MNCs are moving into new markets. At this international activist conference union representatives of the Cargill EWC were present. They had access to an educational budget and the result, a month later, was that funds had been released for an education programme on globalisation for TGWU stewards. This sort of thing was said to be happening “all the time” in the union.

Some authors have commented upon the significance of the content and design of training and education within trade unions in relation to the larger theme of globalisation and the contemporary challenge to organized labour. Hannah and Fischer (2002), for instance have drawn attention to the striking contrast between education and training programmes developed by Latin American trade unions and those developed by British trade unions in the 1980s. Whereas the former – exemplified by the Brazilian Confederação Nacional dos Metalúrgicos (CNM) of the Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT) - were inspired and influenced by ideas of emancipatory struggle, the latter – exemplified by courses run by the GPMU - were more to do with skills training and employment. These authors call for a new philosophy of trade union education that fits with the needs of labour in the context of globalisation.

Perhaps, in the example given above, we see the beginnings of new models of trade union education that meet this call.

Another story which involved interaction between British and US trade union activists came from the National Secretary for Public Services of the GMB. Referring to the campaign by the US Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which organizes workers in low paid service sector jobs, to win contracts for cleaners in company offices in Manhattan, the Education Officer of the North West GMB explained its significance for trade unionists in the UK. The campaign became known as Justice for Janitors and was celebrated in Ken Loach's 1999 film, *Bread and Roses*. The union mounted a dynamic and successful programme of activities aimed at embarrassing the cleaning companies' high profile clients. The campaign also inspired a series of worker-justice campaigns that were characterised by strong union-community links and local residents' and service-users' support (Wilton and Cranford 2002). The outcome was usually that improved contracts were won for most employees. The style and panache of the Justice for Janitors campaign caught the imagination of trade unionists in the UK and Loach's film has been shown at many GMB conferences and campaigning events. GMB members, however, took the opportunity to develop closer working links with the SEIU during a Europe-wide dispute with the security firm, Securitas. This firm has contracts with companies across the EU as well as in the major metropolitan areas of the US. The SEIU were fighting Securitas for new contracts in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and

Los Angeles. Frustrated at the lack of progress they approached UNI, the global union to which they are affiliated, to raise the international profile of the dispute. As UNI affiliates became aware of the struggle of the American union, they raised it within the relevant EWC and so, through this route, the British union became involved in the solidarity developing around it. One outcome of these developments was that GMB activists travelled to the US to spend time with the American union.

*Six months after we had raised the case at the works council I got a phone call from UNI saying the SEIU wants us to send thirty officers, trade union officials and shop stewards, from each country in Europe where Securitas was operating. They wanted to take them on a tour of all the contracts they were fighting for. They flew 34 out there, put them up for a week - all expenses paid. We had some of our lads over here [who] went out on sites. They worked with some of our people to demonstrate that they had now got recognition in all of those states. Its left behind some good active relations with the Americans. (MG)*

This account of course also further evidences the active role of a global union in making possible effective trans-national links. The role of UNI in facilitating joint action across national borders was also illustrated in a story given in the same interview regarding the pest control company, Rentokil. This company had set up an EWC that excluded British unions

which, at that time had not signed up to the EWC Directive of 1994. The GMB raised the issue with UNI who broadcast an appeal to European affiliates to support the demand by the British unions that they be granted recognition. The result was a boycott of the company and a round of pickets of its annual general meetings in each of the countries where it had operations. This meant that the British unions worked closely with sister unions in France and Belgium on joint activity that led to the company agreeing to their involvement in the EWC.

In yet a further example from the same interview as that referred to in the previous passage, a detailed account was given of how European unions had responded to moves by the British Marks and Spencer's retail outlet to close down their Continental stores. The GMB, along with colleagues in the relevant European unions booked four Eurostar trains to bring company employees to London to protest and to picket the company head offices. These protesters were joined by thousands of British trade unionists in a highly visible and vibrant day-of-action. According to this official it is through such actions that a culture of trans-national linking and international solidarity is becoming established beyond the official layers of the union, and that is beginning to involve new layers of trade union activists and members.

A senior International Officer at Unison explained the difficulties involved in establishing bi-lateral branch and regional links. The idea of such links with the health-workers' union in South Africa were put to the

first national Unison conference in 1994. From that conference activities were initiated to create those links and, within a relatively short period nine out of the union's thirteen regions had made contact with the South African union. Several of the regions made a promising start by sending profiles of their work and memberships to the sister union as well as some material support and expressions of solidarity for the various struggles with which the South African health workers were engaged. The initiative faltered, however, as the key individuals who had carried the work moved on to other jobs or to new union projects. This demonstrated the dependency of this kind of work upon individuals. It also revealed what was described as a "cultural difference" in how electronic communications are used by trade unionists in different parts of the world. This referred to the fact that the South African union rarely returned communications. In discussion the officer reflected that this was probably due to low capacity within the South African union. The problem was thought not to be one merely of low technological capacity. Responsibility for the link, she thought, would have fallen to one individual for whom it would have been only one of many other areas of work. It was also thought to be unlikely that email would have been a normal mode of communication at that time for a union in South Africa. By the late 1990s there were just three Unison regions who reported having a link with this union. Even then, the nature of these links was quite passive or even dormant. This interviewee gave this example to illustrate the difficulties of sustaining bi-lateral links. These sorts of difficulty go some way to explaining the frustrations expressed

over the piecemeal and episodic nature of such links across the hemispheres by figures such as Walden Bello (Harris 2002). Martínez Lucio (2003) has also drawn attention to the importance of factoring in cultural sensitivities when seeking to understand the ways in which electronic communications are used – or not used – by trade unions. The Unison International Officer explained that more success had been achieved when delegations had physically visited other unions and thus created more personalised links that were sustained through the development of friendships and shared cultural agendas that went beyond a narrow trade union focus.

*There are a hundred reasons why people don't get back to us. They might get caught up in something that was going on. They also have a lot fewer people than we have here. But also it is a cultural thing. You are not going to get as much 'side-ways' communication going on between individuals. Gradually they [bi-lateral links] started to fall by the wayside. So then we were left with three regional links. We discovered the best way to keep them going was to have a delegation from here over there or from there over here. They would be taken around the branches so that people from the branches were getting a chance to meet and talk. Delegations are the best way of sustaining links. (CA)*

This official gave other examples of efforts to establish bi-lateral or twinning arrangements between branches that illustrated different aspects of this area of the union's work. Two of these examples have been mentioned earlier in this chapter. They illustrate the ways in which the ethnic and cultural composition of branch memberships influences the choices that are made regarding twinning arrangements. In one case the Tower Hamlets Local Authority Unison branch twinned with a public sector union in Bangladesh. This was clearly related to the relatively high proportion of British Bangladeshi's living and working in that borough as well as being employed by the Local Authority and being members of Unison. In another case the Islington Local Authority branch of Unison twinned with a Nigerian public sector union through the personal links that one Nigerian activist had through his family. In both cases the Unison branches had organized and financed delegations to come to Britain as guests of the union and had arranged for them to speak at branch meetings and conferences.

### ***Changes in communications technology***

There is no shortage of studies on the impact that electronic forms of communication are having on the work of trade unions. The internet and email based communications systems are changing trade union culture in areas such as the development of women's careers as union officials (Kirton 2002) and the ways in which learning is conceptualised and organized (Hertenstein and Chaplan 2005) to give two important

examples. A number of branch and regional level officials explained how their use of email gave them a sense of connectedness to a larger world of issues and campaigns. One example that was referred to quite frequently at the time of these interviews was that of the case of a Nigerian woman who had been sentenced to death by stoning for adultery. This was a case that led to an internet-based international campaign. Many British trade unions took up the case and encouraged their members to support it. Similarly, human rights abuse cases in countries such as Columbia had, according to many of the interviewees at this level, elicited strong support from trade union activists who were able to express that support by sending emails to newspapers, governments and campaign groups around the world.

At the UK level, however, just as at the global level, a digital divide was apparent. This divide had less to do with the availability of technology, however, and was far more to do with age. The quote given below comes from the Liverpool Branch Secretary of the GPMU print union.

*Most of the activists are closer to my age. I think what you find in the union [is that] a lot of the full time officials are in their 50s or 60s. I think the IT side will develop. In the younger age groups you see more of an awareness. Most of the full-time people are like me. I can't switch a computer on.*

**(BM)**



The general tenor of the comments on this topic were, however, far more upbeat about the potential of ICT to improve the effectiveness of their activists. Some comments related this explicitly to the theme of internationalism. Many activists, according to some of the officials interviewed, regularly communicated with activists in other countries and accessed web-sites that provided information about international trends in their economic sector, about political developments that related to their companies and about movements and single issue campaigns to inform their arguments within their branches and work-places. This quote from the Regional Administrator of the RMT gives a flavour of this.

*Yes, given the makeup of our secretaries and activists, I would say this is certainly an important development. They can talk to each other and as part of our web-site activists can come on and argue about various issues within the union and - its true - there is a more international flavour in some of these debates than there used to be. (AB)*

In the UK context, as in the global and the European contexts, innovations in ICT had certainly had an impact upon the ways in which trade unionists worked. What this meant concretely, however, varied according to setting and circumstance. In an important example Liverpool dockworkers made use of the internet to mobilise support and solidarity around the world during their gruelling three year battle with the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board. E-mail communications were used extensively to publicise the dockers' cause and, in some instances, to

organize real and effective solidarity actions. The emphasis that was placed upon national and international electronic communications was reflected in the remarkable skill base that many of the docker-activists achieved in their use of ICT. This was a point made by the Convenor of the Liverpool dockers during their dispute.

*... a friend of ours he came in and said, that's all you do, if you want to send a message to America, Canada, New Zealand its easy. Press a few buttons and it [a message] went. It was easy to grasp. So during the course of the 28 months we had a lot of our own people getting interested in international communications and when we came to the end of our dispute we had a approximately one hundred and ten of our own people go on to study multi-media courses. They went to John Moores University for twelve months and they made tremendous advances and got certificates. (JN)*

He went on to explain that there had been an assumption that, despite the fact that the struggle was ultimately unsuccessful, nonetheless some good would come out of the use of ICT for those who hade been involved by way of access to alternative and promising employment markets. Bitterness was expressed at the fact that three years after the dispute no ex-docker had been able to obtain employment in computer or media related areas. This was thought to be because of a prejudice towards ex-

dockers on the part of potential employers as well as active black-listing in some cases.

One finding that straddles the different levels of analysis for this thesis was that examples of innovative uses of ICT were found. For purposes of general communication this was not surprising. What was unexpected, however, was that the use of online systems to form, agree and set policy was present at the North-West regional level. This can be seen as an example of how ICT is impacting on trade union processes in some fundamental ways (Freeman 2002). The International Officer for the North-West region of the TGWU, explained that he had worked with the German metal workers whose European body, the EMF, we have already seen, employs a system known as EUCOB@ for just such a purpose:

*Yes, we can make decisions on line. This is more than just exchanging information. It is actually co-ordinating policy. We collaborated with the metal workers. We had a joint conference and had a look at what they do. It makes it easier for us to help people who sit on EWC's for instance - how to advise them, how to put them in touch with colleagues in other countries when they want to raise issues. (PMcN)*

A pioneering use of ICT, and again one that has already been referred to at the global level of analysis in this thesis, is that of the live video-link that was established between the Unison head office and the activists who

staged the Sintraemcali occupation in Columbia. This was an event that included UK national general secretaries from a number of unions as well as high ranking officers within Unison itself. It was designed to provide the union activists in Columbia with evidence of the support they were receiving which they could, in turn, present to their own employer and government, as well as to maximise publicity for the struggle within the British trade union movement. It was described as having been exhilarating for all who had taken part.

*There were several general secretaries - the GMB, the FBU, some others. Then there were a few here from Unison and some people from the solidarity campaign. We were able to discuss things across the link-up and pass on messages of support. They were able to tell us about the negotiations that were going on. Then they took us on a tour around the occupation. It was amazing. It was like being transported to the occupation. You got a feeling there were loads of people. There were six hundred people living in a building like this - an office building. They had transformed it into a place where they could co-exist for a whole month - all of these people. They had made all of these flags. Women had organized women's committees. The way they had democratised the occupation was interesting. (TS)*

In a line of discussion that flowed directly from that about the Colombian occupation, she went on to explain how Unison also makes use of an email network – the Urgent Action Network - to mobilise support in situations where trade unionists in any part of the world are experiencing state repression. This network was reported to have been very important in mobilising solidarity for the Columbians during their occupation.

The use of the internet in organizing solidarity and in conveying the issues, concerns and experiences that affect workers in other parts of the world to trade unionists in Britain was a theme that was also present in an interview with the National Advisor for the TGWU. He explained how solidarity had been built with employees of the transport company, Stagecoach, in Hong Kong through internet connections. One use of the internet here had been to send digital images of working conditions for the Chinese workers at the company. The condition of the lavatories made a particular impression on the British trade unionists and brought home to them the disregard that this MNC had for their workers there. One outcome was that a delegation of the Hong Kong Stagecoach workers was brought to the UK to take part in international seminars organized by the British union.

This kind of work within the TGWU has led to a UK based solidarity e-group of around 120 activists who are especially interested in international issues and in issues to do with the conditions of workers abroad. The National Advisor explained that sometimes the information

being exchanged was incidental and even trivial. Nonetheless the feeling was that these sorts of exchanges were important in building up on-line dialogues and friendships which then became crucial when the network was called upon to mobilise support when needed. It was also the case that, as the network grew and began to involve trade unionists in other parts of the world, essential information began being routinely exchanged that allowed activists to make comparisons about working conditions across national borders within the same company. Such comparators provided these activists with ammunition in their dealings with their managements and in bargaining situations. This officer had initially presumed that communications between activists within the UK, that were being simultaneously read by activists in New Zealand or the US would not be of great interest to the latter. He was surprised to find, however, that activists in other countries would actually join in with these discussions which would snowball into wider discussions and debates. The network had come into its own, he explained, during a transport strike in Sheffield, two years previously to the interview, during which emails of support had come from Australia, New Zealand, the US, and Germany. Reading out these emails at picket lines had caused amazement amongst the strikers who felt cheered that trade unionists in other countries knew about their fight. This strike had had a successful outcome in winning a 6% increase in pay but the international moral support that had been received, it seems, had made the strike seem so much more significant than that, and had led to a feeling of being a part of a much larger movement for many of the strikers.

The research interview that was conducted with the Deputy General Secretary of the ships officers' union, NUMAST revealed moves towards an advanced model of on-line union working. NUMAST, with around 15,000 members of whom about half are at sea at any given time, has traditionally faced difficulties in organizing its members as well as in its internal decision making processes. NUMAST does not, for example, have a regional or branch structure because of the difficulties of bringing members together for union meetings. The introduction of electronic forms of communication has opened up possibilities for this union in terms of radically improving communications and membership involvement. It may be that the forms of on-line and virtual networking and union democracy that are being developed by NUMAST, and that are discussed hypothetically by Diamond and Freeman (2002), are pioneering new models of union practice that will be taken up by unions in other sectors.

*... over the years we have tried numerous things to try to encourage participation in the union. We are exploiting web bulletin boards and chat rooms. We put a great deal of emphasis on the written word. We encourage our officials to correspond with the members in mass communications as well as one-to-one - increasingly electronically. We are exploring the possibility of our own 'hot mail' where all members would get an email address and that would be a free*

*service. We think if we can encourage that, given the social economic status of our members – high salary white collar workers - then we think there will be a high penetration within the home. There is a growing use of computers at sea. Most seafarers have access to a computer. There is still a question as to whether or not they can get use of the internet while they are at sea. Its certainly something they can get at port and increasingly, as costs fall for satellite communications, then more and more seafarers are going to be ‘surfing’ the internet while they are at the sea and that brings them much closer to everyone - their families, the shipping company and potentially the union as well. We are exploiting that. We do a lot of on-line surveys, and questionnaires. We produce reports on the findings and we get a very high response rate – up to 25% - which means we are getting constant feed back from the members on issues. We have also experimented and used email balloting in consultations over pay reviews. That is an established way now of consulting over pay. We send out a bulletin using the email - or written word to the home address and the bulletin via email to the ship. (MD)*

New forms of rapid electronic communication for international activism and trans-national trade union business do appear to be of increasing importance. The use of email lists, websites, web-logs and electronic



bulletins, it seems, is quite routine for those involved in the international activities of their unions. Examples of applications of such communications systems were found in the context of online policy development, industrial disputes and intra-company communications between stewards in different countries. The use of internet-based communications, then, can be seen as being a significant factor in the revitalization of international activism.

The widely acknowledged 'digital divide' between unions in different parts of the world is itself a focus of solidarity work by some trade unions in the UK. A number of British unions are active supporters of an NGO called Computer Aid. A senior International Officer at the London head office of Unison described the way in which this NGO recycles old computers for transport to trade unions in the developing world. She, herself, had recently been involved in organizing the shipment of second-hand computers to unions in Zimbabwe and Uganda. She had also been involved in providing computer training for Libyan trade unionists who were members of a union that was receiving support from DFID. The availability and use of computers and of internet-based forms of communication, she went on to explain, is also important for the continuation of solidarity work in the UK. The recipients of trade union aid are more able to give feed-back and express appreciation in ways that help to cultivate a dialogue of solidarity. Previously the experience of those trade unionists in the UK who were active in such solidarity work was often that of sending material support abroad but with little, if any,

sense of who they were sending it to or of what difference it was making. This report was given as a development of a broader point relating to the difficulties of sustaining bi-lateral links that was discussed earlier in this chapter.

### *Summary*

Many of the UK interviews revealed a lively culture of active linking with trade unions in different part of the world. The purposes of such links were very varied and ranged from the very practical, to do with such things as information sharing and trans-national bargaining with employers, through to links that were to do with cultural exchange or solidarity in the context of industrial struggle. A frequent dimension to accounts of these linkages was that of face-to-face interaction and feelings of solidarity of a quite personal nature. This was often the result of delegations and sponsored visits for the purpose of bi-lateral exchange, speaking tours or conference engagements.

The commonalities created by neo-liberal government and public service cuts was a theme that appeared in different ways in a number of interviews. The particular experience of British unions in this regard was something that both made trade unionists in other countries interested in making contact with them and made British trade unionists responsive to these approaches. This theme was present in the example of the contacts made between the FBU and French fire-fighters during the 1995 public

sector strikes in France. Personal links emerged as being important for maintaining bi-lateral links between unions abroad, for personal inspiration, for politicisation amongst members beyond the activist layer and for maintaining transnational activist networks. Such personal links could arise through chance encounters, educational events, visits and delegations in the context of industrial struggle and through the international structure of the production process itself. Several interviews produced examples of transnational activist networking within companies. In the auto-sector this was presented as building upon the traditions established by the TIE.

Again the importance of global unions emerged in many accounts of transnational action and activity. These provide mechanisms of information exchange and brokerage between sister unions. They were also reported by some interviewees as being important for the educational materials that they provide relating to topics such as world poverty, changes in global governance and economic justice.

The ICT access that the relatively wealthy British trade unions have was repeatedly reported as being important for the ability of union activists to network within companies, to interact with global unions and to engage in global campaigns over human rights and labour rights issues. In one case, that of the North West Region of the TGWU, the emergence of on-line union policy formation was evidenced. In another, that of NUMAST, an on-line model of global trade unionism was described.

Issues, complexities and obstacles were also a part of many of the accounts given. The issue of trust between activists in relation to intra-company competition for jobs emerged as important in some sectors. There were comments that suggested that feelings and ideas of international solidarity did not permeate far beyond the activities of committed activists. The limited language ability of many British activists was cited as an obstacle by some interviewees. The difficulties of maintaining durable bi-lateral links was also discussed. Nonetheless, despite the problems mentioned here, a strong picture emerged of trade union activists, and new membership layers, engaging with issues and areas of activity that had a clear and definite international dimension to them. This was such a consistent finding that it seems appropriate to talk of a 'new' – and revitalizing - culture of internationalism, certainly amongst activists across the British trade union movement.

### **Key themes at the UK-national level**

The accounts given of international work at the UK-national level provides a picture in which it appears as an important part of trade union life. All the interviewees talked enthusiastically about the ways in which they and the members they represented had come to see their situations in a more global framework and, in many cases, to see connections between their own experience and those of workers in other parts of and, in some instances, in all parts of the world.

The rise of the prominence of MNCs is giving rise to and shaping international outlooks in a number of different ways. The experience of working for an MNC was revealed to be one that led to high levels of awareness of global and sectoral markets as well as an understanding of the dynamics of company behaviour. It was also something that gave rise to particular forms of resentment and political consciousness in response to things such as executive salaries and company excess. It was certainly the case that activists in such firms saw the need to actively connect with other activists in different countries across the same company and also within the same industrial sector. Other aspects to the response of trade unionists to the increasing power of MNCs were to do with their negative impact on the quality of public services through deregulation and more generally upon the social environment.

A significant factor that has been emphasised, unsurprisingly, in interviews at the global, the European and the British levels of trade union activity has been the increasing importance of electronic forms of communication for cross-border working. Difficulties do exist. Where there are barriers in the forms of lack of ICT knowledge and skill, access to computer hardware, issues of language and mistrust, then such media cannot, in any simple manner, overcome these. In this sense it seems clear that ICT does not provide any self-sufficient solutions for the traditional problems of trade union internationalism. Nonetheless e-groups by which activists in different countries network and share

information and views are common. Many UK activists, it seems, also routinely access websites from which they glean information about their companies, about international trade union news and about global campaigns. A small number of examples were also given of unions moving towards online models of trade union business including policy formation.

Europe was the most commonly cited focus for transnational work. This was especially true of interviewees at the national level of trade union officialdom. The accounts given encompassed such things as: lobbying for the defence of jobs in certain industrial sectors; lobbying for regional development funding; searching for comparators on contracts; and remuneration within companies; and engagement with EWCs. On this, last, theme the assessments given of the benefits and experience of taking part in EWCs were mixed. This fits with much of the comment in the literature on the subject.

Other significant changes for trade unions have been the increasing numbers of trade union members who work in a country other than their country of origin. This is true of workers from other EU countries and beyond seeking employment in the UK as well as British trade union members working abroad on an occasional or semi-permanent basis. Issues around trade union representation with employers, legal protection and legislative entitlement are being generated for trade unions by this reality.

Another theme that emerged from the research interviews was that international trade union organizations do play a significant role in the life of British trade unions. Most of the officials and activists spoken to were aware of the GUFs and ITSs that their union was affiliated to. Several gave accounts of activities, actions, campaigns and exchanges that they had been involved in and that had been organized or facilitated by an international union organization. This revealed a changing dynamic of the different levels of the world of trade unionism interacting more frequently. In some cases this led to speculations about the future emergence of transnational or even global trade unions that represented individual members and mobilised in their own right.

The ways in which trade unionists interpret their experience and come to see their situation in relation to workers in or from other parts of the world was shown to involve many different, though often interacting factors. The international social and cultural composition of working class communities was shown to be important amongst the Liverpool dockers, for instance. Personal memories of solidarity with black workers during struggle against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s were clearly significant for a generation of regional and national trade union officials. Attitudes to Europe as representing an alternative, and more trade union friendly, legislative regime than that of the UK – perhaps more in the past than in the present – also appears to remain an influence in how trade union officials interpret their experience. Political traditions remain

important but are again an area of change. The officials of unions with a history of Communist Party influence referred to a historical culture of internationalism. This was often illustrated by pointing to a record of having defended Cuba against US imperialism in the areas of trade and diplomacy. One shift that has occurred here, and that was said to be the result of the decline of the Communist Party as a political force in the trade union movement, was that away from single country campaigns premised upon the defence of a 'progressive state' and towards issue-based campaigns. Examples included those around human rights abuses, the environment and trade union repression. This said, it is also true that, over the issue of trade union repression in particular, Columbia emerged as a country of current special interest for trade unionists.

A major finding from this research was that amongst British trade unionists there is an active orientation towards issues that are of global concern or that at least have some transnational dimension to them. Accounts of trade union activists travelling to France to take part in the trade union organized demonstrations of French public sector workers in 1995, of participation in days-of-action organized by the ITF and of linking with trade unions in other parts of Europe to share experience and ideas were examples of this. There were many other examples besides. The research also revealed that such international practice amongst British trade unionists was not without its problems. Language barriers, the cultural and practical difficulties of sustaining bi-lateral links and



competition for jobs, for instance, represented barriers to the development of deeper levels of solidarity.

On the theme of coalition building the interviews revealed a very live culture of activism. Campaigns over ethical issues to do with trade and trade regulation were prominent in the examples given. So also were links with recent political movements such as the Stop the War Coalition and the Anti-globalisation Movement. In both of the two latter cases a complicated relationship with trade unions was revealed. In the case of the Anti-war Movement strongly held feelings of support for the war amongst members who had family connections with the armed forces caused difficulties for unions whose official policy was one of opposition to Britain's involvement in Iraq. Issues of organizational remit and style were shown to represent obstacles to more thoroughgoing trade union engagement with the Anti-globalisation Movement. The issue of challenging domestic racism, especially against asylum seekers and refugees emerged as having been a priority for British trade unions in recent years. Here the story, also, was one of argument and debate within union branches. Several officials and activists said that their unions were affiliated to far more campaigns, NGOs and other non-trade union bodies than in the past and that many of these were to do with issues that had an international dimension of some kind.

Overall, the picture that emerged from interviews at the national, regional and branch levels was that British trade unionists have an orientation

towards the world. In many different ways, and for many different reasons, British trade unionists see and interpret their situation in international terms. In 1950s and 1960s, during the era of classical corporatism, in which the British industrial relations model locked unions into tri-partite relations with governments and employers, the horizons of active trade union work did not extend far beyond those of the bargaining table and the factory gate. There were, of course, conference positions to be taken on questions of British foreign policy and there were trips to countries in Eastern Europe for fortunate senior officials. There was not, however, anything remotely like the diverse range of activism and political expression relating to issues of global concern or international trade union affairs that is clearly evident in, and that seems to permeate all levels of, the British trade union movement today.

## ***Chapter 8: Labour internationalism and labour revitalization***

The aim of this thesis has been to explore the correspondence between perspectives on trade union practice that have emerged in recent years in labour revitalization literature, and the perspectives of key actors within trade union structures on the topic of trade union internationalism. The picture that emerges is not one that can be described as homogenous or consistent. Indeed the variegated patterns that the research material reveals, as it has been analysed through the categories employed by one key group of labour revitalization theorists, suggests that caution against over-generalisation is advisable. In some areas of trade union international work and at some levels, there seems to be a strong sense that revitalization perspectives do indeed describe what is happening with some accuracy. In other areas and at other levels there does not. On some themes we can make strong statements about what is happening for trade unionists engaged with international trade union practice. Such statements are based upon strands of interview evidence that are consistent across many interviews and that are given unambiguously. On others we need to be far more nuanced. In these latter cases the evidence will have been patchy, inconsistent or qualified. A summary for each theme at each level of analysis is given below.

## **The global level**

- At the global level trade unionists described a strong trend of getting far more involved with the 'real' trade unionism of their national affiliates. Strong commonalities existed across many national trade union movements. These were motivating activism and new energies of struggle and global unions found themselves increasingly active with regard to them. Examples here included deregulation, political disarticulation and privatisation.
- ICT is clearly having a significant revitalising effect in the internal life of international trade union bodies as well as in dealings with national affiliates and is relevant also to the organizational restructuring that has characterised the development of these organizations in recent years. This is qualified, however, by considerations of the effect of a digital divide between trade unions of the poor and rich countries and by issues of language and culture.
- Global unions have engaged with broad based coalitions around international campaigns and issues. There was a strong sense that came through in a many interviews on this theme that the global campaigns against Third World debt, globalisation and war have all been revitalizing for the global unions and have helped to overcome the malaise and pessimism regarding the prospects for

organized labour that had characterised the movement for much of the 1990s.

- No clear evidence was forthcoming that partnerships between the global unions and employers organizations or governments were significant or that they were helping to revive the organizational energies of international trade unionism.
- On the theme of political action global unions seemed to be involved in a range of political campaigns but usually as ‘outsiders’ in relation to formal policy processes.
- International links are being revitalized through the work of international unions in areas such as moves designed to achieve multi-national collective bargaining and in anti-privatisation struggles and the Anti-globalisation Movement. Significant barriers and complexities do exist, however, such as interest conflicts within coalition based movements and job protection. Some strands of evidence relating to the building of international links were ambiguous and needed to be interpreted according to their local and specific contexts. These included ICT and the decline of party based, political ideologies and formal political affiliation.

## **The European level**

- At the European level the relative paucity of points of articulation in policy processes to which unions have access and that lent themselves to mobilisation, was regarded as a problem. Some examples were forthcoming of mobilisations around legislation on de-regulation and privatisation. Overall, however, the theme of ‘organizing’ at the European level was not seen as an area that was significantly revitalizing for the European unions.
  
- The experience of EWCs was very mixed. Some interviewees indicated that their EWCs had played important coordinating roles in some mobilisations and industrial battles. Others were strongly of the view that their EWCs had diverted important resources that could have been better spent elsewhere. This also touches upon the related theme of the prospects of the emergence of European trade unions through a transnational restructuring process. Although there was one positive assessments of this as a possibility the overall tenor of remarks on this topic were pessimistic.
  
- A view did exist that coalitions of various sorts - especially those associated with the Anti-globalisation Movement and European Social Forum Movement - had indeed helped to revitalize activist energies across European trade unions, both amongst national

affiliates to EIFs and the ETUC and within the European level trade union bodies themselves. This view was, however, qualified by concerns over the compatibility of organizational styles and issues of accountability between unions and their coalition partners.

- With regard to partnership working between unions and employers' bodies and governments the assessments of benefits to trade unions and their members were downbeat. Cross-sectoral Social Dialogue was said to have produced gains, for instance in the regulation of working time. Such gains, however, were regarded as few and far between considering the efforts and resources that had been expended in order to achieve them. At the sectoral level no material gains were identified. The pessimism around this theme was also said by some to reflect the neo-liberal turn that many saw as beginning to characterise the legislative agenda of the European Commission.
  
- Political action was described in terms that can be loosely interpreted as revitalizing insofar as this is understood as interaction with social movements and coalitions. The concrete outcomes of such political actions were generally thought to be meagre.

- National factors were commonly described as playing a significant role in working as a barrier to the creation of international links. Issues of language, differences in industrial relations regimes, differences in attitudes to Europe itself, and difficulties of establishing meaningful comparators for transnational collective bargaining, were all cited as being significant factors in this regard. These difficulties were all being intensified for the European unions by European expansion and the need to engage with the trade union movements and industrial relations regimes of the ‘accession countries’. Innovations in electronic communications were thought by many to be revitalizing European trade union work and, in one important example – that of the EMF – were said to be facilitating the emergence of new forms of cross-border trade union policy formation. This was also qualified by pointing to the obstacles of communication and cultural difference represented by the Anglophone nature of the internet. The decline of formal allegiance to political ideologies as well as the decline of welfarism and social democracy at the national level was said by some to have reduced differences amongst the affiliates of European trade union organizations. These factors could be described as being revitalizing if the possibilities of transnational union convergence are considered. If these factors are seen in terms of what they really mean for the concrete outcomes of trade union work and activity, however, then they appear negative for



considerations of labour revitalization. Many interviewees, especially those representing public sector trade unionists pointed to raised levels of mobilisation amongst national affiliates resulting often from responses to privatisation offensives by governments.

### **The UK-national level**

- At the UK level a strong and consistent picture emerged of a culture of internationalism amongst a wide layer of activists in most unions. With regard to organizing this took the form of cross-border activist links working at the official and grass-roots levels. This was often described in relation to industrial disputes in which messages of support, financial solidarity and delegations from sister unions were said to be a normal aspect of struggles over a protracted period. Regular communications were also often said to go on between activists within the same company or sector. Electronic forms of communication as well as low cost air travel were seen as significant factors here.
  
- The assessments of the prospects of the emergence of European level trade unions contrasted strikingly with those of European trade union officers. British trade unionists seemed to be generally optimistic about both the desirability and the possibility of national unions across the EU restructuring into European trade

unions. The main concrete examples in this area were those of bilateral links between UK unions and sister unions across the EU. Some interviewees talked of the possibility of their own unions expanding beyond their national borders into becoming transnational unions in their own right. This optimism was qualified by reference to issues around language differences and job protection.

- In relation to coalitions and internationalism many interviewees spoke in very positive terms, that can be seen as fitting a revitalization perspective, about a culture of engagement and activism around campaigns and political issues at branch, regional and national levels. Sometimes this was described as being the result of a political vacuum that had opened up with the weakening of the links between trade unions and the Labour Party. The movement against British involvement in Iraq and the Anti-globalisation Movement emerged as being of particular significance in this area.
- The examples gleaned of partnership working tended to be weak in the sense that the partnership element was not described as a revitalization factor in and of itself. The examples themselves, also tended to be somewhat peripheral to the mainstream of labour internationalist work and were reported either as being unusual as forms of international linking or as ‘one-off’ projects.

- With regard to political action for international aims there were some examples that related to work at the level of lobbying within the EU. These examples were not enough, however, to suggest that such transnational political activism constituted a major or consistent revitalization strategy for UK unions.
  
- The national factors that mediate international work for UK unions can be seen as playing a revitalizing role. The specific experience of British trade unions having had to contend with neo-liberal governments since the late 1970s has stimulated international contacts and perspectives in a number of ways. Unions from other countries have made contact with British unions because of their experience in this area. British unions were also regarded as being very receptive to appeals for solidarity from sister unions fighting against privatisations. The tendency for British trade unions to 'look to Europe', rhetorically, if less so in practice, also has its roots in this historical experience. Internationalist traditions and demographics were said to become relevant factors in the context of industrial struggles in relation to solidarity and strategic thinking in some cases. The disarticulation of British trade unions from the Labour Party - their traditional political expression - was also seen as having created a vacuum that was being filled by individual and local affiliations to a wide range of international causes and coalition based campaigns. The

relatively deregulated nature of the British labour market within Europe, leading to job insecurity for British workers, was described as a barrier to deeper levels of international solidarity within certain sectors. Language, and the generally monolingual limitations of British trade unionists, was also a barrier to cross-border working.

### **Concluding discussion**

Taking the widest perspective that we can on the findings from this research then, it is in fact impossible, or perhaps just ill-advised, to give a straightforward and singular assessment of the fit between labour revitalisation categories and the perspectives of key actors on trade union internationalism. We have seen that labour internationalism itself is a hugely multi-faceted phenomenon that has different and even conflicting meanings in different contexts and in its different aspects. When this is considered within the deeper context of shifts in the global economy and broader social change, the ever increasing complexities of the structures and processes involved become all too obvious. This research has led to conclusions that are not only separated by ‘level’ – a result of the research methodology used – but also by the strategies adopted by trade unions as they struggle to respond to and adapt to their changing environment. At some levels and with regard to some strategies, internationalist practice on the part of trade unions has been reported as being creative, proactive and energetic and certainly ‘vital’ according to the revitalization framework I have used for this thesis. At other levels

and for other strategies any revitalisation, if present at all, has been reported as being faltering, sluggish and disappointing to those describing it. It is with this – differentiated - understanding that I will approach my assessment of my findings in relation to revitalization theory. For each level of analysis, the global, the European and the UK-national, I will give a general overview and discuss the findings with respect the ‘four dimensions’ of labour revitalization given by Behrens *et al.* (2004). These are: membership; economic impact; political activity; institutional dynamism.

### Labour revitalization at the global level

At the global level the accounts I was given of the full range of activities conducted by the ICFTU, the GUFs and the ITSs, gave the impression of a world trade union movement which was in recovery. The time factor is important here insofar as this ‘recovery’ was frequently seen as relating to the period of the early 1990s, when the assessments of many senior trade unionists of their own prospects for survival were bleak. As we have seen Silver (2003) has highlighted the importance of historical relativity as a factor that can colour assessments of the state of organized labour. Nonetheless, most of the interviewees at the global level of this research conveyed a sense that, although the challenges were great, the fight was on.

Assessments of the state of the trade union movement, surveyed from the perspective of the peak international bodies, did stress the negative aspects of the experience of trade unions world-wide. Declining

membership, rising age demographics, a loss of political influence in many parts of the world and severe repression in some countries, were all highlighted in several interviews. In this regard the kinds of analysis put forward by Burgess (2004) and Baccaro *et al.* (2003) that focus upon the disintegration of the historical political blocs that have historically supported unions seemed apposite. The accounts given by officers at the ICFTU, for instance, did suggest that where there was a tendency to reach out to unions in other parts of the world, it was also likely that institutional support for trade unions was weak.

On the other hand, most interviewees stressed the vibrancy of the various global campaigns they were conducting, the rising profile of their organizations in the activities of their constituent members and the ways in which they were involved in ‘real-time’ trade union business as never before. This latter theme of ‘real-time’ intervention and involvement on the part of global trade union bodies seemed to strongly confirm the transformatory potential that Lee (1997; 2001) has suggested of the internet for world trade unionism. This, more upbeat, picture also came through clearly in relation to the strategies of organizing insofar as international union organizations were said to be more willing than in the recent past to mobilise their members for days-of-action and for the purpose of political engagement over issues of human rights and trade union rights. Coalition building with a wide variety of interest groups and NGOs also featured as a significant area of work, and provided evidence for Hale’s (2004) optimistic perspective on this topic. With respect to other strategies, there was often evidence of revitalisation, for instance

for organizational restructuring, political action and international linking. However, this evidence was also heavily qualified by frequent references to the mixed blessings of new developments such as new communications technologies, the ongoing problems of the national focus of most trade union activity as well as language and cultural difference, and the difficulties of engaging with global capitalist institutions. Despite this, what was striking was the lack of the kinds of generalised pessimism for world labour that has characterised some recent writing on the topic (*e.g.* Jose 2002).

Considering Behrens *et al.* (2004) in their general framework for assessing labour revitalization, we again need to recognise the variegated nature of the picture we find. On the theme of membership for instance, most interviewees, as we have seen, highlighted the declining numerical memberships in many, if not most, parts of the world. We should acknowledge, however, the different meanings that trade union membership has in the context of different industrial relations regimes and within different national political cultures. This is certainly stressed within labour revitalisation theory (*e.g.* Frege and Kelly 2003). Moreover the same interviewees would present the fact of declining membership, not as a given and static situation, but rather as a ‘problem’ to be solved or as a challenge. Again this is in keeping with the kind of approach adopted by Frege and Kelly (2003). The ways in which the issue of membership and recruitment was made a priority in the Millennium Review of the ICFTU and in which ‘youth’ has been made a target for

recruitment gave a sense of the international unions rising to this challenge. They also provide evidence for the relevance of ‘targeting’ as a strategy for organizing that was identified by Heery and Adler (2004). More specifically such targeting in membership campaigns and recruitment, can be seen as being ‘field-enlarging’ in that it seeks to engage with groups that have historically been difficult for unions to reach such as contingent workers and migrant workers.

In a similar fashion to the theme of membership, the economic dimension of international work was portrayed in terms that demand some interpretation. On the one hand many interviewees described the woeful deterioration in living standards, social protection and contract security for workers around the world that has accompanied the era of neo-liberalism since the early 1990s. On the other some significant figures, and especially the lead MNC negotiator at the ICFTU, were more optimistic. These figures described the greater bargaining power for trade unions in situations of intensified competition for global markets, the vulnerability of MNCs in particular to coordinated transnational industrial action and the greater ability of international trade union bodies to strike global agreements with MNCs than in the past. This assessment seemed close to the kinds of ‘concentrated’ and ‘employer orientated’ method of bargaining expansion again identified by Heery and Adler (2004) in their discussion of organizing and revitalization.



On the political dimension there was a definite sense of the world trade union movement having lost ground. Interviewees talked about how, in nearly all parts of the world, trade unions had lost influence with governments and often with parties with which they had had longstanding political alliances. The international trade unions themselves, also, no longer had the kinds of influence that they had once enjoyed through the ILO. The accounts that were given of the lobbying work that was ongoing with the WTO and the IMF, though sometimes presented positively for this theme, clearly did not compare to the kinds of institutionalised position that trade unions once had within the Bretton Woods arrangements. The kinds of partnership that this had once represented, and that might have qualified ‘partnership’ as a revitalizing factor in Fichter and Greer’s (2004) view, were seen as a thing of the past. This said, however, it was also true that the interviews revealed the ways in which the register for political activity has significantly changed. So, whereas once the ‘political dimension’ was taken to mean influence with government and ‘insider’ status, today it is assumed to be more about involvement with coalitions, engagement in social movements and work that seeks to influence policy through external pressure - as an ‘outsider’ actor. The kinds of coalition described were usually those of the ‘common cause’ type identified by Frege *et al.* (2004), in which unions identified areas of joint interest with NGOs and campaign groups and worked with them as equals. On this, latter, way of approaching the question, the picture that emerged was one of energetic activism and involvement in some of the most important political mobilisations of

recent years, notably in association with the Anti-globalisation Movement and the various social forums held at global and regional levels.

In relation to the institutional dimension identified by Behrens *et al.* (2004) then, and flowing from the accounts given for the other three dimensions at this level of trade union internationalism, it seems that there is a close fit between revitalisation theory and the perspectives of trade unionists. The international trade unions are certainly not falling back on old repertoires of practice according to the assessments provided by these interviewees. They are, on the contrary, responding to the very real challenges that they face with imagination and vigour. There was an emphasis on the greater ability of the international trade unions to raise their profile through campaigns and involvement in public protest, to engage with their national affiliates and to mobilise internal resources towards new priorities of work. For some of the strategies considered, the experience was also contradictory and this explains the assignment of ‘weak’ revitalization for them. Nonetheless, in terms of overall institutional dynamism the sense that was conveyed by nearly all of the interviewees within the international trade unions was that their organizations were just that – dynamic.

### Labour revitalization at the European level

At the European level the trade unionists interviewed (with one exception) were pessimistic in their assessments of the vitality of

transnational work across the continent. The family of European trade union organizations and the ETUC in particular, have developed along an accommodationist path, as they have adapted to the changing contours of the evolution of 'Europe' in its various political and economic manifestations since the 1960s (Dølvik 1999; Imig and Tarrow 2001). Some researchers, as we have seen, have commented upon what they identify as a tension between accommodationism at the official structural level of European trade unionism and activism at the grass-roots level (*e.g.* Rigby 1999; Taylor and Mathers 2002b). Even within an 'accommodationist' paradigm, however, and according to the labour revitalisation framework being used here, it is still entirely possible that forms of trade union practice such as collective bargaining, partnership, restructuring and political action could be 'revitalised' within their own spheres of activity. On these areas, however, the comments still tended to be downbeat. With reference to the Social Dialogue, for instance, that since the early 1990s has been the dominant form of trade union engagement with European political processes, the general view that emerged was that the level of real delivery for trade unions and their members was low and certainly not in proportion to the amount of effort and resources that had been put into it. Such assessments resonate with research that has highlighted the obstacles that exist to cross-border organizing within Europe (Dølvik 1996) and the somewhat 'patchy' experience of new industrial relations mechanisms such as EWCs (Weston and Martínez Lucio 1998). There were tendencies reported that also contradicted this view and that did provide some evidence of

revitalisation in some areas. This was true of the comments on the culture of transnational activism and mobilisation in some sectors. Even here, however, such assessments were often qualified by other factors that worked against revitalization in those areas. On the theme of mobilisation, for instance, it was also pointed out that the weaknesses of structures of engagement for trade unions led to a lack of policy articulation and therefore to a paucity of opportunities for trade unions to turn out their members. The overall tenor then, even for themes where there was evidence of revitalization was, at best, ambivalent.

With regard to Behrens *et al.* (2004) and the general approach that they suggest we can see that assessments of the dimension of membership require some interpretation. The reason for this is that national variance is a real factor for this dimension particularly. The significance of membership density and membership coverage, for instance, vary between different European countries. In Germany, where unions are locked into partnership with government structures and with employers, decline in membership does not necessarily impinge immediately on trade union power insofar as unions maintain their institutional position. In France, though trade union density is low, unions nonetheless command significant political influence and are able to mobilise beyond their formal memberships. Conversely in the UK unions have seen recruitment strategies as an important priority in their efforts to maintain their bargaining position in the face of successive neo-liberal governments. In fact the trade unionists interviewed at this level did not

place a high priority upon recruitment at all. There was an emphasis upon the enormous efforts that have been made, and that are still being made to engage with employers for bargaining position and with the various European commissions for regulatory improvement in given sectors. This work can be seen as belonging in the categories of ‘depth organizing’ and ‘employer-orientated’ trade union strategies identified by Heery and Adler (2004). Still, none of the interviewees put any emphasis on targeting strategies for increasing membership levels or on the importance of improving membership levels to maintain legitimacy. One comment made by an officer at the ETUC suggested that this was a direct result of the position of the European trade unions in the Social Dialogue process and within EWCs. One qualification is that some officers did comment upon the importance of winning new memberships within the accession countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Here, however, the term ‘member’ referred to national unions which, it was hoped would become properly affiliated to the family of democratic European trade unions.

On the economic dimension most assessments were negative. A strong feeling came through in most of the interviews that the results of the Social Dialogue process, with regard to real benefits for European workers, were disappointing. For the sectoral level these trade unionists were of the view that little, if anything, had been achieved in recent years for European trade unions and their members. At the cross-sectoral level some examples of significant legislative advantage for unions, such as the

Working Time Directive of 1993 and the EWC Directive of 1994, were offered. These were presented, however, as being some of the few examples. Really, most interviewees were anxious to stress, little had been achieved considering the enormity of the efforts that had been expended.

For the political dimension a similar note was struck as for the economic dimension. There was a sense that in the early 1990s, in the wake of the end of the Cold War, European trade unions had achieved an improved position as insiders within European political processes. Nonetheless, there was also a clear view that this position had been steadily eroded over the course of the decade previous to the interviews. This was said to be one result of a steady freezing out of the European trade unions by institutional disadvantage and by employer avoidance. A strong emphasis was put on a 'neo-liberal turn' under the influence of the UK government in particular, but also the Italian and Spanish governments in various governmental phases, by some interviewees. This was consistent with the analysis of disarticulation put forward by Burgess (2004). This said, although it was the case that the political position of the European trade unions as 'insiders' within political processes had waned, it was also stressed by some interviewees, referring to political movements, in particular the Social Forum movement, that such new engagements had brought with them new political energies at the activist level as well as at the more regional and pan-European levels. The framework put forward by Frege *et al.* (2004) for understanding coalition building on the part of

trade unions is relevant here insofar as they stress the importance of such coalitions for increasing diversity in membership representation, and for providing new layers of activists. Overall, the resulting picture is one in which European trade unions continue to engage as political actors within policy processes as lobbyists whilst also displaying tendencies towards higher levels of membership activism. In fact the complex, and even contradictory, mix of strategic actions at the official and ground levels, including trade unions becoming political actors in their own right, seeking to exert pressure on policy processes from ‘the outside’ fits with the elements identified within Hamann’s and Kelly’s (2004) analysis well.

In terms of the institutional dimension engagement in the Social Dialogue process many interviewees spoke in terms that suggested that it had been a drain on resources and energies that could have been better spent on other areas of activity. It was also the case however, that some pointed to evidence for a greater vitality across the European trade union movement on some measures. The rising incidence of ‘Euro-strikes’ for instance, in the car, retail and transport sectors was one example of this. Attendance at some of the larger Anti-globalisation events such as those at Nice in 2000 and Genoa 2001, was another. Within given sectors there was evidence also of an emerging and very active culture of cross-border communication and networking amongst worker-activists of the kinds identified by Lillie and Martínez Lucio (2004). At the ‘higher’ structural levels it would seem that the picture is not one of a European trade

unionism becoming revitalized on the sorts of criteria employed by these labour revitalization theorists. At the ‘lower’ levels, however, there is evidence that revitalization is occurring in the form of a readiness of worker-activists to act as European as well as national trade unionists.

### Labour revitalization at the UK level

The research interviews conducted with British trade unionists provided evidence of significant revitalization of the international dimensions of trade union work and activity. Indeed the picture revealed by the research for this level closely resembled that suggested by the criteria put forward by Waterman (2001: 363-383) as representing a ‘new’ trade union internationalism. To recap, these were: face-to-face solidarity interactions; decentralisation; replacement of the wealthy ‘donor’ and poor ‘recipient’ model with one based on more reciprocal solidarity; the replacement of rhetorical gestures by more meaningful action; and a more grass-roots internationalism.

On the theme of industrial organizing many interviewees spoke about British unions and activists developing international links and building internationalism into their work in different ways. Several interviewees spoke about the ways in which, during industrial struggles, messages of support from around the world, visits by trade unionists from other countries and solidarity delegations had become quite normal. The experience of travelling to international events at which trade unions



were represented, attending transnational conferences for trade unions within particular sectors and being in regular communication with counterparts abroad were said to have become commonplace for many union officers and shop-floor activists. Coalition building for international work was a very strong theme. Affiliations by branches to organizations, campaigns and political causes that had an international dimension to them were frequently said to have become very diverse at all levels of trade union structures. They were also said to have become an integral element in branch, committee and conference culture. Organizational links between ‘sister’ unions in different countries, as well as more personal links were also an important part of the picture. Indeed it was the branch level and personal nature of international linking that was said by many interviewees to be what made internationalism today different from that in the corporatist era. The personal nature of many of the accounts of international solidarity, in which the story told clearly meant a great deal to the activist telling it, also suggested something of the meaning of more ‘organic’, rather than ‘mechanical’ (bureaucratic) forms of solidarity promoted by some researchers (*e.g.* Hyman 1999). It also resonates with a more active – and activist – conception of workers within the globalisation paradigm of much of the relevant literature (*e.g.* Waddington 1999).

There were areas for which the evidence for revitalization was either patchy or inconsistent. On the topic of Europe for instance, many trade unionists spoke in very committed terms about the ‘importance of

Europe'. There was a frequently stated view that trade unions need to focus far more on European level political processes. This stemmed from an apparently paradoxical mixture of, on the one hand, notions that the EU and the European Commission were more traditionally Social democratic than the UK government, and, on the other, that more and more neo-liberal policies were emerging from Europe that were affecting trade unions and their members in the UK. A number of interviewees gave examples of bi-lateral links. No interviewees suggested, however, that there had been any major shift of resources towards European level work. There was also little suggestion that transnational political action was a significant priority for British unions. One exception to this was the account given by the ex-General Secretary of the GMB of the union's office in Brussels which is involved in lobbying within EU policy processes.

There were areas of trade union activity that seemed to fit well with the categories of revitalization suggested by Behrens *et al.* (2004). The membership dimension was a significant aspect in several of the accounts given of trade union internationalism in the British context. Principally this meant internationalism that involved worker members in mobilising contexts, either in strike situations or as part of social movement events. This did fit with some aspects of the organizing model of revitalization outlined by Heery and Adler (2004). Stories of bi-lateral links that reflected the local ethnic composition of branch membership or of internationalism that stemmed from local working class culture that had

grown out of various histories of immigration and the experience of empire, were relevant here. The link between membership interest and representativity was also apparent when interviewees talked about the wide range of affiliations that characterised local branches, and the ways in which many active members saw their union as representing their own political outlooks through these affiliations. This strand within the findings seemed to fit well with the accounts given by Frege *et al.* (2004) of ‘common cause’ coalitions in which unions strike up alliances with different organizations around common agendas as well as, in some cases, ‘integrative coalitions’ in which the aims and values of coalition partners become absorbed into the internal culture of the union itself.

There was little material from the research interviews that could be considered to indicate revitalization directly in relation to economic impact. Indeed it would appear that the complete lack of interview data pointing to internationalist action actually improving the economic position of workers confirms the more pessimistic assessments of the institutional position of trade unions in most parts of the world given by some researchers (*e.g.* Jose 2002). If this dimension is expanded beyond bargaining, however, to include industrial struggle, then we can point to the internationalist aspect to many strike situations. This can be justified insofar as there were many examples of internationalist solidarity in situations of strike action relating to economic issues. This could also apply to situations in which trade unions have engaged in trade union

action against MNCs in Britain and, in the process, forged links with unions in other countries in which the company operates.

For the political dimension the obvious area of international work for British trade unions would be Europe. There were examples given of political lobbying within the political processes of the EU and the European Commission. Overall, however, a strong sense was conveyed that the real levels of commitment for this sort of lobbying effort did not live up to the verbal commitment that was expressed by a number of interviewees. The political focus of British trade unions was said to still be that of the Labour Party. Even for those unions that have disaffiliated from the Labour Party, such as the FBU, or within which there have been serious challenges to the 'Labour-link', such as Unison, the focus clearly remained on the UK government as the main threat to public services and social welfare. This meant that the kinds of political action described by Hamann and Kelly (2004), such as involvement in electoral activity and fighting for progressive and pro-trade union legislation, did not feature to any great extent in these findings. There were accounts given that did fit Hamann and Kelly's criteria insofar as they described UK unions taking an active interest in the European courts and in cases that would have implications for their members. Considering unions acting more as 'outsiders' through involvement in political campaigns and movements there was a sense, that was expressed by several interviewees, of activists becoming increasingly engaged and politicised through this experience.

This, again, confirmed the relevance of the types of coalition building described by Frege *et al.* (2004).

Many interviewees were of the opinion that international work had become more prominent in recent years and had brought new energies into trade union structures. Whether this was to do with active members bringing political international issues to branch meetings, to regional events or to national conference, the story was of the trade union benefiting in various ways. The benefits reported were those of: the health of internal debate; awareness of international issues within branches; the political sophistication of members; the general cultural levels of branches and in terms of tolerance and understandings of other cultures; and resistance to racism at home. Sometimes interviewees gave accounts that suggested that contemporary issues had re-enlivened old traditions of working class solidarity. In some cases unions had embedded internationalism more deeply into their structures by creating branch level international officers, incorporating international issues into their education programmes or ensuring easy routes to conference for branch motions on international issues. Many of the examples given confirmed the account given by Lille and Martínez Lucio (2004) of the dimensions across which a new, revitalized labour internationalism is developing. Specifically, the most directly relevant were: intra-company activist networks; greater awareness of global inequality; greater transnational coordination; and more de-centralised forms of cross-border activism. With regard to the more central point of their analysis - that national factors frame international work in ways that can facilitate as

well as impede it - the evidence was supportive. This was especially true with regard to the more disarticulated political reality in which British trade unions find themselves. In other words it does seem to be the case, on the basis of the evidence offered by these interviewees, that since British unions have been pushed politically to the sidelines by the New Labour government, they have been more prepared to reach out to unions abroad, to concern themselves with the struggles being engaged in by workers in other parts of the world and, perhaps, to revitalize their never quite dormant traditions of international solidarity.

The positive assessment given above does not mean that there were no obstacles in this area. There were problems that resulted from job competition in some manufacturing sectors, for instance. Issues relating to language were also, as at all other levels, a source of difficulty. Nonetheless, the enthusiasm with which British trade unionists talked about internationalism within their organizations, and the sheer range of examples they used to illustrate their accounts, suggests that this internationalism is indeed at least helping to revitalize the British trade union movement.

### **Possibilities for further research**

This research did reveal a sharp difference in assessments of trade union internationalism at the European level and the global and UK-national levels. My findings at the European level however, are supported by a relatively small number of interviews. Further work at the European level would therefore be useful. Such work could focus particularly on the

effects of the Social Dialogue process on the potential of other union strategies to revitalize trade unions at this level.

At points there appeared to be interactions between the three levels at which the research for this thesis was conducted. In the case of the profile of the global unions at the European and UK-national levels this seemed to be enhancing to both labour internationalism and to revitalization. In the case of efforts towards a Europeanization of trade unions this seemed to be less the case insofar as dynamics at the national level appeared work as a brake on the necessary processes. This theme of scalar interaction would be useful to explore for the research field.

Over the course of this research and within this thesis, a wide range of types of trade union internationalism have been highlighted and discussed. International labour solidarity, engagement with international social movements, intra-company trade union transnationalism, lobbying for transnational regulation *etc.* have all been touched upon at various points. Studies that went into more depth for each type of trade union international practice in relation to revitalization would serve to deepen the approaches developed here.

The model of labour revitalization analysis employed for this research might usefully be applied to other key strategies that are being pursued by trade unions. Examples from the British case might include the partnership agendas being developed around ‘Agenda for Change’ in the

National Health Service and the Union Learning agenda to which a large part of the work of the TUC is now devoted.

Partnership working emerged in the main as a strategy that was not revitalizing for trade unions. Research that looks into this area more deeply, both to establish this finding more securely and to explore the reasons for it, would be of interest and benefit to the field.

Those union strategies that emerged as significant for trade union revitalization, such as organizing and coalition building, lend themselves to a case study approach. Case studies that focus upon a particular struggle or coalition would be valuable in bringing depth and detail to our knowledge of the ways in which internationalism and revitalization are connected.

### **Final remarks**

Overall, the model put forward by the authors of *Varieties of Unionism*, provided a rigorous analytical framework for the research data. The detailed break-down of forms of practice, within the six designated strategies of revitalization, meant that the various interview accounts of different aspects of internationalism could be organized in a consistent and systematic fashion. By enabling themes to be identified according to this pre-determined schema, it was possible to differentiate and highlight patterns in the data where examples of internationalism suggested



revitalization as well as areas where there were significant gaps. This all suggests that this model of labour revitalization analysis might indeed provide one way of straddling the diverging streams of labour internationalist studies and, in so doing, bring a new coherence to the field.

As an overall conclusion I can say that labour revitalization themes do intersect with the perspectives that trade unionists have on the international practice of their organizations. The overlaps and correspondences are not even. They vary according to the particular union revitalization strategy being considered. Coalition building and organizing show strong correspondences, for instance. Partnership working shows little or none. They also vary according to the level of analysis. At the global and UK-national levels the overlaps were frequent and often strong. At the European level they tended to be fewer and weaker. Nonetheless, at the most general level, the evidence indicates that internationalism, far from being merely a defensive response to domestic weakness, is in fact, in many of its dimensions, a revitalizing force in the arteries and capillaries of the trade union movement.

## ***Appendix I: Research interviews***

<b>Name</b>	<b>Union</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Global level</b>				
Dwight Justice (DJ)	ICFTU	Multi-nationals Negotiations Coordinator	ICFTU offices, Brussels	10 September 2001
Duncan Pruett (DP)	ICFTU	Information and IT Coordinator	ICFTU offices, Brussels	10 September 2001
Tim Noonan (TM)	ICFTU	Head of Campaigns and Education	ICFTU offices, Brussels	11 September 2001
James Howard (JH)	ICFTU	Director, Employment and International Labour Standards	ICFTU offices, Brussels	11 September 2001
Marieke Konig (MK)	ICFTU	Campaign Coordinator (Equality Department)	ICFTU offices, Brussels	12 September 2001
Alice Carl (AC)	PSI	Research and Information Officer	PSI offices, Fernay Voltaire	13 May 2002
Mike Waghorn (MW)	PSI	Assistant General Secretary	PSI offices, Fernay Voltaire	13 May 2002
Alan Leather (AL)	PSI	Deputy General Secretary	PSI offices, Fernay Voltaire	14 May 2002
Dain Bolwell (DB)	PSI	Director, Communication s and IT	PSI offices, Fernay Voltaire	14 May 2002
Derek Hodgson (DH)	UNI	General Secretary (UNI- Postal)	ILO buildings, Geneva	15 May 2002
Phillip Boyer (PB)	UNI	Assistant General Secretary (UNI- Postal)	ILO buildings, Geneva	16 May 2002
Norah Wintour (NW)	PSI	Equality Officer	PSI offices, Fernay Voltaire	17 May 2002
David Cockroft (DC)	ITF	Deputy General Secretary	ITF offices, London	8 February 2003
<b>European level</b>				
Bart Samyn (BSa)	EMF	Assistant General Secretary	EMF offices, Brussels	17 April 2003

Nadja Salsen <b>(NS)</b>	EPSU	Research Officer	EPSU offices, Brussels	17 April 2003
Brian Synnot <b>(BSy)</b>	EPSU	Research Officer	EPSU offices, Brussels	17 April 2003
Penny Clark <b>(PC)</b>	ETUC	Senior Negotiations Officer	ETUC offices, Brussels	18 April 2003
Bernadette Tэш-Segol <b>(BT-S)</b>	UNI-Europa	Regional Secretary	UNI-Europa offices, Brussels	18 April 2003
<b>UK level</b>				
James Nolan <b>(JM)</b>	TGWU	Branch Convenor (Liverpool dockers)	The Casa (dockers' club), Liverpool	3 July 2001
Tammy Sherar <b>(TS)</b>	Unison	Campaigns Coordinator (International Office)	Unison offices, London	1 July 2003
John Edmonds <b>(JE)</b>	GMB	Ex-General Secretary	TGWU offices, London	7 July 2003
Les Ford <b>(LF)</b>	TGWU	European Trade Union Advisor	TGWU offices	7 July 2003
Graham Stevenson <b>(GS)</b>	TGWU	National Advisor	TGWU offices, London	8 July 2003
Paul Bennet <b>(PB)</b>	NATFHE	National Research Officer	NATFHE offices, London	8 July 2003
Mark Dickinson <b>(MD)</b>	NUMAST	Assistant General Secretary	NUMAST offices, London	9 July 2003
Mick Graham <b>(MG)</b>	GMB	National Secretary for Public Services	GMB offices, London	9 July 2003
Caroline Annisley <b>(CA)</b>	Unison	International Officer	Unison offices, London	24 July 2003
Neil Thompson <b>(NT)</b>	FBU	Regional Chair (North West Region)	FBU offices, Liverpool	6 October 2003
Alfe Jones <b>(AJ)</b>	GMB	Regional Education and training Officer (North West Region)	GMB offices, Liverpool	6 October 2003
Kevin Coyne <b>(KC)</b>	Amicus	Regional Secretary (North West Region)	Amicus offices, Liverpool	7 October 2003
Billy Morris <b>(BM)</b>	GPMU	Branch Secretary,	GPMU offices, Liverpool	7 October 2003

		Liverpool		
Andy Boyack <b>(AB)</b>	RMT	Regional Administrative Manager (North West Region)	RMT offices, Liverpool	8 October 2003
Frank Hont <b>(FH)</b>	Unison	Regional Secretary (North West Region)	Unison offices, Salford	20 October 2003
Carl Webb <b>(CW)</b>	CWU	Regional Secretary (North west region)	CWU offices, Manchester	20 October 2003
Phil McNulty <b>(PMcN)</b>	TGWU	Research Officer (North West Region)	CWU offices, Salford	20 October 2003
Rob Aldritt <b>(RA)</b>	CWU	Branch Secretary (Liverpool branch)	CWU offices, Liverpool	28 October 2003
Pat Maloney <b>(PMa)</b>	MSF	Senior Representative (Marconi branch)	MSF office, Marconi, Liverpool	4 December 2003
Peter Ballard <b>(PB)</b>	Unison	Branch Secretary, Aintree NHS Trust	Unison Office, Aintree NHS Trust	8 December 2003
Phil Allman <b>(PA)</b>	Amicus	Vauxhall's Convenor	Amicus office, Vauxhall's plant, Ellesmere Port	9 December 2003
David McDonnel <b>(DM)</b>	TGWU	Vauxhall's Deputy Convenor	TGWU office, Vauxhall's plant, Ellesmere Port	9 December 2003
Colin Smith <b>(CS)</b>	ASLEF	District Secretary (North West District)	Lord Nelson Hotel, Liverpool	24 January 2004

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