

Rethinking trade unionism: Union renewal as transition

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Abstract

Union renewal has been the subject of debate over the last two decades. Via a review of these debates, a revision of the union renewal thesis is presented, suggesting that union renewal should be examined as a process of transition. Three analytic dimensions of renewal are identified and presented, each arising out of a consideration of the debates: union organisation, union capacity and union purpose. The proposition is that an understanding of contemporary unionism involves a consideration of the ways renewal involves a multi-faceted transition in relation to the political economy of trade unionism. The way to understand this characterisation is to reconsider theories about unions in terms of a dialectic, addressing the inter-relationships and integration of union organisation, capacities and purpose.

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Labour relations, neo-liberalism, social justice, trade unions, union renewal

While there has been much debate about union renewal, the challenge now is to assess the concept's appropriateness in relation to unions in an increasingly global world. Since the concept's initial and tentative formulation in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a persistent emphasis on the importance of membership activism, participation and engagement as markers of renewal (Kumar and Schenk, 2006). This focus is part of an argument that renewal is about the 'democratisation' of unions in the circumstances of comprehensive restructuring and internationalisation of economies (Fairbrother et al., 2007). This

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emphasis has also been challenged, on both analytic and substantive grounds (Hickey et al., 2010). It is now opportune to rethink the conceptualisation of union renewal.

Much of the analysis of unions in the current period focuses on union organisation and union capacities in relation to the perceived threats to unions, particularly from industrial and political restructuring under the auspices of the neo-liberal agenda. This long-term recomposition of the political economy occasioned a shift in union approaches in the late 1980s and 1990s. The aim was to underwrite a shift to 'organising' (actively engaging members) away from servicing (providing support to members). Subsequently, work and employment relations were further reconfigured as part of the internationalisation of production, consumption and trade. Three preliminary points may be made. First, the propositions about union renewal were developed at a particular moment, initially in the 1980s with the development and maturation of neo-liberal approaches in relation to work and employment. Second, unions in the context of on-going social and economic restructuring face choices between pressures towards participative, accountable and campaigning forms of unionism and pressures towards sectional, instrumental and relatively unaccountable forms of unionism (Hyman, 1979). In this context, the concept of renewal incorporates a normative aspect: a progressive, humanistic and inclusive approach to change. Third, transition is likely to be uneven, appear *ad hoc* and entail debate and reflection about organisation, capacity and purpose. Thus, it is necessary to consider the conditions for a transition from forms of business, responsible and political unionism, to the more participative and campaigning unionism that is social movement unionism (Fairbrother, 2008; Fairbrother and Webster, 2008).

The analysis is developed via four steps. First, the renewal debate is presented to set the scene for an analysis of trade unionism in the current political and economic moment. This section highlights the way in which a consideration of the public sector and the shift to the public and private provision of services is critical to an understanding of the flux and flow of the debate. Second, the key aspects and dimensions of union organisation, union capacity and union purpose are presented. In the third section, this dialectic is assessed and evaluated, laying the foundation for a focused understanding of trade unionism. A brief conclusion completes the analysis.

Renewal: A process of transition

Since the late 1970s, there has been extended debate about the prospects for trade unions. Unions have experienced the fallout from widespread restructuring and state reorganisation. Economies have been refocused away from traditional, often mass-based industries to new industries, with dispersed workforces, casual employees and more broadly insecure workforces. The balance of power has shifted in many industries towards employers, and capital more generally, both nationally and internationally. In the advanced capitalist economies, union membership levels have declined dramatically, and in many sectors, there has been a narrowing of union interest and purpose (Fairbrother and Yates, 2003). These developments have been reinforced by political advocacy of the neo-liberal agenda. Some commentators have argued that a long-term decline in union membership and a narrowing of focus is in process, especially in advanced capitalist economies

(Blanchflower and Bryson, 2008; Kelly, 2012; Schmitt and Mitukiewicz, 2012). Others believe that in response to these challenges, a union renewal may occur (Connolly, 2011; Dibben et al., 2012; Fairbrother and Yates, 2003; Simms and Holgate, 2010).

Drawing on these perspectives, I argue that it is now necessary to rethink the debate, in terms of a dialectic relation between three analytic dimensions: union purpose, union organisation and union capacities. Each dimension is defined in the sequence in which they were addressed in the debate about union renewal.

First, union organisation refers to the way unions operate and organise, in the workplace as well as across the levels that make up unions. Moreover, trade unionism is now increasingly characterised by different layers of organisation, involving the workplace (and workers no longer defined by fixed workplaces), trade union confederations and global unions and confederations (Fairbrother et al., 2013). Organisation covers the structures of relationship as well as the forms of governance, raising questions about accountability to members and the leadership remit for members – a consideration of union democracy. Central to these provisions is the texture of the relations among members, activists and leaders.

Second, union capacities refer to the abilities of unions to address and define union concerns. Capacities can be exercised when trade unions have the capabilities to do so, (aptitudes, competences, skills). As noted by Lévesque and Murray (2010), such capabilities can be ‘developed, transmitted and learned’ (p. 341). Nevertheless, as these writers further note, in the clearest discussion of capacities to date, capabilities without resources, particularly power resources, are not enough and vice versa. Such resources include infrastructure (material, organisational), internal solidarity (collective identities and practices) and external solidarity (embeddedness – within community and political structures).

Third, union purpose refers to the aims of unions as collectivities and the key values that are expressed or implied therein. The task is to frame and articulate these values, either implicitly in relation to policy advocacy or explicitly as goals unions seek to realise. These values may refer to short-term immediate concerns, such as the defence or the pursuit of employment terms and conditions; they also may involve long-term goals about the defence and improvement of social, economic and political arrangements, as well as the prospect and possibility of alternative ways of structuring such arrangements. These processes of narrative building and articulation involve the exercise of capacities, via deliberation, and occasionally by leadership proclamation, depending on the organisational arrangements that define trade unions.

There is a dialectical relation between these dimensions of trade unionism. They combine in interactive ways so that each depends on the other and is merged in ways that give trade unions their collective authority and power. The focus on these dimensions also allows an examination of union renewal since they enable the identification and specification of those processes over which trade unions have control in relation to the political economy in which they operate (structure and agency). One outcome is that it becomes possible to identify different forms of trade unionism: business unions, responsible unionism (unions committed to reform in partnership ways) and social movement unions (focusing on collective mobilisation). It also means that the transition implied by renewal can be explained.

The renewal debate

The concept of union renewal has its origins in the 1970s and 1980s. Initially, it was formulated in relation to the form and processes of union organisation, extending the debates about bureaucratisation and democracy (Hyman, 1979). Its genesis was in studies about union government (e.g. Lipset et al., 1956) and considerations of unions as class-based organisations, with the capacities to exercise agency in relation to work and employment relations (Allen, 1966; Hyman, 1971). During the 1980s, the question of democratic engagement, accountability and involvement came to the fore. It appeared that union leaders were increasingly removed from direct membership accountability, giving rise to arguments about business unionism (particularly in the US) and responsible forms of union leadership (in the UK). As these analyses became more focused, the concept of union renewal was elaborated, initially in relation to organisation and by implication capacities (e.g. Fairbrother, 1989).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the debate took an often unacknowledged twist, focusing on the public sector, citing union development in relation to the public services as exemplars of renewal (e.g. Fairbrother, 1996, 2000). Specifically,

These are forms of unionism where the emphasis is on decentralization rather than on centralization, egalitarian forms of organization and operation rather than hierarchy, and involvement and participation rather than passivity and remoteness. (Fairbrother, 1996: 112)

Until the early 1980s, many British unions in the core public service areas, the civil, and public service, were organised in centralised ways, underwriting forms of representative leadership (Fairbrother, 1996). Faced with a lack of capacity as collective bodies, a number of these unions commissioned reviews of their organisational structures and practice, often within a union democracy framework (e.g. Drake et al., 1982; and nearly 10 years earlier, Fryer et al., 1974). More specifically, it was during the 1980s that the public service unions in the UK were transformed from centralised and unaccountable unions to more engaged and participative unions (Fairbrother et al., 2012; for a statement on Canadian public sector unions in the 2000s, see Camfield, 2007). These unions not only reorganised (Drake et al., 1982) but also developed into unions that were prepared and able to campaign for alternative ways of organising and delivering public services. Towards the late 1980s and into the 1990s, it became more appropriate to consider the public sector as a sub-site of public services, following deregulation, contracting-out of services, privatisation and outsourcing (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). Out of these developments came a robust debate about renewal (McIlroy, 1997: 105; and Heery, 1996, 1998). Recently, two decades later, public service union renewal remains a focus, this time by North American scholars although there is often a conceptual drift between public sector and public services (Camfield, 2007; MacDonald, 2014).

Promoters of renewal have been forced to acknowledge the on-going tensions between top-down approaches, which can secure structural change within unions and the 'effectiveness of rank and file organizing' (MacDonald, 2014: 13). MacDonald argues that accommodation with employers and the policies promoted by governments rather than resistance (and transformation) is the outcome; hence, MacDonald locates the arguments

about renewal within an understanding of the political economy of capitalism. Moreover, as with much past analysis, MacDonald ends up focusing on state sector unions, noting,

Whether public sector unions will serve as scapegoats for a neoliberal resolution of crisis or as organizing centres of resistance to the politics of austerity depends on how public sector trade unionists conceive of the relationship between their interests as producers and the nature of the work that they perform, and how they follow through on the implications of this conception. (p. 21)

Paradoxically, this observation supports much discussion in the British debates about union renewal where the focus on the state sector became a prototypical case of neo-liberal capitalism. Even recently, the focus by governments on the ‘politics of austerity’ (a distinct formulation of the neo-liberal approach) raises sharp challenges for these unions: in becoming ‘organizing centres of resistance’ (p. 21), they must wrestle with a tension in articulating union purposes, as ‘producers’ and/or as workers providing public services. But, this decision is not at all straightforward since public services range from social control to social care. Hence, the focus on public services brings the dimensions of renewal into sharp relief.

Not surprisingly, these formulations of union renewal are subject to continued critique. Recently, Camfield (2007: 284) in an important advance defines union renewal in relation to union praxis (combinations of union activity and ideology). As argued, this leads into a discussion of the type of unionism that ‘can and should be practised’ (p. 284). The purpose is to distinguish between four modes of union praxis: business unionism, social unionism, mobilisation unionism and social movement unionism. While of value, the focus on ‘modes’ of unionism overlooks the ways that unions, irrespective of ‘mode’, can renew themselves, promoting a transition towards collective inclusivity and engagement.

Transition refers to the on-going and tentative construction of unions in relation to collective organisation, capacity and purpose. First, some unions have long sought to reformat and rebuild the ways they organise and operate in relation to members. Such processes are always in a state of flux and uncertainty, as unions adapt, reflect and experiment. Second, for unions to focus on the implications of economic restructuring and political innovation, developments in the political economy of work and employment are crystallised in the form of a major change or – as some have argued – ‘crisis’ (Voss and Sherman, 2000). To illustrate, as states redraw the boundaries between private and public ownership, opportunities are provided, paradoxically, for unions to reposition and rebuild themselves in seemingly very unlikely circumstances. Third, unions draw on internal and, increasingly, external resources when dealing with the impact and outcomes of managerial decisions. In situations where unions face multinational capital, for example, they must be in a position to question a distanced and often disconnected management.

While trade unionism often remains embedded in traditional national spaces (Cumbers, 2004), unions increasingly attempt to deal with the changing architecture of international capital. Current approaches to the question of union renewal tend to begin with questions relating to organisation and capacity building (e.g. Simms and Holgate, 2010 – addressing ‘organising’ strategies; Lévesque and Murray, 2010 – investigating the process of

renewing capacities). While these analyses are valuable, and address different but related dimensions of renewal, there is an understated reference to union purpose. Moreover, the inter-relationship between these different dimensions often is unacknowledged.

Reconceptualising union renewal

To address these themes, the analysis begins with an account of union purpose. The logic is that this dimension is underdeveloped, and that the content of the other two dimensions tends to be constructed in relation to an implied or explicit union purpose.

Union purpose

Union purpose is a key to understanding the process and prospects of renewal. Recently, there have been attempts to define union purpose in ways that are more precise. Hodder and Edwards (2015) have developed a framework focusing on the ‘essence of trade unions’. They consider the relationship between purpose (and identity) and union strategies for renewal. Grounded in relation to the work of Richard Hyman, they provide a useful clarification of the complex of terms and concepts defining purpose; unfortunately, the focus only on the UK discussion limits its value. Hodder and Edwards (2015) define union purpose thus, ‘unions are primarily organizations that exist for the representation of members’ interests, both individual and collective’ (pp. 844–845). The problem with the distinction between ‘individual and collective’ is that these concepts are not necessarily mutually inclusive or reinforcing. One member’s interest may be to the detriment of another (e.g. employment quotas for women), and thus, it is necessary to foreground collective purpose, as a political foundation, that overrides and resists the temptation of celebrating individualism at the cost of the collective interest.

Hodder and Edwards (2015) propose that the purpose of a union is to ‘pursue objectives that reflect its identity’ (p. 847) and identity refers to ‘what a union is, its “very nature”’ (p. 847). Of course, this formulation must be given content and this is achieved via the iteration of the different levels of activity and engagement by unions over time. The limitation of this formulation is that the authors cannot capture the relationship between capacities and organisation as reciprocal relationships that inform and are informed via the articulation of union purpose. Without a consideration of capacity building (repertoires of collective action and the construction of organisational forms), the understanding of union purpose in relation to the political economies in which unions are located is likely to be limited.

At a general level, trade unions articulate their purpose in relation to two competing pressures: towards ‘businesslike service organisation’, and as an ‘expression and vehicle of the historical movement of the submerged laboring masses’ (cited in Hyman, 2001: 61) or ‘sword of justice’ and ‘vested interest’ (cited in Hyman, 2001: 61; Tattersall, 2007). This dualism points to the rigidity of established relations, whereby over time unions are institutionalised in relation to forms of organisation, the exercise of capabilities and the articulation of purpose. It may be that in the context of economic and social change, traditional sources of power are questioned and new sources of power emerge and are played out in complex, uneven and tentative ways.

But, in practice, the pursuit of union purpose is grounded in the complexity of employment relations, as exemplified by the ‘flexicurity’ debate in Europe. While employers’ strategies vary (generally seeking competitive advantage by imposing ‘flexibilities’), unions seek security of employment – or if this is not possible, other forms of income security, benefit and compensation. First formulated in 1998 and then legally introduced in the Netherlands in 1999, the term ‘flexicurity’ brought these two notions together (Auer, 2010: 372; Wilthagen, 1998). This initiative meshed with the European Commission promotion of a European employment strategy towards the end of the 1990s. The idea was to permit employers flexibility in the deployment of their workforce while ensuring protection for workers. It has been argued that this policy was underpinned by the promulgation of the ‘European Social Model’ as a politically constructed approach to employment, based on ideas of social partnership (Jepsen and Pascual, 2005).

From the beginning, unions were divided about this concept. It was questioned on the basis that the thrust of ‘flexicurity’ underwrites a primarily neo-liberal economic strategy, with unions left on the margins arguing for income security or compensation as well as forms of employment security (Auer, 2010). For some trade unions, such policies were part of a broader challenge in relation to the increasing tendency across all sectors towards outsourcing and off-shore production and service delivery. Where unions were successful in securing positive outcomes, it tended to be in terms of established welfare state regimes and similar social models (Muffels et al., 2014). These patterns underwrite the complex processes at work, and the importance of unions locating themselves within the political economy of different national governance regimes (Muffels et al., 2014: 105–108; for a critique of unions in relation to these policies, see Standing, 2014: 174–190).

Unions frame their concerns and objectives in ways that underwrite collective identity and purpose, giving content to workers’ rights, specific to employment and work, as well as broader social and political concerns. One expression may be via repertoires of action, encapsulating strategies that capture the possibility for realising power from below, as trade unions (Piven and Cloward, 2000: 414–416). Such expressions of purpose mean developing capacities that address situations where, for example, there are no direct and immediate employers as such, and where the deepening opaqueness of managerialism and employment relations is recognised. Moreover, they involve consideration of the social and political conditions for participative forms of union representation, organisation and activity that is the celebration of deliberative forms of engagement and politics (Fairbrother, 2000, 2005; Fairbrother and Webster, 2008). These are some of the complexities when seeking to give content to union purpose.

Union organisation

Unions as collective organisations seek to represent their members in relation to the flux and flow of labour–capital relations. These relations include the direct control of labour within specific labour processes, the managerial regulation of labour through large-scale private and public corporate structures, labour as a commodity within labour markets, and the political regulation of labour via the state. In broad terms, there has been a shift

in work relations defined by mass-based workplaces and work sites, to smaller and more dispersed ones; in union density from production sectors to the service sector (Peters, 2011); and a shift from standardised work and employment conditions to flexibility and insecurity (Standing, 2011). The organisational challenge for unions is stark. Unions must respond to and address the processes of workplace restructuring as well as the changing architecture of labour markets.

This restructuring involves a reconfiguration of the labour–capital relation at the point of production and service; it is part of the complex, dynamic and mediated processes of supervision and direction of the sale of workers' labour power in the modern economy (Marx, 1976: 943–1084). One aspect of these relations of subordination and exploitation is the restructuring and recomposition of managerial hierarchies in both the private and public sectors in the 1970s and 1980s, and the internationalisation of these relations in the 1990s and 2000s (Van der Pijl, 1998; on unions, Fairbrother and Hammer, 2005). The redefinition of management *qua* management is central to this process, with its associated wage systems, changing forms of work and employment, the articulation of ideologies of management and the changing role of the state. In this process, trade unions as a form of collective worker organisation both question these relations and, paradoxically, affirm them.

With the decline in union memberships at the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s, unions in a range of countries focused on ways of organising and operating, involving the tentative steps towards processes of renewal. At the time, the key union dynamic was based on the assumption that union leaders (at all levels) had the capacity to shape union objectives to meet every, often contradictory, need. The renewal debates in the late 1980s and early 1990s (beginning in the US and subsequently transferred to the UK, Australia and New Zealand) drew a distinction between an organising model of unionism and a servicing one. These concepts were defined as follows:

the organizing model, which we take to mean a concentration of resources on encouraging the self-organisation of workers, both internally where recognised and externally where not, through support for a wide range of innovative tactics. This approach is widely contrasted to the servicing model, which portrays unions as institutions separate from workers and acting on their behalf. (Fairbrother et al., 2003: 59; see also Fairbrother and Yates, 2003)

This distinction was often cast in stark terms although in practice more nuanced accounts were often presented (see Fletcher and Hurd, 1998). The outcomes of these steps took time to come into effect. As stated by Simms and Holgate (2010) in relation to a history of the implementation of organising strategies in three British unions:

The first thing to note is that ... the strategies and practices described are highly contested and are the consequence of reflection and debate about how organising principles can and should be applied within the specific context. ... it has taken years to develop and implement these strategies and in each of the unions policy makers argue forcefully that, by focusing on building workplace activism, their organising strategies do reflect the core values of organising rather than simply recruitment. The second point is that these strategies and practices have all been accompanied by membership growth that is particularly notable when the figures are broken down by sector. (p. 164)

By implementing an organisation strategy, the leaders and activists in these unions sought to utilise resources and capabilities to realise their purposes (Fairbrother et al., 2013: 6–7; Hyman, 2007).

Unions as institutions are neither confined to the workplace, nor are they necessarily grounded in the workplace. Where union organisation and practice underwrite the role and place of leaders (elected or appointed) as external to the workplace, there can be profound organisational outcomes. To illustrate, in Australia, where third parties are often decisive in dispute resolution, these practices can undermine the democratic vitality and accountability within unions (Howard, 1977).

Unions also operate at a number of different levels, locally, regionally and nationally, sometimes internationally. They deal with managements, with governments and with governmental and non-governmental agencies. Increasingly in the British context, for example, unions have looked to the supra-state level of the European Union (EU), developing links and relationships with other EU countries as well dealing with EU agencies. With restructuring and the shifting relations between labour and capital, there can be no one fixed pattern of organisation and activity. It is possible that some trade union memberships will simply disappear or wither in the face of the uncertainties of work and employment. Others will reconstitute themselves and begin to organise in the light of these changing circumstances and conditions.

Such complexities underwrite an influential view of unions as ‘intermediary organisations’ positioned as collective organisations representing workers to employers and the state (Müller-Jentsch, 1988). The assumption is that trade unions are organisational entities, which, theoretically at least, are distinct and separate from the state and employers. Of course, union leaderships may enter into alliances with the state or employers or be drawn into co-operative relationships at both employer and state level. It is in this respect that arguments are developed about the autonomy and independence of trade unions, their location within work, household and community. Additionally, questions are raised about the degree to which unions should co-operate with employers or the state in the pursuit of union policy (on this complexity for the US, see MacDonald, 2014; Australia, see Pocock, 2011; UK and Norway, see Cumbers, 2004; and Canada, see Camfield, 2007).

In itself, the focus on organisational questions does not constitute renewal *per se*; rather it is one of the key dimensions of a renewal process. Organisationally, unions face choices and the way they exercise them will be both contested and unclear, largely because these conundrums draw attention to union capacities (for a critical assessment, see Bernaciak et al., 2014).

Union capacity

Union capacities rest on the capabilities and the resources at their disposal, locally, nationally and internationally (Lévesque et al., 2013: 273). Analyses draw distinctions between union groups (in workplaces, as occupations, in different sectors, etc.). It is also important to ground the explanations with reference to the layered forms of union organisation (Fairbrother et al., 2013).

Capacities are exercised and leveraged in relation to the circumstances in which unions find themselves, as indicated by the ‘power resources’ available to unions and the

ways they build their capabilities, via education and organisation (Lévesque and Murray, 2010; on 'strategic capacity', see Ganz, 2000; Hyman, 2007). These processes include the development, articulation, and implementation of union agendas, internal solidarity (exemplified by forms of union democracy) and external solidarity (the embeddedness of unions within their localities and as part of national and global unions). As already noted, capacities can be exercised when trade unions have the capabilities to do so and where they also have resources (material and immaterial). And, implicit in such considerations is the way unions organise and operate, as collective organisations.

The complexity of these relationships becomes evident in the cultural industry, notable for its exemplification of precarious employment and active unions. Worldwide, the English-language production sector is characterised by the domination of a handful of powerful global media entertainment complexes (Sony, Disney, NBC Universal). Much of the risk around production, however, is devolved to local independent production companies set up as single cycle corporations or 'one-offs' for the duration of a project –for example, a film (Blair et al., 2001: 171). That risk is in turn further devolved to the cultural workers who drive the labour-intensive production process. These labour markets are based on non-standard employment relationships characterised by employment and income insecurity, excessive overtime, and contract, freelance or self-employment. Film and television production industry unions (principally in Canada and the US) are actively engaged in labour market regulation and workforce development. These unions leverage the labour market power of high profile members (internationally recognised actors and writers) to develop and reinforce union solidarity. Given that their membership profiles are marked by significant disparities in occupational status, a strong attachment to the union serves as a foundational organising principle as well as the base for industrial action at local and international levels. In these respects, unions are drawing on their power resources (collective leverage, alliances, strategic occupations) as well as developing policy narratives that have been taken up by governments (Coles, 2015; Coles and Fairbrother, 2013).

The history of unions in this sector illustrates an important principle in relation to union capacities: the significance of servicing the membership and the forging of a distinctive union purpose. A critical feature of cultural worker unions is that they follow the worker, not the workplace. Hence, some define themselves as 'craft unions' rather than occupational or general unions (e.g. International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts in the US, its Territories and Canada). This presentation of purpose represents an implicit recognition that servicing informs organising and vice versa. One outcome is that such unions increasingly shape their purpose as policy actors, leveraging their capacities in relation to governments as well as employers. (For an extended oral discussion on both cultural and agricultural work, see http://www.crimt.org/TD_Assurance_Forum_1-6_Web_2.mov.) This process of union renewal involves a re-recognition of servicing as a critical capability of unions, especially where workers are employed in vulnerable, tenuous and insecure employment. It also illustrates the ways in which the state remains central to work and employment in an increasingly global world.

The capacities of union leaders and activists are grounded by union organisation and union purpose. On the one hand, as the political economy shifts, it becomes necessary to

redefine 'organisation' in relation to union capacities, in the case of cultural work and precarious work underwriting a service capability (cf. Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998; Fairbrother et al., 2003; Fairbrother and Yates, 2003). On the other hand, the importance of union leadership, union practice in supporting and servicing members and the leveraging of union capacities provides opportunities for unions to refocus their purpose, not only in relation to employers, but the state, in all its forms, nationally and internationally (Jansen, 2014; Jansen et al., 2014; Simms and Dean, 2014).

Developing union capacity and promoting the conditions for particular forms of participation are the key ingredients of active trade unionism. These conditions include the ways that union leaderships and activists frame their interests in collective terms, often reflected in processes of mobilisation (Kelly, 1998). Membership engagement and activism thus occur in those conditions where unions have secured their organisational base, framed their concerns in collective terms and can leverage their capacities in effective ways. However, 'union activism is the result of the interplay between structure (economic and political conditions) and the agency of unions themselves' (Angrave et al., 2015: 22). Such agency involves an articulation of union purpose.

An assessment

The renewal analysis to date has been partial, focusing on unions *qua* unions, and in large part failing to address unions in relation to the political economy of capitalism. The irresolvable tension is that unions are on the one hand rooted in workplaces, usually focusing on immediate work and employment questions, while on the other hand, they face challenges of a recomposed political economy of work and employment. This tension suggests a 'cycle of struggle', whereby unions have the potential to renew themselves in the on-going contest between labour and capital (Bergmann, 2002). The first step in the process of transition captured by the idea of renewal is to critically examine the dialectic between organisation, capacities and purpose. This step requires a consideration of power relations within unions. It is then possible to locate and appreciate the organisational dimension (the basis of agency) in relation to the utilisation of capabilities and resources (capacities) to realise union purpose in relation to specific political economies and objectives (Fairbrother et al., 2013: 7).

Tensions within unions apparently arise from pressures towards inclusivity and exclusivity, often characterised as proactive or reactive stances. Some argue there is a choice between a defence of past positions and more positive long-term assessments in the current political economy (Snell and Fairbrother, 2010). Locating the argument about union renewal as a *process of transition* draws out the dimensions that differentiate renewal from sclerosis (cf. Pocock, 1998; Snell and Fairbrother, 2010; see also Standing, 2014: 179–182). Thus, the next stage in the union renewal debate is to locate the dialectic of organisation, capacity and purpose as a process of transition. Such a theory of renewal is a critique in practice of the agenda for a neo-liberal political economy (see also MacDonald, 2014).

These complex possibilities emerge when the class bases of global labour markets are considered. Given that globalised labour markets increasingly are characterised by precarity, the questions for unions in the modern world have been thrown into sharp relief. While

the decline in union membership and their effective influence within advanced capitalist states became apparent in the 1980s and 1990s, it is only now that the scale and texture of the problem is clear (Standing, 2011: 11–21). The precariat is a ‘distinctive socio-economic group’, a ‘class-in-the-making’ (p. 11). It lacks ‘labour-related security’, ranging from employment to job to income and representative security (pp. 17, 18). Standing (2014) argues that trade union strategies have become broadly defensive, in relation to core jobs and the ‘public sector salariat’ (p. 179). To the extent that is so, unions have a narrow focus, principally in relation to wages, benefits and working conditions for a limited section of the working class; they fail to address the needs of the precariat. However, Standing’s implicit theory of unionism is inadequate. It is a theory that rests on a view that union purpose is ‘to interpose between employers and employees’ (p. 185). But only by questioning purpose, and thus addressing questions in relation to organisation and capacities, is it possible to develop a robust theory of unionism under contemporary capitalism.

Thus, rethinking union purpose in an integrated way extends the focus of union renewal. Such analysis highlights the importance of continuing to re-examine the different dimensions involved in union renewal. It is an integrated process involving a dialectic whereby union memberships reassess their organisation, their capacities and their purpose as collective actors. In these circumstances, unions and their confederations can evolve and develop as policy actors – for example, addressing the circumstances of transition to a low carbon economy (Snell and Fairbrother, 2011), as industrial policy actors (Coles and Fairbrother, 2013), as community focused actors (Pocock, 2011), building capabilities and using resources (Lévesque and Murray, 2013) and as transnational governance actors (Fairbrother et al., 2013; McCallum, 2013). Thus, viewing the process of union renewal as a process of transition draws attention to the on-going, incomplete and challenging trajectories in which unions often find themselves. It also highlights possible progressive futures for unions.

Over time with the routinisation of unions in capitalist political economies, organisational concerns tend to prevail, often in relation to a cautious use of capacities, with limited objectives. Moreover, as Hyman (2004) argues, this is an on-going tension and works out in complex ways involving union leadership ‘and the institutional framework within which it functions’ (p. 343; see also Connolly, 2011). How unions organise and in what ways depend on the specific circumstances and conditions of work and employment. It also depends on the political stances taken by governments towards labour and collective organisations and the ways that unions resolve how they organise, exercise their capabilities and define their purpose. Capital encourages division and competition between workers, or sections of the working class, along such lines as skill, gender, racialisation, age (youth and aged), citizenship status, and waged and non-waged labour. The specificity of these experiences and the associated identities and consciousness mean that as institutions, unions should be deconstructed rather than reified (for theoretical elaboration, see Jessop, 2001: 1230).

Conclusion

Union renewal comprises a dialectical relation between union organisation, union capacities and union purpose. These dimensions depend on each other and merge with each

other to provide the basis of collective authority and power. Hence, union renewal becomes a possibility where trade unions have an organisational basis, can exercise capacities and seek to realise their purpose in relation to the political economy in which they operate. The challenge is to give content to these dimensions in a relationship that is appropriate for the circumstances in which unions find themselves. Thus, union renewal is on-going, incomplete and partial. It is a process of transition. And so, the union renewal debate itself should be renewed. The danger of not rethinking trade unionism is that a more defensive and instrumentally focused unionism will prevail, often looking to governments for support and sustenance, around policy initiatives and defence of work and employment. In this case, unions are likely to become place-bound; insular and inward looking; defensive, unaccountable and sectional.

Analytically, the premise for evaluating union renewal should be in terms of the flux and flow of the relations of work and employment, the evolving arrangements in the political economy of capitalism. Of course, unions will suffer defeats and setbacks; they take time to rebuild, and on occasion are unable to do so. In other words, the understanding of union activity and the collective actions by unions should be comprehended as part of an on-going struggle between capital and labour in relation to the socio-economic context in which the struggle occurs – locally, in regions, nationally and internationally. This is a dynamic and on-going struggle, not a static and capital-driven process.

The potential of trade unionism within the present conjuncture arises precisely through efforts to reinvigorate and reformulate the relations that define trade unionism. Thus, trade unionism is and will remain a core dimension of the challenge to the state and capital. Nonetheless, there is also an on-going danger of co-optation and compromise. This is the struggle in and of trade unionism in the current political economy.

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