


# Book Review: Trade Unions in Western Europe: Hard Times, Hard Choices

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*In this book the authors attempt to provide an account of how trade unionism has evolved in ten west European countries, the main recent challenges that unions have faced, and their responses. This work will certainly make a fundamental contribution to the debate about the future role and functions of unions as the authors provide key insights in their attempt to identify how unions can learn to attract new members and enhance their strategic capacities, writes **Pietro Manzella**.*



**Trade Unions in Western Europe: Hard Times, Hard Choices. Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick and Richard Hyman. Oxford University Press. October 2013.**

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**Trade Unions  
in Western Europe**  
*Hard Times, Hard Choices*



REBECCA GUMBRELL-MCCORMICK  
& RICHARD HYMAN



Are unions still relevant actors in the twenty-first century? Can they still give 'voice' to employees? If so, to what extent can they do this? What is the trade union response to globalization?

The answer to these and other questions concerning trade unions is to be found in the latest work by [Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick](#) and [Richard Hyman](#). *Trade Unions in Western Europe: Hard Times, Hard Choices* sets its sights on the changing functions of unions in western countries in the twenty-first century. In tackling this contentious issue, these two influential scholars supply convincing arguments to explain why the role of unions is still decisive in today's industrial relations arena. The study is the result of a research project funded by the Danish Social Research Council, which enabled the authors to carry out fieldwork on union responses to globalization. In this connection, a comparative analysis was undertaken which focused on both larger and smaller countries representing each of the four widely acknowledged varieties of west European capitalism. This comparison included Sweden and Denmark for the Nordic model; Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium for the central European model; France and Italy representing southern Europe; and Britain and Ireland for liberal market economies. Field research consisted of, but was not limited to, interviews with officials at the level of union federations and sectoral unions, in addition to academics and informed observers. Of the eight chapters making up the book, Chapter 3, "Hard Renewing Power Resources: Recruitment, Representation and Mobilization", and Chapter 8, "Hard Choices: Reconciling Strategy and Democracy", stand out as particularly riveting. In Chapter 3, trade union recruitment, representation, and mobilization are seen as intertwined activities, all part of the effort to stem declining membership. Especially engrossing is the section on recruitment and the ways trade unions in the ten countries surveyed have reacted to falling membership. In some cases the unions have taken a passive stance, while in others they have made the utmost effort to retain and attract members. By way of example, the authors identified a commitment on the part of unions to recruit workers

on precarious contracts – who mainly consist of migrants, women and young people – also by opposing initiatives aimed at extending the scope of agency work and contracting-out. Union resistance to precarious employment in many cases rebounded on workers in atypical work, for their employment status often precluded them from becoming members. Some examples are given in this connection. The German *IG Metall* “traditionally refused to organize temporary agency workers on the grounds that this would give their status ‘legitimacy’” (p. 34) and the same happened in Italy, France, and Belgium. Over time, the unions appreciated that in order to maintain power and their ability to act, workers in atypical forms of work should be allowed to become members, and they have responded accordingly. This means presenting themselves as modern champions of precarious workers, by resorting to new modes of communication (especially information technology). With this approach, even the most reluctant workers seem to have changed their minds and are now considering union membership, mainly due to the adverse economic climate.



Trade union march against cuts. Credit: [xpgomes12](#). CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The concluding chapter, “Hard Choices: Reconciling Strategy and Democracy”, is also deserving of consideration, for it investigates two persisting themes of the book, ‘strategy’ and ‘democracy’, and the question of their compatibility. In the authors’ view, democracy is a contested notion, and its meaning tends to change across disciplines and countries. Unions are democratic organizations, and as such they rely on the legitimacy of their mandate to work effectively. Trade unions are defined as “intermediary organizations” (p. 123) thus their legitimacy is the result of “an agenda which is externally defined” on the one hand, and the result of proactive intervention on the other hand, all the more so in times of crisis. The concept of ‘strategy’ is likewise ambiguous and often used loosely. Originally a military metaphor, strategy refers to the planning of a campaign or war, which is contrasted to the tactics deployed in a single battle. As its literal origin suggests, the notion of strategy is closely related to leadership, though this may cause unease to those engaged in building union democracy. Leadership is an essential condition to enhance participatory democracy and deliver positive outcomes. It requires an ability to evaluate opportunities for intervention and also to develop policies and union initiatives. As the authors insist, trade unions in many European countries possess this quality, mainly as a result of “inherited identities and ideologies” (p. 124). Reconciling strategy and democracy in trade unionism is certainly possible, by means of *representative* democracy, with leaders who are free to take informed policy decisions with little accountability to their members. In an alternative perspective, since effective action requires member to be proactive, their identification with union goals and methods is essential. In this sense, union democracy becomes *participatory*.

*Trade Unions in Western Europe: Hard Times, Hard Choices* is an outstanding and pioneering work. It will certainly make a fundamental contribution to the debate about the future role and functions of unions. Rebecca Gumbrell-

McCormick and Richard Hyman provide key insights in their attempt to identify how unions can learn to attract new members and enhance their strategic capacities. This means a more systematic and generalized effort to develop innovative responses to hard times, nationally and internationally. Addressing academics and IR scholars, *Trade Unions in Western Europe* will also provide insights for IR practitioners, unionists, and non-specialist readers. Its practical approach makes this book an essential read for all those concerned with unionism who seek to find out more about future prospects for trade unions in Europe.

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