



Richard Hyman

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UNION RENEWAL: A VIEW FROM EUROPE

Richard Hyman

I approach Dan Clawson's book with two questions in mind: what can readers in very different national contexts learn from an analysis rooted exclusively in the USA; and conversely, how might an external perspective complement (and perhaps alter) Clawson's insider focus?

Across Europe there has been extensive discussion for over a decade, in parallel with similar debates in the USA, on the themes of trade union innovation, modernisation and revival. How far has this been reflected in real transformations of unions and union movements themselves? Experience has been uneven and largely disappointing. A somewhat depressing conclusion might be that a sustained process of radical renewal requires two preconditions: a powerful external challenge which demonstrates that established routines and presuppositions are no longer viable; and an internal organisational capacity sufficient to formulate and carry through new strategies. Unfortunately such a combination of external and internal supports for transformation is rare. One lesson of the comparative study by Martin and Ross (1999) of European labour movements seems to be that many have not yet been jolted out of their long-established complacency, while many others have been too severely weakened to reinvent themselves as an effective force. The British trade union movement is one of the few (another, very different, is the Dutch) which has suffered badly in the past quarter-century but has retained sufficient membership, resources and public status to reform itself substantially. Union density in Britain has roughly halved over this period, under the impact of drastic economic restructuring, a legislative assault and employer antagonism (though relatively mild by US standards), but remains at just under 30%: roughly where American unions stood several decades ago.

Across western Europe as a whole (further east, the story is much more grim), union density is almost universally above the current US level, with rates of over 80% in Sweden and Denmark. And the movements at the bottom of the scale (in France and Spain with roughly 9% and 15% respectively) benefit, as in most of Europe, from a contradictory mix of two factors which enhance their influence. First, their legitimacy as representatives of a broad working-class constituency, even though the great majority of workers are not members, gives them the capacity for mass mobilisation (occasionally in the form of general strikes) which results in significant national influence. Second, legal and socio-political supports give them a public status as 'social partners' – a complex and ambiguous concept, as I have argued elsewhere (Hyman 2001: 47-50) – which reduces their dependence on membership numbers. In addition, across western Europe – with Britain the notable exception – employers tend to negotiate collectively, and multi-employer agreements tend to apply (sometimes as a result of legal extension mechanisms) to firms with few if any union members employed. Hence France with under 10% union density has over 90% bargaining coverage. And this in turn reflects a more fundamental European characteristic (from which Britain, again, diverges): labour markets are far less like markets than in the USA, there is an extensive web of social and statutory regulation, and the autonomy of employers is thus significantly circumscribed. Societally, to an important extent unions work with the grain.

Nevertheless, many of the themes of Clawson's book resonate with European experience. In most countries, unions have been losing members for a decade or more (though in many cases this trend is relatively recent and the losses have been modest – so far). Neo-liberal globalisation is widely perceived as a serious threat to the 'European social model'; though whether economic integration within the

European Union represents an obstacle to, or reinforcement of, such tendencies is a topic of considerable debate. The labour force is becoming more differentiated and more segmented than in the past (though the contours of race, ethnicity and migration, while clearly associated as in America with disadvantage, are shaped very differently). Gender issues are firmly on the trade union agenda, though how far this is reflected in altered priorities and structures varies very considerably across and within countries. All this means that there is much in *The Next Upsurge* of relevance for trade unionists in Europe, even though direct comparability is limited.

Clawson's core argument – the theme which links what would otherwise be a rather disconnected set of essays – is that any labour revival will be explosive, not incremental; that it will be driven from below, articulating 'the concerns, hopes and fears of millions of ordinary workers' (34); and that it will require the transformation of unions as institutions into a social movement. I have sympathy with all these positions, but feel that their presentation is often too one-sided. In my discussion I will argue that time and place shape both the need for and the possibility of explosive growth; that despite the importance of initiative from below, spontaneous and decentralised action is not enough; and that a 'fusion' (194) between unions and social movements is neither possible nor desirable. I also make some comments on the question of politics – largely neglected in Clawson's analysis.

It is certainly true that trade union expansion has historically often been based on an explosive upsurge such as Clawson anticipates and advocates. This has been particularly notable in the case of new unions seeking to recruit and represent previously non-unionised groups of workers in the face of extreme employer hostility. Evidently the current situation in the USA matches historical precedent in many respects, and the upsurge scenario may well be the most plausible. Theoretically, it meshes well with the model of perceived injustice leading to mobilisation and resistance recently proposed by Kelly (1998: 27-33). Yet if 'new' collective organisation is almost always insurgent, the position becomes more complex if we seek to draw more general recipes for union revitalisation and expansion. If we ignore the state-controlled 'trade unions' of the old eastern bloc, the most impressive record of sustained membership growth in the world was in Sweden, with density rising from roughly 10% in the early twentieth century to over 90% in the 1990s; but the process was one of sustained incremental expansion rather than 'upsurge'. At the other extreme, May 1968 in France was one of the most remarkable instances of mass worker (and student) mobilisation in modern industrialised capitalism, but union density barely increased even in the short term, and soon commenced its sustained decline. Hence 'upsurge' is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of union expansion; and moreover we should also note that if union membership can sometimes increase explosively, it can also decline no less rapidly. Explosive growth all too often proves short-lived.

How can we make sense of these contrasting experiences? Part of the answer lies in the familiar distinction between movement and organisation. For Clawson, this is presented in terms of two contrasting types of social entity: 'the "union" is a precisely circumscribed institution,... the "labor movement" is a more fluid formation whose very existence depends on high-risk activism, mass solidarity and collective experiences with transformational possibilities' (24). I do not find this formulation very helpful. What is at issue is not two different modes of collectivity, but rather a dualism or tension within *any* form of worker collectivism. As Herberg (1943: 406) insisted long ago, any trade union is *at one and the same time* 'a businesslike service organization, operating a variety of agencies under a complicated system of industrial relations' and 'an expression and vehicle of the historical movement of the submerged laboring masses for social recognition and democratic self-

determination.... The union, as an institution, is thus in the grip of a very real contradiction.’ The balance between these contradictory identities may of course differ markedly between unions, and may shift substantially over time. But the dualism itself is universal.

There are two main reasons. First, this side of the socialist revolution (which, if it comes, will certainly not be a re-run of 1917), any realisation of workers’ aspirations will involve compromise. Thus transformation will be bounded; Luxemburg’s *Mass Strike* cannot serve as a guide for labour movement action today, whether in Europe or the USA. Second, mobilisation ebbs and flows: unceasing high-risk activism and mass solidarity result in burn-out or in a counteroffensive by employers and the state, or both. Gramsci recognised this almost a century ago: trade unionism and the associated regulatory apparatus which it implemented in the world of work were the consolidation of past struggles, the means of generalising fragmented victories and defending these when the wave of insurgency ebbed. He defined this institutionalisation as an ‘industrial legality’, which he termed ‘a great victory for the working class, but... not the ultimate and definitive victory’ (1977: 65). Indeed, in times of genuine upsurge, ‘industrial legality’ was an inhibiting constraint. We may see parallels with Gramsci’s reflections on Italian experience in Mills’ analysis of the dialectic of mobilisation and routinisation of workers’ action three decades later in the USA (1948: 8): ‘the labor leader is a manager of discontent’. The task of sustaining collective commitment and organisational effectiveness – within the limits imposed by a hostile environment – required a delicate alternation between encouraging militancy and containing it. (As any union organiser will explain, it is harder to end a strike successfully than to begin one.)

It is evident that Clawson is unhappy with the notion of leadership; he quotes (198) EV Debs, speaking in 1905: ‘too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves.’ Hence suspicion of the principle of leadership has a long and honourable tradition: ever since the rise of syndicalism, what *The Miners’ Next Step* of 1912 called the ‘bad side of leadership’ has been systematically exposed and rejected by many on the left. As Michels put it in the same period, ‘who says organisation, says oligarchy’. Yet is it enough to rely on grassroots spontaneity in order for workers to emancipate themselves?

I would argue that leadership – and the institutional framework within which it functions – is indispensable for a sustained trade union revival. This for at least four reasons. First, it is necessary in order to *generalise* localised advances. Clawson admits (89) that the success stories which he recounts are exceptional; yet we have no overall map of opportunities and obstacles. His assumption is seemingly that a process of bottom-up imitation and emulation will suffice to extend the scope of victorious initiatives, with union centres at most distributing the resources to make this possible. I would argue, on the contrary, that localised autonomy alone is a recipe for fragmentation of policy and action and is unlikely to lead spontaneously to the inter-group solidarity which is essential if an employer counter-attack is to be resisted. To be effective, rank-and-file democracy requires centralised coordination and articulation.

Second, leadership is needed in order to *consolidate* the gains achieved in moments of activism. Experience shows that the vitality of collective self-organisation and self-activity is precarious; it can be shattered by defeat but can also atrophy once the euphoria of victory recedes. For the long haul, collectivism requires a more institutionalised support.

A third function of leadership is that of *intelligence*. In part, an organisational apparatus is the repository of a kind of historical memory, an understanding of past successes and past failures without which activists are all too likely to repeat the mistakes of earlier struggles. To some extent, intelligence involves specialist expertise in research, education and information-gathering, and the means to disseminate knowledge throughout the organisation (which is to some degree a question of resources). It is also (and perhaps more importantly) a matter of the degree to which, at all levels within union movements, knowledge is seen as an essential component of union power.

This links to a fourth dimension: *strategic capacity*. The latter may be defined as the ability to assess opportunities for intervention; to anticipate, rather than merely react to, changing circumstances; to frame coherent policies; and to implement these effectively. It is not easy to theorise or to specify concretely the components and causal dynamics of such capacity, but it is obvious to any informed observer that some trade union movements possess this quality to a far greater degree than others – as Ganz (2000) has demonstrated in his study of Californian farmworkers. Effective strategy depends on organisational structures and organisational traditions which link knowledge to action through analysis of circumstances, evaluation of alternative options and planning of objectives and forms of intervention.

Is leadership incompatible with democracy? As Barker et al. insist (2001: 15-17), it is crucial to differentiate between *authoritarian* and *authoritative* leadership, and between leadership as *hierarchy* and as *process* or *function*: 'leadership is exercised at all manner of levels and locations... and not only by those obviously designated as "leaders"'. Gramsci's notion of the 'organic intellectual' is relevant here: grassroots activists may develop a breadth of information and analytical capacity which distinguish without distancing them from their colleagues. Hence there can be a complex dialectic between leadership and democracy, which should certainly not be regarded as simple opposites. Union democracy clearly requires adequate scope for all categories of members to shape the priorities and programmes of their organisations. But it also requires appropriate *structures* for participation, involvement and self-activity at rank-and-file level. As feminist activists came to recognise several decades ago, the outcome is otherwise the 'tyranny of structurelessness': an excess of spontaneity, a deficit of direction. In my view, 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches should not be seen as strategic alternatives but rather as contradictory elements in any route to union revival. What is necessary, in the terms used by Offe and Wiesenathal (1985), is a 'dialogical' relationship between processes of leadership and grassroots initiative. Too often, Clawson appears to treat these as mutually exclusive.

There are interesting affinities between my argument here and the important recent exploration by Lévesque and Murray (2003) of the means of refashioning trade union power despite the challenges of economic internationalisation. They propose a triangulation between three elements: the strategic capacity of workplace union organisation, its ability to develop a proactive agenda rather than simply reacting to management's initiatives; the internal democratic life ('internal solidarity'), which enables members to identify with, or in the current jargon to 'own' the policies pursued on their behalf; and 'external solidarity', the degree to which broader national (and international) organisational resources and commonalities of interest shape local priorities and counteract the pressures towards competitive undercutting of standards. I have some reservations with this analysis, insofar as the idea of workplace union organisation is the product of the old, 'normal' employment relationship. Clawson is absolutely right to insist that trade unionism has increasingly

to accommodate, in both its agenda of action and in its processes of policy formation, those in peripheral labour market situations with no stable workplace identification. At the other extreme, one should add, are growing categories of worker with more advanced skills and competences but a clearer career capacity which is, again, detached from a single workplace and employer. Nevertheless, despite my reservations with the analysis of Lévesque and Murray, they are right to stress that the pursuit of a virtuous circle of proactive capacity, active democracy and higher-level strategic support has to form the basis for any effective strategy for labour.

This brings me to the question of the relationship between trade unions and social movements. Though his treatment is at times ambivalent, Clawson argues explicitly (194) that alliances are not enough: labour 'must fuse with these movements'. While I sympathise with his rationale, I have considerable reservations. Indeed a rigid separation between the concerns of trade unions and of other movements limits the efficacy of each; as Clawson rightly insists, trade unionists do not draw clear boundaries between their interests as workers and as tenants, or as women, or as ethnic minorities – or indeed, one might add, as parents, or future pensioners, or voters. Nevertheless, it is the labour market and the employment relationship which define the core incentive to unionise; and it is for trade unionists themselves to determine how widely the scope of union-relevant concerns will be set. Undoubtedly this scope has extended significantly in many countries in recent decades, but it has done so through debate and dialogue. To short-circuit the process of winning over those resistant to an expanded agenda is to risk internal division and a loss of collective strength.

A second reason for scepticism is that, as Clawson himself concedes (22), union members expect material benefits in the here and now, which entails acceptance of 'compromise and small victories'. And I would add that there is no *necessary* reason why this should result in the construction of 'something approximating the old-style political machine': for example, the studies by Beynon (1972) of the dynamics of shop steward representation in the Ford Halwood plant, and by Batstone et al. (1977) of a British tractor factory, showed that a shrewd assessment of the limits of available short-term gains could be complemented by active debate and democratic accountability. Conversely, Clawson shows that many social movements rely on dramatic initiatives by often small minorities, and have little desire or incentive to compromise. One may add that many social movements have been torn apart when some elements do agree to negotiate to achieve partial gains, while others insist on fidelity to their maximal objectives.

How can unions relate effectively to other social movements? In his thought-provoking book *Beyond Individualism*, Piore (1995) has suggested a new understanding of trade unions, first as 'communities of action' (organisations that provide a context for individual self-realisation), and second as 'borderland institutions' (which bridge the ideals and perspectives of distinct social or cultural groups). Unions must engage, perhaps symbiotically, with (usually single-issue) social movements, but need to maintain their autonomous accountability to the worker constituency which defines their identity and purpose.

Let me end by remarking briefly on a silence in *The Next Upsurge* which any European reader must find surprising. The issue of politics receives at most half a dozen passing references. Now trade unions are not political parties, any more than they are single-issue campaign organisations; but everywhere in Europe, it is taken for granted that to realise their core objectives they must relate in an articulated fashion to the political process at every level, must engage with the local and national (and increasingly, supranational) state apparatus, must attempt to achieve a

regulatory regime which facilitates their day-to-day activity in defending and advancing workers' conditions and workers' rights on the ground. If Clawson is almost wholly silent on the politics of labour political action, this may reflect a distinctive American pessimism: both main US parties are irredeemably committed to a neo-liberal agenda, any third-party initiative seems merely to draw votes from the lesser evil in terms of attitudes towards labour. But in a broader perspective, the challenge of labour politics cannot be ignored.

Politics becomes all the more important in an increasingly neo-liberal world, when successful pursuit of what the ILO calls 'decent work' may simply make existing jobs uncompetitive. Is regulated capitalism any longer possible? If so, how can it be (re)constructed? There is no easy answer, and a serious confrontation with this key challenge would demand far more space than is available here. But what is at issue is a strategic bridge between the local and the global, between the faces of trade unions as bargaining agent and as socio-political movement. It involves a redefinition of what is meant by labour internationalism. As Dølvik argues (2003: 111), 'this dilemma cannot be circumvented by syndicalist appeals to global labour activism'. More than ever before, the fight against neo-liberal globalisation demands strategic leadership.

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