

Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, Richard Hyman, *Trade Unions in Western Europe. Hard Times, Hard Choices*  
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For decades, and even more since the onset of the economic crisis, trade unions have been under pressure, have been on the defensive. They have lost power resources, first of all with the decline of membership density, that in some countries has fallen drastically and almost continuously. Also to be considered the weakening of collective bargaining, the decline of unions influence on governments and also of their public reputation. These tendencies have been driven by different factors, from the intensification of cross-national competition, to the fragmentation of production processes and labour, to the dominance of neoliberal ideas, that have made labour market deregulation, decentralization of collective bargaining and austerity measures the priorities.

Even so, even in the current «hard times» (and stimulated by these), trade unions have often developed new thinking, readjusting or significantly modifying their approaches and practices, sometimes embracing «alternatives to their time-honoured traditions». Innovations to the representative action and effective responses to the old and new challenges are then possible. And unions remain relevant socio-economic actors (and also an important subject for scientific studies); still providing collective voice to employees, constituting a form of countervailing power to the dominance of capital and a «sword of justice» (Flanders 1970), defending the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. This is the recurrent optimistic key message of the book of Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman.

The authors examine the challenges facing trade unions and their responses in ten countries, grouped according to the four commonly identified varieties of capitalism in Western Europe. Such an overview is based on the findings of an articulated and in-depth four-years research, carried out through interviews with key unions representatives, academic experts, informed observers and through a meticulous analysis of documents and secondary literature. Challenges are similar in all the countries, but may have different implications, depending on the institutional context. And the same is for trade unions responses, even though – as authors point out – not always in a neat way; in this respect, differences are also affected by unions power resources, identities, understandings of their mission.

Engaging with the debate on revitalization, authors describe trade unions initiatives on five fundamental themes: recruitment, representation and mobilisation, including organising experiences; restructurings, i.e. mergers and organisational redesigns; collective bargaining; relations with government and political parties, alliances and collaborations with other organisations and renewing of the «moral» power resources, i.e. defining a social vision and communicating it; international level actions and approaches to internationalism. The analysis emphasizes the best practices, but gives also details on failed experiences and on progressive adjustments of the different ‘instruments’, considering the dilemmas unions had/have to face, the context of conditions that enhanced or hindered the specific responses. In this way, the book provides a very interesting reading for researchers, trade unionists and policymakers.

Authors insist on the importance of the «complementary power resources», not necessarily new but not sufficiently appreciated in the past by trade unionists. They are first of all the discursive and communicative ones. In a sort of «battle of ideas», unions have to convince their mission is a better and more democratic society. Besides, they have to contrast the «decline of the public discourse on work» and on quality of work (Crouch 2012). The other complementary power resources, as already said, are logistical and collaborative, i.e. alliances and cooperative relationships with other groups, movements, organisations.

Anyway, at the end of the book, Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, returning on all the themes, remind that there are no simple and unique solutions for trade unions; extensions/adjustments of their representative action,

innovative responses, alternative practices are important, but unions have to adopt a more strategic approach, a long-term planning, a wider coordination, selecting priorities and making, if necessary, «hard choices». Closely linked, trade unions have to make a more systematic effort to incorporate the multiple aspirations and interests of the today's increasingly fragmented workforce, by ensuring fist of all internal democratic processes.

(Marcello Pedaci)

## References

- Crouch C. (2012), *Il declino delle relazioni industriali nell'odierno capitalismo*, in «Stato e mercato», 94: 55-75.
- Flanders A. (1970), *Management and Unions*, London: Faber.