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**Union identities in post-industrial society:
evidence from the UK**

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Dr Melanie Simms
Associate Professor
Industrial Relations Research Unit
University of Warwick
Coventry, UK
CV4 7AL

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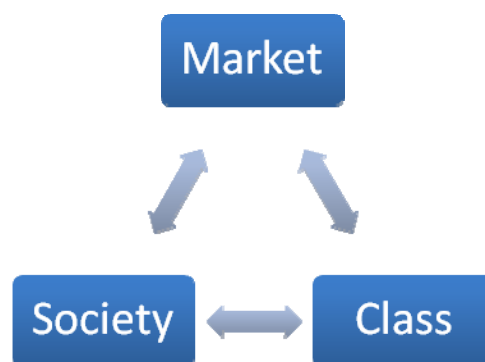
Introduction

The late 1990s and early 2000s provoked an upswing in enthusiasm and confidence in the prospects for union renewal and revitalisation in the UK and beyond amongst both the academic and practitioner communities (for an overview, see the edited collections by Gall 2003 and 2006). After more than a decade of sustained investment and engagement in a range of strategies, the UK economy is entering what seems likely to be a lengthy period of fiscal crisis, lower economic growth, increased inflation, and quite probably long-term effects on the labour market. Evidence from previous recessions suggests that this combination of events is likely to present unions with a far more challenging external context than has been experienced since the start of the long boom from the mid-1990s to the financial crisis of 2008-9 (Gallie *et al* 1996). Thus, it is a logical point at which to assess the efforts of unions during the 15 year period of steady employment growth, low inflation and very low unemployment.

The paper takes as a basic assumption Hyman's view that building solidarity and the expression of collective interests is at the heart of what trade unions seek to do. Further, that this is, and always has been, a socially constructed process demanding a vision of the purpose of such activity. In his various writings, Hyman explicitly acknowledges the process of the social construction of 'working class interests' and the important role that trade unions have always played in this (1997, 1999). He argues that the notion of worker interests rests on "imagined solidarities" (1999; 94) which have traditionally privileged the interests of one group of workers (skilled, white, male, full-time, manual workers) above others (unskilled, ethnic minority, women, atypical and service workers). But because he stresses the extent to which "through their own internal processes of communication, discussion and debate – the 'mobilization of bias' – unions can help shape workers' own definitions of their individual and collective interests" (1999; 96), he is relatively optimistic that unions can therefore "re-imagine" interests

and, specifically, notions of solidarity, to reflect the diverse interests of a changing workforce and membership. The contemporary challenge is, therefore, to construct solidarities that respond to the changing context of work, employment and society; specifically post-industrial labour issues and the challenge of the recent recession.

A central concept in this paper is Hyman's typology of union identities. Conceptualising comparative differences between trade union movements across Europe, Hyman (2001) uses the notion of the "geometry" of trade unionism to argue that trade unions in Europe (and perhaps more widely) have three distinctive ideological orientations; as labour market regulators (market), as vehicles of raising workers' status and promoting social justice (society), and as schools of war in class struggle (class). Whilst all unions face in all three directions and cannot afford to ignore any of the orientations, particular histories and social frameworks lead to different tensions emerging in different institutional contexts. And, centrally, different union movements in different institutional contexts have had a tendency to prioritise different combinations of identities. The three vertices represent 'ideal types' of trade unions which are rarely, if ever, seen in practice thus leading Hyman (2001: 4) to assert that "Most union identities and ideologies are located *within* the triangle...[and] in most cases, actually existing unions have tended to incline towards an often contradictory admixture of two of the three ideal types." British trade unions, he argues, have tended towards the market-class axis with the centrality of free collective bargaining being the underpinning premise of union's identity in the UK.



Whilst the market-class axis is a useful analytical tool for British trade unionism throughout much of the 20th century, Hyman acknowledges that the legal, political, economic and social challenges of the 1980s and 1990s and beyond have left British unions searching for identity and ideology. The market-class axis that underpins voluntarism and free collective bargaining has been profoundly challenged as the institutional and ideological frameworks for pursuing developing and reinforcing this identity have been demolished. Consequently, British unions have been searching for alternative conceptualisations of how to behave and how to understand their future role. This paper explores the central ideas about union identity underpinning union renewal efforts in the past decade.

In order to do this, four particular initiatives have been selected: partnership, organising, legal mobilisation, and union learning initiatives,¹. Those with knowledge of the UK context will quickly spot that these are the four most high profile renewal initiatives in the UK union movement over that period. They have been selected because of the attention given to them and the investment made in them by UK unions (and, in the case of union learning initiatives, the UK state). Each of the renewal initiatives holds within it different ideas about key questions of union identity and collective interest representation. Thus, it is possible for each one to ask the following questions. First, *whose* interests are central to these a vision of a renewed union movement? Debates about union renewal have tended to place different emphases on different groups, so having a clear view of whose interests unions are seeking to represent is important for understanding more clearly what they 'imagine' future solidarities to be based. Second, these initiatives vary very profoundly in ideas about *how* collective interests may most effectively be represented. Bringing together these two questions allows us to see very different ideas about the 'imagined' future of the trade union movement and the effort that unions put in to expressing and promoting those different ideas.

¹ At first glance it may seem that the state-funded Union Modernisation initiative is an obvious omission from this list. However, early evaluation of the Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) (Stuart et al 2010) indicates that, unlike the four initiatives that form the focus of the paper, there is little central underpinning rationale across the varied projects that have been funded from the UMF.

Of course, these debates and initiatives take place against a backdrop of enormous changes in the UK workforce and society more generally over the preceding decades. This is important because historical ideas about solidarities and the identity of the UK trade union movement were formed in a very different social context. It is often assumed that in order to represent workers' huge variety of interests in contemporary society, unions need to move away from old ideas about how to build collective interests and how those interests can effectively be represented. The fact that we have seen developments such as the changing patterns of women's work, changes in patterns of immigration, changes to the relative importance of the service and manufacturing sectors add up to a context in which not only are the jobs people do very different from the past, the people who do them have fewer immediately shared common experiences. And here it is worth repeating a central point: unions have always faced the challenge of condensing a wide and heterogeneous set of interests into a small coherent set of collective interests and demands. Unions are effective agents in this process. Precisely what they do – and always have done - is to take a large group of workers and identify and express the interests that they share. That is not to say that trade unions never represent the interests of a minority group. Trade union history is full of examples of campaigns that are of little immediate relevance to the working lives of the majority of their members, but which have been judged to be important for unions to support. But it does help explain why some issues have a tendency to fall off the union agenda despite the concern of a significant, but minority, group of members (Heery 2006).

Some commentators have used these social changes to develop an argument that trade unions are therefore no longer relevant in contemporary society. But the fact still remains that workers are subordinate to capital in the labour process and evidence from previous recessions strongly suggests that the 'sweating' of labour is likely to intensify under difficult economic and fiscal conditions (McGovern et al 2008). So it becomes particularly relevant to reflect on how unions are building (or attempting to build?) collective solidarity in the period since the economic crisis of 2008. The current fiscal crisis also puts under severe pressure the heartlands of the trade union movement in the public sector. An optimistic analysis might suggest that there is

increased scope to argue for common interest between workers in the face of a crisis of capitalism. A more pessimistic view might argue that the huge variety of experiences of work in post-industrial society mean that unions will struggle to find a set of collective interests that appeal sufficiently widely.

Renewal activity is empirically important because it reveals what unions understand to be the purpose of that activity. When they engage in renewal activity, unions need some kind of 'vision' or underpinning idea about what they seek to achieve as a consequence (whether or not they are successful in achieving those ends). In other words, it allows us to 'see' what unions think their future purpose will be. It allows us insight into how they understand their future role(s) and how they intend to get there. Further, it reveals which interests unions seek to represent, thus allowing us to explore who unions understand to be the future membership, and how they aspire to represent them. The central argument presented here is that academic debates about union renewal in the UK have given very little attention to questions of how renewal efforts relate to the collective interests can be developed and represented in post-industrial society. I argue that the socio-economic context in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 presents even more profound challenges to this process than the UK union movement has experienced in the previous decade. Failure is not, however, inevitable. Not only is in theory possible for unions to "re-imagine solidarities" (Hyman 1999), evidence from organising campaigns (Simms 2007) shows that unions *are* capable of framing and giving voice to collective interests in a post-industrial context and that there remains a demand for collective representation on employment relations issues from both workers and, to some degree, from managers. Using the framework of trade union identity proposed by Hyman (1994, 2001), the paper examines the four central renewal initiatives (partnership, organising, legal mobilisation, and union learning initiatives,) and argues that competing ideas about union renewal are underpinned by very different assumptions about which interests can and should be represented and how that process should happen. The discussion sections then argues that this lack of a coherent vision for the future, and the conflicting ideas about future union identities helps explain the very limited impact of these renewal efforts.

The research

This paper uses data from a longitudinal study of union renewal activity starting in 1996 and continuing to the present. Over that time, interviews have been conducted with over 250 key decision makers, officers, and other actors (organisers, workplace representatives etc.) throughout the trade union movement. This data was initially designed to study the emerging phenomenon of union organising. But over the period of 14 years, many of our interviewees and the unions and campaigns we have observed reflect broader changes in thinking about union renewal more widely. This paper uses this data to reveal information relating not just to a range of renewal activity but in particular to the ideas and strategies underpinning those activities. Periods of observation have been undertaken at peak level (TUC) and within individual unions and campaigns. This empirical work has been undertaken by the author and colleagues as part of a close research team. I am, obviously, very grateful to the research team and, in particular to Professor Ed Heery and Dr Jane Holgate for allowing the use of the data for this broader analysis. Documentary evidence such as policy documents, position papers etc. have been collected and analysed. Used as an empirical source alongside published debates and evidence relating to alternative strategies and initiatives, this enables us to assess ideas and initiatives relating to renewal within union movement since the mid-1990s. In addition, evaluation reports and summary articles by other scholars are used and cited appropriately.

UK union renewal initiatives

The paper focuses on the UK because it allows us to compare specific union renewal initiatives within a single institutional context. This is extremely helpful because it allows us to 'hold constant' many of the factors that might reasonably be hypothesised to influence union renewal activity such as changes in membership levels, particular structural patterns of representation, the political and economic context etc. However, a danger of focusing on only one country is that some of the meanings of particular words or ideas may not easily translate across national contexts. So, for example, the notion of 'partnership' in the UK is a very particular one that does not equate with, for example, notions of 'social partnership' in many

other EU countries, for example, Germany. Similarly, organising activity in the UK is not exactly congruent with organising activity in the USA because of the different institutional, legal and political contexts. Nonetheless, by focusing on a single country context, we are able to identify particular dynamics that are important in the process of building solidarities and collective interests.

This section of the paper outlines the four main union renewal strategies seen in the UK over the past decade and argues that each have a very different logic and rationale about the perceived 'vision' of a renewed trade union movement. This is important in the process of building solidarity and collective interests because it influences *whose* interests are expressed and *how* those interests are expressed which, in turn, rests on competing ideas about the ideational work that unions need to do in order to identify and express those interests. These strategies have been empirically identified as the capturing the main initiatives of UK unions in the past decade. As explained in the following sections, they have enjoyed support from different sections of the trade union movement at different points over that period and provide very different ideas about what a renewed trade union movement might 'look like'. What is notable, however, is the relative ineffectiveness of any of them in securing effective change at aggregate level, and this paper argues that this is largely because of a lack of a coherent notion of where the future UK union movement might fit in the triangle of union identities discussed above.

Partnership

Throughout the 1990s, the notion of 'partnership' became extremely fashionable in UK employment relations with a range of different assertions about the potential for mutual gains between employers and unions that could emerge from an essentially consensual company-level relationship (see Stuart and Martinez Lucio 2005 for a useful overview of debates from a number of perspectives). Although it was robustly criticised (amongst many others Kelly 1996, Danford et al 2002), the idea took hold within the UK union movement as providing the possibility for renewal and revitalisation. In particular, the hope was that in building a strong

relationship with individual employers, day-to-day employment relations difficulties could be overcome and a spirit of mutual respect could develop. Central to this notion is that the interests of employers and employees can, at least in principle, be brought closer together and some degree of common interests between employees and employers can be identified. Most writing on partnership (IPA 2010, Stuart and Martinez Lucio 2005) recognises that interests can rarely be completely reconciled, but stress that the aspiration of a successful partnership arrangement between a union and an employer is to develop a spirit of mutual trust within which compromises can be made through negotiation and bargaining.

So, *whose* interests are seen as the focus of renewal through partnership initiatives? Primarily those of the established core of the workforce for whom recognition for bargaining rights has already been established. To a certain degree, employer interests are also integrated into this view so that the success of partnership rests largely on ensuring that the employer sees the union as a credible and legitimate representative of workers' interests. And *how* are those interests represented? The UK focus on workplace or company-level partnership ensures that the primary mechanism for negotiating and discussing differences of interest is collective bargaining or consultation (see Stuart and Martinez Lucio 2005 for a range of useful case studies).

In short, the partnership agenda shifts UK unions firmly towards the 'market' axis of Hyman's typology. Underpinning ideas about partnership is the notion that by working together constructively, employers and unions can engage in effective collective bargaining to regulate the terms and conditions of employment within the organisation. Unions may or may not then choose to seek to extend these kinds of arrangements to competitor firms, although it is notable that the most prominent union pursuing this strategy – the retail and distribution union, Usdaw – has attempted to expand this approach beyond the 'flagship' agreement with the supermarket chain Tesco and into the retail sector more widely. Although largely unsuccessful, this does present evidence of a strategy to attempt to develop a wider regulation of the sectoral labour market.

What is notably missing from the partnership agenda as it has been expressed in the UK context is either a notion of 'class' i.e. trade unions as organisations with any ambition or potential to transform the structures of the capitalist labour process, or of 'society' i.e. trade unions as the legitimate voice of working people in debates about how society should be organised and in whose interests. The absence of the 'class' identity marks partnership out from the historical emphasis on collective bargaining that dominated the development of UK trade unionism. The absence of a discussion about 'social partnership' i.e. unions being involved in partnership bipartite or tripartite arrangements at levels above the firm, differentiates the UK partnership agenda from that of other countries, notably Germany. The former is explained largely by the fact that the language of partnership emerged as a very explicit rejection of previous perceptions of trade unionism. From the early 1990s onwards, partnership was explicitly promoted as an alternative to oppositional forms of trade unionism that was perceived to have dominated union identities previously (see, for example, Ackers and Payne (1998), but also documents such as the foreword – written by Tony Blair – of the *Fairness at Work* White Paper (1998) that preceded the development of statutory measures to grant trade union recognition). The absence of the 'social' identity is largely explained by the lack of institutional arrangements to support and underpin social partnership in the UK.

The argument here is that without those added dimensions, partnership in the UK adds up to a very 'shallow' renewal strategy because each bargaining unit remains highly vulnerable to being undermined by non-union labour. And because of the emphasis of partnership in securing legitimacy in the eyes of employers as well as employees, it is highly unlikely to secure concessions from employers across an entire sector or labour market. Nonetheless, ideas about partnership provide (provided?) a central idea about what a renewed trade union movement might 'look like' and based that vision on building relationships of mutual gain between employees and employers largely at workplace or company level.

Organising

Previous writers on union renewal (Heery 2002) have contrasted partnership and organising. In the UK context, organising refers to both activity to secure the right to collective bargaining for the first time and to activity to build membership density and representativeness. The central underpinning idea is that unions should work closely with members and activists to identify common interests and workplace problems. They should then build collective support for those issues and pursue them through whatever means is appropriate in the context. That may be through negotiation with management, or through more direct forms of action. Ultimately, however, the objective is typically to secure formal collective bargaining rights where they are not already in place, or to use those mechanisms more effectively if they are already established.

In this case, the answer to the question as to *whose* interests are being represented is very clear; workers in the target workplace. It is also clear that there is a central engagement with the challenge of expanding membership into new areas and to build and strengthen, although this may not always be successful. Importantly the emphasis on collective bargaining does not exclude other forms of action in the way that partnership activity tends to, so organising campaigns are typically open to the opportunity to build alliances and links with groups outside the target workforce such as community groups or customers (see the growing discussion on 'community organising' in, for example, Wills and Simms (2004) and the excellent overview presented in McBride and Greenwood (2009)). Although union organising efforts have had relatively little impact on union density and bargaining levels in the UK on aggregate level (Brown and Nash 2008) it is clear that underpinning ideas about organising are located on the historically important market-class axis of union identity (Hyman 2001). Indeed, in some more recent strategies implemented by unions such as the general union, Unite, and the transport sector union the RMT, there is evidence of an effort to ensure that organising activity is linked to a wider effort to give voice to collective interests of workers beyond individual workplaces at sectoral level (Simms and Holgate 2010). This approach has required these unions to be clear that they are seeking to represent the interests of "working people" in those sectors, and in

some cases even more broadly. However, these efforts are rare and most UK unions have slipped into seeing the purpose of organising activity as being to secure or strengthen collective bargaining (see Simms 2006 for a case study example). There is really very little evidence of efforts to mobilise beyond the workplace through community unionism, or social movement unionism (although there are notable exceptions such as the Justice for Cleaners campaigns – see Wills (2008)).

This is important because it reveals that although much of the discussion around organising promotes a vision of a renewed trade union movement that rests on a strong, active and comparatively independent system of workplace representatives, research has shown that in practice organising campaigns usually stop if they succeed in expanding collective bargaining to new groups of workers (Simms 2005). Thus, although organising does offer an important alternative to partnership about what a renewed trade union movement might 'look like', there is little evidence over recent decades that unions have had the confidence to pursue this agenda beyond an effort to secure and extend workplace bargaining.

Legal mobilisation

Legal mobilisation is a term used to highlight that when unions take on legal cases for individual members, they can have a relevance to a far broader constituency and unions can use that to mobilise wider changes in employer behaviour (Colling 2009). UK law, and particularly employment law, tends to favour a system whereby individual (rather than collective) cases are heard and the judgments and rulings in those cases set precedent, although the precise mechanisms depend on the nature of the case. The point here is that any landmark case is likely to be highly contested and will go through several stages of appeal, most likely leading to a precedent being set. If decisions go in their favour, unions can use these landmark rulings to bargain with other employers to change their behaviour. At best, a judgment may mark out a particular activity as clearly unlawful. Cases may also clarify particular aspects of statute.

In some respects, this is a core function of unions and they have always undertaken this kind of work. Indeed, it is notable that it is rarely discussed in union renewal literature. Where the provision of services is discussed, it is often dismissed as 'servicing', which is typically presented as a very ineffective way of a union to renew itself, especially in practitioner debates (see, for example Blyton and Turnbull (2004) for a brief overview). What is particularly relevant to the discussions in this paper is that legal mobilisation is not simply the provision of services to individual members. It is the provision of a legal service in order to mobilise members around a particular issue and to promote a particular agenda through the use of the law. Examples include Unison's cases around workers who have been sub-contracted to other employers (TUPE legislation) or the use of equal pay laws to promote gender equality (Colling 2009). These cases both illustrate how these issues can be used to expand and extend a union agenda beyond the core membership. Interests of sub-contracted workers and equality have been demonstrated to have a tendency to 'slip off' the bargaining agenda (Heery 2006, Heery 2004) and legal mobilisation provides an important alternative to collective bargaining as a method of pursuing those interests.

In principle, legal mobilisation undoubtedly has the potential to allow unions to build new solidarities around new issues such as the interests of sub-contracted workers and/or women workers. In practice, however, unions have tended to avoid taking legal cases because of the complexity and expense involved (Colling 2009). Added to this the very real possibility that a case may not be won, and it is unsurprising that most officers express a clear view to avoid the use of the law wherever possible. It is also important to note that of course this approach could only ever be effective in areas where there is clear legal support for particular worker interests. The UK is also notable for its relatively flexible labour market (Coats 2006) and related lack of legal prescription of worker rights thus limiting the number of areas where such an approach might be effective.

Consequently, we can summarise legal mobilisation as a mechanism that attempts to regulate the labour market – and one that can be and has been quite effective in some cases - but which

offers very little underpinning notion of whose interests might be represented by a renewed trade union movement. In this sense, it is a strategy that demands attention but which, unlike partnership and organising, does not offer a clear idea about what a renewed union movement might 'look like'. At best, it suggests that unions might invest in legal mobilisation in order to extend the range of ways in which they might promote a wider set of worker interests. But as a strategy, it is highly dependent on effective legislative support for worker interests, which is patchy in the UK context.

Union Learning

Like legal mobilisation, union learning initiatives are relatively rarely discussed in the wider literature on union renewal. Unlike legal mobilisation, they do have a central underpinning idea about the envisioned future of a renewed trade union movement; trade unions promoting and providing access to adult learning in order to improve the UK skills base which, it should be noted, is still remarkably low compared to most competitor economies in the EU (Leitch 2006). Interestingly, this idea was supported with considerable enthusiasm by Labour governments from 1997 to 2010, which introduced statutory support and protection for workplace union learning representatives in 2002.

Unions have invested heavily in this initiative and around 22,000 trained union learning representatives in UK workplaces. The investment from unions has been supplemented by investment from the State-funded Union Learning Fund and from employers. It seems unlikely that the State funding for this initiative will survive the current fiscal crisis and government spending cuts, although no formal announcement has been made at the time of writing. But it is certainly hoped that many of the learning programmes set in place since the start will endure even without access to State funding.

Underpinning union learning initiatives is the view that unions can and should be deeply involved in the process of upskilling the UK workforce. There is comparatively little incentive for UK employer to take on this responsibility unilaterally (Leitch 2006) and the rationale of the

then Labour government was to enthuse employees and unions about the topic of learning and training. In this regard, union learning initiatives are clearly envisaged to improve the skills of individual employees. However, the approach and training of Union Learning Representatives at workplace level encourages joint action with employers, but does not necessarily expect it. Representatives are expected to engage in bargaining and negotiation with employers to improve learning opportunities. We can therefore argue that although there is some view of collective worker interests in union learning initiatives, there is a far greater emphasis on finding shared interests between an individual employee and the employer, typically framed around ideas of improving productivity at company level (see, for example, the consistent references to productivity improvements on the *unionlearn* website).

Again, this should not be read as an inherent criticism of these initiatives. Like the others outlined here there are undoubtedly workers who have benefited hugely from their existence. But there is certainly little evidence of any kind of underpinning idea about solidarity with other workers as a collective group, especially beyond the target workplace. Union learning is therefore more about securing a future union identity based on the 'society' identity discussed by Hyman (2001), especially given the involvement of the State in promoting this idea of the future of trade unions. As with partnership, the fundamental challenge of this approach is that in the UK, we simply do not have the necessary labour market institutions to ensure the sustainability of this kind of project. Thus, such initiatives will always be at the whim of government policy. Despite the optimism of unions, it seems unlikely that government support for union learning will survive the current government spending cuts and it seems unlikely in the extreme that large numbers of employers will commit resources to these activities given the current economic challenges without some kind of statutory responsibility to do so. Thus, although union learning presented a very interesting alternative idea about what a renewed trade union movement might 'look like' it seems highly vulnerable within the current economic, fiscal and political contexts because of the lack of institutional support.

Discussion

All four of the strategies identified (partnership, organising, legal mobilisation and union learning) have received significant investment and effort by UK unions over the past decade and have been clearly identified as potential routes to renewing and reinvigorating unions. What is lacking in these debates – amongst practitioners and academics – is much discussion about the ‘kind’ of union movement such investment and effort might eventually seek to promote. The central argument here is that UK unions, like all unions, are constantly trying to balance the three core union identities within Hyman’s eternal triangle and that they have some degree of agency in that process. In other words, although the political, social and institutional context within which they operate influences and constrains the effectiveness of such activity, the context does not determine the activity (*contra* Frege and Kelly 2003). Indeed, periods of crisis are precisely when unions may seek to think innovatively about how they imagine their futures. So it becomes important and useful to examine renewal initiatives with the intention of identifying the ideas that underpin them.

Identifying these ideas is particularly important because a central challenge facing unions seeking to renew themselves as renewed (or renewing) actors in contemporary society is to build collective interests and solidarities amongst increasingly diverse groups of workers in the UK labour market. This process of “re-imagining” (Hyman 1999) the basis of collective interests demands effort from unions, and always has done. Thus, when unions engage in the kinds of strategies identified above, one of the things they must do in order to pursue them successfully is to help to construct a common interest between their members and, where relevant, between workers more broadly. If they fail to do this, then they cannot claim to be expressing the collective interests of their members. This effort demands an underpinning idea or ideas about what unions ‘do’, what they seek to be ‘for’, whose interests they represent and the mechanisms by which those interests are represented.

This paper has argued that different renewal initiatives draw on contrasting – and often conflicting - underlying notions of the processes involved in and the consequences of building

and framing collective interest and solidarity. Of particular relevance is the fact that we can identify very different underlying ideas of what we can infer about the perceived *purpose* of such activity in creating competing *visions* of a renewed (or renewing) trade union movement. Many unions have engaged in several, if not all, of these strategies simultaneously. To some degree this is pragmatic; union leaders often want to spread the risk of engaging in a new strategy. However, it also presents very serious problems.

First, it suggests that there is a lack of consensus about what UK unions see as their future. Even within individual unions, it is rare to interview a General Secretary or other key decision maker and they lay out a coherent single view about what they hope their union to 'look like' in future years. The lack of a coherent strategic vision or idea pulls unions in different directions at once and spreads investment and effort thinly. It can also create competing views about strategy that can create conflict within unions. Second, it is clear from the UK experience of the past decade that the lack of institutional support for initiatives aimed at moving UK unions towards the 'society' identity means that they are fragile and vulnerable to changes in political will. Third, it is clear that the focus of many of these kinds of initiatives is at workplace (or perhaps company) level. Discussions of worker and union power are largely absent from these strategies and debates, and as a consequence little attention is given to ideas about the locus of union power. Implicitly, workplace or company level collective bargaining is often seen as the default idea about the future locus of union influence over work. But that is a very narrow and limited vision of a renewed trade union movement and, at best, risks creating islands of trade unionism in a sea of non-unionism. At best, the focus is on negotiating some kind of control over the labour market (the 'market' identity) at workplace or company level. Although the other identities occasionally feature, there is little evidence that they have successfully embedded themselves within any effective 'vision' of the identity of a future trade union movement.

Taken together, this helps explain why trade unions have left 13 years of Labour government control in a weaker position than they entered it. It also explains why the response of unions to the financial and economic crisis of 2008 was so muted in comparison to the response of union

movements in many other countries. UK unions now face an even harder task than they have done for the past decade. The fiscal crisis is likely to lead to difficulties in the heartlands of the public sector. State support for initiatives such as union learning are likely to be withdrawn. The economic context may mean that members are less inclined to take collective action. And the challenges of developing and expressing collective interests amongst a diverse workforce remain.

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