

RE-EMPOWERING TRADE UNIONS ? EXPERIENCE IN WESTERN EUROPE

Richard Hyman
London School of Economics

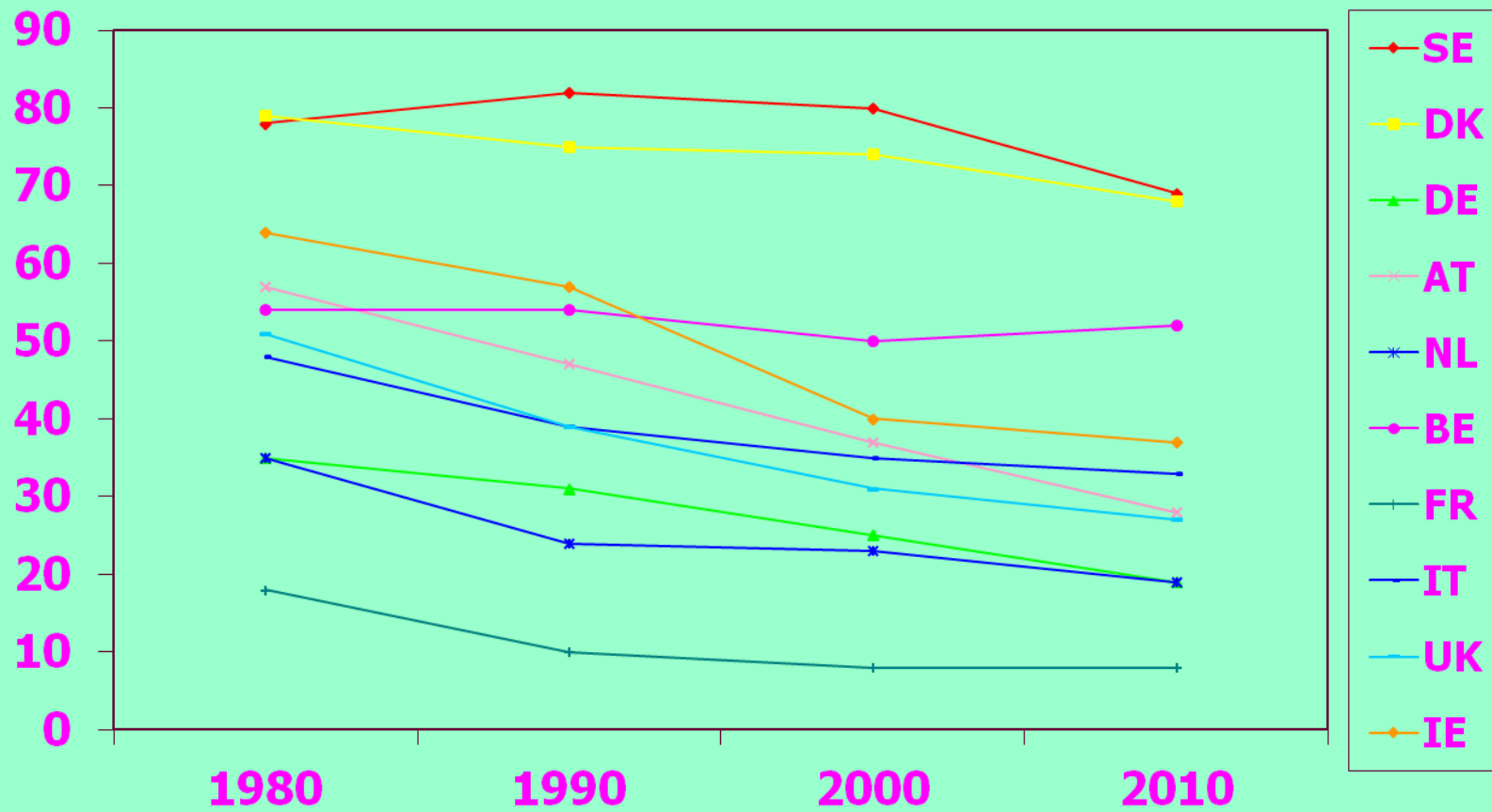
OVERVIEW

- **experience in western Europe : decline and crisis ⇒ revitalisation ?**
- **understanding trade union power resources**
- **revitalisation requires strategy, not just tactics...**
- **... involving both leadership and democracy**
- **the challenge(s) of solidarity**
- **the battle of ideas**

DECLINE AND CRISIS

- **trade unions in most of western Europe are weaker:**
 - declining membership and financial resources
 - reduced bargaining power
 - loss of political influence
- **impact of economic/financial/debt crisis**
 - missed opportunity for radical initiatives ?
 - neoliberal resurgence
 - austerity: further threat to remaining strongholds
 - internal divisions: public/private...
 - unions outflanked by new forms of radicalism ?
- **but there have been serious debates on revitalisation in most countries**

UNION DENSITY



TRADITIONAL POWER RESOURCES

- **structural : economic location**
 - but weakened by globalisation
- **associational : willingness to pay**
 - but numbers are declining
- **organisational : willingness to act**
 - but reduced capacity, motivation or confidence
- **institutional : legal framework, bargaining structure, codetermination rights, Ghent...**
 - often superficially robust; but precarious
 - challenges by employers, national governments, EU institutions
 - the curse of institutional security ?

REVITALISATION REQUIRES NEW POWER RESOURCES

- **what power resources can compensate for decline in traditional sources of strength ?**
 - **normative: winning hearts and minds**
 - **collaborative: constructing alliances**
 - **strategic: learning resourcefulness**
- **varieties of response :**
 - **selective adaptation of the 'organising model'**
 - **extending representation : redefining interests and constituencies**
 - **mergers and restructuring**
 - **public campaigning**
 - **cross-national cooperation**

REVITALISATION MEANS STRATEGY, NOT JUST TACTICS

- there are no 'quick fixes'
- so, for example, the 'organising model' requires rethinking
 - aims and objectives
 - constituencies
 - forms of action
 - internal structures and responsibilities
- this is inevitably contentious : it entails threats to internal power relationships and resource allocation
- unions possess strong organisational inertia

STRATEGY REQUIRES LEADERSHIP

- **diminished resources must be deployed smartly**
- **to act strategically entails :**
 - **effective coordination**
 - **long-term planning**
 - **well-designed initiatives**
- **all require central commitment and leadership**

BUT LEADERSHIP IS NOT ENOUGH

- **the best strategies are useless if only adopted at head office**
- **new strategies are meaningful only if they affect day-to-day union action**
- **this means they must be understood and accepted by local officials and representatives, and the rank and file**
- **empowering the weak must involve a process of *self*-emancipation**

HENCE EFFECTIVE STRATEGY REQUIRES UNION DEMOCRACY

- **strategic innovation has to go beyond formal decision-making procedures**
- **effective strategy is impossible without members' willingness to act**
- **thus unions must ensure a permanent and active internal dialogue**
- **and must also develop 'organic intellectuals' within the rank and file**

WE NEED NEW CONCEPTS OF SOLIDARITY

- there are no longer any 'average union members' (if there ever were)
- women, migrants, precarious workers have (partly) *different* and (potentially) *conflicting* interests from unions' traditional core constituencies
- collective identity is not given, it must be constructed
- unions need not 'mechanical' but 'organic' solidarity
- unity ≠ uniformity
- the goal must be: reciprocity despite disparate identities (and interests)

SOLIDARITY IN ONE COUNTRY IS NOT ENOUGH

- globalisation calls for international solidarity (or *solidarities*)
- but bureaucratic internationalism does not work
- international solidarity is not just a matter for 'international experts'
- internationalism must be 'mainstreamed' in trade union education and action
- which involves questions of articulation between local, national and supranational levels

STRATEGIC INNOVATION REQUIRES AN IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE

- union weakness has ideological as well as material roots
- union revitalisation thus requires:
 - a new, imaginative, indeed utopian ideological counter-offensive: a battle of ideas
 - a new vocabulary to articulate unions' core principles as a 'sword of justice'
 - alliances with other progressive movements (since unions can no longer automatically claim to represent a majority)
 - a new type of politics (since defending the weak is inescapably a political process)
- do unions dare to create new strategies and arguments, or are they content to manage their own decline ?

A CONCLUSION ?

- **there are obvious problems of generalisation**
- **responses to crisis : renewal or damage limitation ?**
- **there is (bounded) evidence of union revitalisation**



GEMEINSAM FÜR EIN
GUTES LEBEN

