Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, union membership declined massively, and many union leaderships lost their former eminence in the economic and political arenas. In an examination of recent developments in manufacturing and the restructured public sector, it is argued that unions face a set of problems, associated with economic restructuring, institutional reorganisation of the state sector and the uncertainties of internationalised economies. There has been a recomposition of power relations within the current political economy, so that even with diminished power and in more difficult circumstances, unions face new prospects and possibilities. The implications of these developments and the prospects for union renewal are reviewed with reference to the changing patterns of trade unionism.

British Trade Unions Facing the Future

Peter Fairbrother

The Problem

The current uncertainties facing British trade unions come after three decades of extensive restructuring of work and employment relations. This restructuring was accompanied by extensive legislative reforms as successive Conservative governments sought to shift the balance of power towards employers (Smith and Morton, 1993). In these circumstances, and with the beginnings of a distancing between the Labour Party and trade unions, individual unions and the TUC began to look to their own forms of organisation and operation to reverse the falling membership levels, both within particular trade unions as well as across the unionised workforce (Undy *et al.*, 1996). A series of reviews were conducted from 1987, under the auspices of the Special Review Body (SRB) of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) (Trades Union Congress, 1988a; 1988b; 1989). One of the main concerns was to address the problem of falling membership and towards this end financial services were actively promoted to encourage membership recruitment and retention

(Waddington and Whitson, 1997). In addition, major unions, such as the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and the General, Municipal and Boilermakers (GMB) embarked on focused recruitment campaigns. Organisational rationalisation was also seen as an appropriate response and there were a series of mergers involving major unions within the civil service, the public sector more generally and manufacturing, aimed at relaying unionism on a firmer basis (Waddington, 1992a). While the reality of many of these mergers fell far short of the promises, they illustrate the scale of the problems faced and the outer limit of the package of measures adopted to deal with these problems (Carter, 1991).

What is missing in these measures is an adequate appreciation of the changing terrain of trade unionism. Effectively, the locus of power both within and between trade unions has shifted so that the basis for past relationships and practices no longer exists.   While there has been much debate about membership decline and structural reform, there has been limited discussion and debate about the form of unionism that may be in the process of emerging (Fairbrother, 2000: 324-26). In recent debate, under the label New Unionism, the TUC draws on international experience and experiments, in Australia, the Netherlands and the United States of America, to promote a re-examination of the way unions organise and operate (Trades Union Congress,1997a). However, the focus is largely on recruitment and retention and not union form, specifically the way unions organise and operate in the current economy and polity, the policies pursued, and the objectives of unions. In this respect, there remains an opaqueness about the analysis of current problems facing unions.

Focusing on this prospect, I argue that trade unions are in the process of reconstitution and reorganisation. I point to the paradox that while it may appear that trade unions are on a downward spiral, towards narrow economism and political irrelevance, there is a broader-based structural recomposition of the economy taking place which opens up prospects for trade unionism (cf. Heery, 1998). One way of explaining these developments is with reference to the concept of union renewal (Fosh, 1993; Fairbrother, 1996; Fairbrother, 2000: 17-22 and 326-34). Such renewal comprises a set of processes concerned with union survival and development within the workplace—recruitment and replenishment of new generations of activists,

building workplace activity in the context of restructuring, the development and promotion of mutual support between levels of union members and leaders, and the conditions for international unionism (Fairbrother, 2000: 17-22; for an example of a campaign combining local and international solidarity, see Russo, 1998). Involved and participative forms of unionism are constructed or inhibited as part of the diverse and multi-faceted aspects of union renewal (see also Bronfenbrenner *et al.*, 1998 and Pocock, 1998; and for varied critiques: on unions and politics, see Darlington, 1994; Gall, 1998; on a different interpretation of evidence, see Colling, 1995; McIlroy, 1997; Heery, 1998; on a different conceptualisation of unionism, see Kelly, 1996 and Kelly, 1998: 59-64).

There are five stages to the argument. First, the theoretical premises for an understanding of trade unionism is presented, elaborating a view that runs counter to prevailing interpretations. Second, the argument is developed that the unions of the 1960s and 1970s were 'politicised' by building on their long-standing 'partnership' with the Labour Party, which, in this period, gave unions access to the levers of the state. Third, the 1980s and first half of the 1990s was a period of reversal and apparent union decline, when the basis for defining unions as special interest groups was laid. Fourth, one outcome was that unions began to rebuild within the workplace, particularly in the public sector, addressing the specific features of economic and political restructuring that were taking place. Fifth, the foundation for a reconfiguration of the basis and purpose of unionism has been laid, although barely recognised by union leaderships and their members. These developments raise important questions about the relation between unions and politics.

Theoretical Premise and Approach

The underlying premise of the argument is that trade unions are institutions embedded within the social relations of production and service. How they organise and operate depends on the complex of relations at the workplace level. Trade unions carry with them their own histories, their own traditions and face up to particular sets of relations in different sectors and regions, according to the occupational composition of their memberships. With restructuring and the shifting relations

between labour and capital seemingly fixed and established patterns of organisation and activity no longer suffice. While some unions will attempt to maintain past practices, it is also the case that other unions will attempt to reconstitute themselves and begin to organise in the light of these changing circumstances and conditions. The question is will trade unions as collective organisations, rooted in the workplace, play a critical part in the unfolding pattern of restructuring between labour and capital?

It is at the workplace that the coercive social relations of capitalism provide the crucial terrain of collective organisation and class struggle, organised as a labour process at the immediate point of production (Braverman, 1974; Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977; Elger, 1979). The collective character of the labour process, involving both co-operation between workers and co-ordination of the tasks of labour, provides the material basis for both collective organisation, in the form of trade unions, as well as resistance through trade union activity. But this is also a dynamic relationship in that the way trade unions organise and operate, and the consciousness of trade unionism expressed by members are not only shaped by the labour process, but in turn mould and fashion the particular configuration of the labour process. It is this struggle, between workers and managers, over employment conditions, the circumstances of work, the relations between manager and worker, individually and collectively, that constitutes the detail of the social relations of the labour process.

Unions are institutions in which representatives negotiate on behalf of the membership and where leaders represent this membership in a variety of fora, including political ones. They are positioned as collective organisations representing and articulating the interests of workers to employers, including the state (cf. Muller-Jentsch, 1985). This assumes that trade unions are organisational entities that theoretically, at least, are distinct and separate from the state and employers. Of course, union leaderships (at all levels) may enter into alliances with state representatives as well as employers or be drawn into co-operative relationships at both employer and state level. Such relationships and accommodations are defined by and contribute to the political economy of the moment. Thus, in a reconstituted political economy, unions also reconstruct the basis of their involvement and engagement in the polity and the economy.

The 'Political' Integration of Unions

During the 1960s and 1970S trade unions operated within a set of politicised relationships, characterised by an inclusivist approach from the state towards trade unions and an on-going historically-based relationship between the trade unions and the Labour Party. While there is a long history acknowledging the political activity of trade unions, as institutions, there has been less comment on the integration of trade unions, as part of the polity (exceptions being Panitch, 1975 and Coates,]980)

There are two noteworthy features to the development of unionism in the post-war period and particularly the 1960s and 1970s—rising unionisation and growing Convergence in organisational forms and relationships (Fielding, 1995; Ackers *et al.*, 1996; Gallie *et al.*, 1995; Martin *et al*, 1996) The 1960s and 1970s was a period of dramatic increase in unionisation, reflected in the expansion of union membership as well as by the signs of an emergent union consciousness and practice in hitherto quiescent areas of the workforce. The second feature of this period concerns an apparent convergence in industrial relations practices and procedures, across different occupational groups and sectors, apart from the private sector services In the public sector unions began to reorganise so as to place their organisations on firmer foundations, enabling more active forms of mobilisation, with many memberships engaged in various forms of collective action, often for the first times in their history. The outcome was a more broadly based union movement in the public sector. (For a brief history of public sector strikes in the post-war period, see Lyddon, 19S3 130-36) The former Whitley-type arrangements, Premised on consultation and co-operative arrangements, that had long characterised the public sector, began to give way to more formalised and overt negotiating committees, with public sector management and union leaders entering into formal bargaining and negotiating relationships (Carter and Fairbrother, 1999: 122-35). With these developments, the public sector unions developed strategies and practices in their approaches to bargaining and negotiation, which mirrored practices long evident in other sectors, such as manufacturing. It is in this sense, that the 1970s in particular, became the decade of public sector militancy, as measured by strike action and related forms of collective activity (Fairbrother, 1989).

Alongside these trends, unions had a long-standing relationship with the Labour Party, as partners in the pursuit of legislative reform. Historically, unions were not only instrumental in the founding of the Labour Party at the turn of the century but were organisationally bound up with the Labour Party. Many unions, mainly the manual ones, were (and remain) affiliated to the Labour Party. They were immersed in Labour Party decision making, formally and informally, and provided the bulk of funds to the Labour Party as well as active support at the time of elections and related campaigns. Although often this was a contradictory relationship, involving compromises in the pursuit of electoral success, there was usually a tacit agreement between the two 'wings' of labour about their roles in this process. In principle unions were left to negotiate and represent their memberships in the industrial arena, with little legislative restriction, whereas the parliamentary Labour leadership took the lead on policy issues and concerns (for details, see Minkin, 1991).

These patterns of representation were clearly evident in the 1960s and 1970s. The unions represented their membership in the industrial arena as well as promoting employment legislation, while the Labour Party, in and out of office, defended union concerns and pressed for the social legislation and the infrastructural reforms for a modernised economy. Thus, the two wings of the labour movement sought to elaborate and implement a progressive social programme of reform, which was seen as the legitimate province of both unions and the Labour Party (Flanders, 1970; Coates and Topham, 1986).

At a more general level, most unions were part of the polity and sought to realise their objectives via petitioning and an involvement with the state (Korpi,1983; Goldthorpe, 1984). From the 1960s onwards, there was an increased involvement of unions in the polity, evident in various ways. At the most transparent level, union federations in a number of countries came to formal agreements with political regimes where by the 'economic' interests of trade unions were recognised, via legislation, consultation, co-operation and, in some countries, centralised bargaining and agreements (Sweden and Germany). Such accommodations were very much in evidence in the United Kingdom, during the 1960s, and especially in the 1970s, during the so-called 'social contract' period. The then Labour Government reached an agreement with key sections of the trade union leadership over a range of issues, including wage

levels, legislation and policies aimed at recognising the place of labour in the polity (Panitch, 1975; Coates, 1980). While this was not an easy time for either the Government or trade union leaderships, it set the precedent for this type of co-operation and union involvement.

The 'Political' Distancing of Unions

These politicised relationships were challenged in the 1980s. Increasingly union leaderships were excluded from any direct involvement in state bodies and agencies, representing the interests of the membership in the formulation of wages policies and related economic initiatives. Instead, unions were defined as a special interest group, representing a section of the community, and thus not a 'fifth estate' (Taylor, 1978). Complementing the disassociation from state bodies, the logic of such distancing was gradually accepted by the leadership of the Labour Party, as the trappings of partnership between the Party and trade unions came to be seen as a barrier to re-election. In the context of these developments and in relation to a major reverse in trade union membership and the weakening of traditional forms of representation, the conditions were laid for a reformed role for the TUC (Taylor 1994: 160-79).

The political distancing of unionism was accompanied by a major decline in trade union membership over the last two decades, and particularly during the 1980s (Waddington,1992b). This has not been uniform across all sectors and occupations, and reflects in part changing patterns in the composition of the workforce. While the manufacturing and public sector (public services and utilities) workforces were consistently more densely unionised during the 1980s, when compared with other sectors, there were differential patterns of decline. Briefly, in the public services (national and local government, education and health) actual membership levels increased between 1980 and 1987, although employment levels increased proportionately more, resulting in a slight decline in union density from 79.6 percentage points in 1979 to 78.9 percentage points in 1987. In the utilities (electricity, gas and water) the converse applied, where there was a sharp decline in employment levels and a smaller decline in union membership, resulting in a union density increase, from 94.9 percentage points in 1979 to 96.4 percentage points in 1987.

This contrasts with manufacturing, where in the context of a major decline in employment levels overall, union membership density fell in manual occupations from 83.4 percentage points in 1979 to 65.5 percentage points in 1987 and for non-manual occupations, from 46.7 percentage points in 1979 to 45.3 percentage points in 1987 (Waddington, 1992b: 295-300). The outcome was a beleaguered unionism, increasingly restricted in its role and place in the economy.

Adding to the pressures on unions during this period, Conservative governments legislated to shift the balance of relations between labour and capital in favour of capital. This shift tilted the balance towards employers by placing restrictions on how unions organised and operated, especially in relation to industrial action. These included the Trade Union Act 1984, Employment Act 1988, Employment Act 1990, Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993 requiring unions to hold ballots before conducting industrial action, placing restrictions on unofficial action, and giving notice of industrial action. More generally, the import of the legislation during this period was that unions found themselves in sets of relations which were juridically defined and restricted. The result was a complex set of relations between employers and unions in relation to legal recourse in disputes (Dickens and Hall, 1995: 284).

Taking strikes as a key indicator of the relations between labour and capital, collective industrial action by unions declined throughout the 1980s, although the miners' strike of 1984/85 was an exceptional moment. The causes of the strikes shifted from overt concerns about pay and hours of work in the 1970s to security in the 1990s. What was equally important, but is not revealed by the aggregate figures, was that there was a significant compositional shift in strike patterns and related forms of industrial action. According to the WIRS reports, there was a continued fall in the level of industrial action in the manufacturing sector throughout the 1980s, with a shift over the same period towards non-strike forms of action, such as overtime bans and work to rule action (Millward *et al.*, 1992: 279-81). In contrast, the incidence of industrial action remained much higher in the public sector (excluding privatised enterprises) than elsewhere. During the 1970s and even more so in the 1980s, it became much more likely that major industrial stoppages (disputes of 50,000 strike days or more) would involve public sector workers than otherwise (Fairbrother, 1989). Overall,

during the 1980s, there was a massive increase in industrial action involving public sector establishments, even apart form the coal mining strikes (Millward *et al.*, 1992: 281-82). Although the incidence has fallen, industrial action is still relatively common within the public sector including the privatised utilities (Cully *et al*, 1999: 132).

It is in this context that the political unionism of the past was questioned. As background it is important to note that union relations with the Labour Party from 1968 to 1979 had been politicised, marked by conflicts between the Parliamentary Labour Party and significant union leaders, on a range of issues with the Party in government (Marsh, 1992: 139-40). In opposition after 1979, the Labour Party was divided over policies about constitutional reform, leading to splits within the Party, founding of the Social Democratic Party, and with union leaders supporting the different groupings in the dispute over constitutional reform (Taylor, 1986: 132-42). More importantly, the sectoral and occupational composition of unions and the TUC changed decisively during the 1970s and into the 1980s, from manual to non-manual members and from manufacturing to public sector. One outcome was that there was a basis for the loosening the traditional ties between the TUC and the Labour Party (Taylor, 1986: 152-98). Accompanying these developments, the continued dominance of Conservative governments prompted the beginnings of a reconsideration of the TUC political strategy, under the label of 'New Realism. While initially this had little impact on the relations between the TUC and the Labour Party, after the election defeat in 1987, the Labour Party instigated a policy review which initiated an extensive programme of change which resulted in a more distanced relationship between the trade unions and the Labour Party than had hitherto been the case (Marsh, 1992: 158-61). These moves lay the foundation for the more explicit formalisation of distanced relations under the Blair leadership of the Labour Party, from 1994 onwards.

There are three features to the process of distancing from the polity, indicated by the history of the 1980s and 1990s. First, unions found it difficult to organise and represent their members during the 1980s and early 1990s. Second, unions were excluded from state bodies, no longer seen as acceptable partners by governments of the period. Third, increasingly there was a distancing between trade unions and the Labour Party, particularly at a national level. The outcome was a beleaguered

trade union movement, facing membership decline, that was no longer located in the economy and polity in the same way as had been the case in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Question of Bargaining and Representation

One way of assessing these developments is to consider the changing patterns of bargaining arrangements and the implications of these for union representation. More specifically, such an approach is based on the assumption that the process of representation is a primary rationale for unionism. Such reference has been the touchstone for an assessment of trade unions over the last two decades (eg. Heery, 1998; Heery and Kelly, 1994). The ways that unions addressed this question reveals how and under what circumstances they may be able to adapt, reorganise and renew. To draw out the dimensions of this process the focus is on three sectors: manufacturing, public sector and privatised utilities.

In both the public and private sectors, there was a long term trend, beginning at the turn of the century towards industry or national pay settlements and related agreements (Clegg, 1976). While there is a long and complicated history relating to national and industrial bargaining, by the 1980s this form of bargaining was severely compromised in manufacturing, followed by a similar movement in the public sector in the 1980s and 1990s. In part based on long-term trends, involving ongoing struggles between sections of the trade union movement and employers and, in part, as a feature of the extensive managerial restructuring and reorganisation in the private and public sectors during the 1980s and 1990s, the balance of power was further tilted against unions as nationally-based and focused organisations. It was in these circumstances that unions began to look at the ways they organise and recruit, how leaderships represent membership, and the future role of trade unions (Trades Union Congress, 1984, 1991, 1994a and 1994b).

Manufacturing

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, there was extensive change and reorganisation in the private sector, setting the scene for an increasingly defensive form of trade unionism. Managements took steps to decentralise budgetary control and

devolve the management of the labour process to establishment level. Moves were taken to establish more flexible workforces through changes to numbers employed, forms of work organisation and pay policies (Pollert, 1991). A feature of this process of change was the uneven and somewhat piecemeal changes in relations between workers and management, signified through increased managerial control of work organisation, increased range of work tasks and an intensification of work (Elger, 1991).

During the 1980s and 1990s the terrain of manufacturing was recast, although the origins of these changes lay further back in time. There was extensive restructuring involved plant contraction and closure, large-scale job loss, reorganisation of work and employment, contracting-out ancillary services and changed bargaining agenda (Pollert, 1991). Such developments were part of a broader set of changes that have occurred involving the increased prominence of multi-national manufacturers operating across national borders. Accompanying this process was the pattern of de-industrialisation indicated by the declining proportion of employees located in manufacturing employment. Commentators pointed to the increased internationalisation of manufacturing, corporate restructuring, managerial strategies (including human resource management) and the recomposition of work organisation (Crouch, 1993; Burnham 1999; see also Cully *et al*, 1999: 16-20).

In the past, unions were often locked into district and industry structures, where wage levels were set and then implemented enterprise by enterprise, giving rise to locally based forms of unionism within broader organisational and representative structures (Croucher, 1999: 7-12; 31-7). Such unions had built themselves on forms of representation, based on the section (often defined in terms of skill) or the assumption that workers were employed at set tasks with regular contact with other workers. The outcome was a form of unionism centred on male, manual and full-time workforces, which for a long time were able to represent their memberships relatively effectively, but which in the 1980s and 1990s faced a declining membership, usually employed on contracting worksites with more assertive managements. In these circumstances, such unions found themselves in vulnerable positions, with employers able to assert and set the terms of the relationship with unions in ways that were unimaginable in the recent past.

One aspect of relations between unions and employers has been the articulation of managerial practices and approaches based on developing employee commitment and identification with company aims (Pollert, 1996). However, where work organisation had been reorganised, involving team working and related practices, the impact on workplace unions was ambiguous (Elger and Fairbrother, 1991). On the one hand, managements have initiated programmes of reorganisation attempting to win wider support for company ambitions and approaches. On the other hand, workers are still locked into alienating and exploitative work relations. In these circumstances unions continued to have a presence, paradoxically opened up by the tensions and unevenness of these managerial strategies and their implementation (Elger and Fairbrother, 1991; Pollert, 1996).

Trade unions based in the manufacturing sector tended to cover one or few workplaces (WIRS and Cully *et al.*, 1999: 17-18). Whether manual or non-manual, they were organised on the basis of shop steward or workplace steward structures. In this respect, the prevailing form of workplace organisation was built around the sectional steward, representing a shop or workgroup within the workplace and sitting as a member of a steward committee which decides union policies and practices for that site. In one Midlands study it was apparent that the trade union representatives were unable to maintain their networks of support in the context of pressures towards managerial advantage and control (Fairbrother, 2000: 89-141). Moreover, the issues addressed by these unions continued to be pay, discipline, redundancy, leave arrangements and the organisation of work. It was noteworthy that these union groups tended to ignore questions relating to state policies and practices, and very few people (often only two or three) played an active part in their union's policy-making fora. Thus, while existing forms of workplace organisation and operation were maintained there was very little indication of a broadening or a redefinition of trade unionism along the lines looked for by some commentators (Kelly, 1996).

As union leaderships sought to maintain their presence in workplaces their principal concern was survival, often via a 'bargained accommodation' (Fairbrother, 2000:10-25). The steward form of representation was maintained during the 1980s and into the 1990s, providing the bedrock for the continued

presence of unions in many workplaces. The outcome was an accommodative form of trade unionism, where many leaderships worked with the grain of managerial policy and direction, although there are variations depending on union strength and depth of union organisation. Although these arrangements did not preclude the emergence of more active and critical local leaderships, there is limited evidence of this happening in the first part of the 1990s (Fairbrother, 2000: 83-164; cf. Gall, 1998: 151; see also the more aggregate reports by Cully *et al.*, 1999: 198-207). Even when union groups attempted to redefine the boundaries of trade unionism it was within the parameters of a managerially-defined restructuring that was still in progress (Fairbrother, 2000: 126-41).

Against this background it is possible to argue that the conditions for more active forms of unionism in manufacturing have changed, as a result of corporate reorganisation, rationalisation and merger, new management techniques, changing government economic policy. With the introduction of new management techniques the boundaries and demarcations upon which the traditional workplace steward model of unionism was based could be liable to reconsideration and possibly renewal. While the evidence points to the continued emphasis on 'economistic' concerns by unions in this sector, a reflection of the balance of power, and thus prompting unions to defend existing terms and conditions of employment, there is a prospect that the conditions have been laid for organisational renewal. If so, one feature of renewal is the role played by local leaders and activists in dealing with restructuring and reorganisation. Leadership style is critical in promoting collective awareness and activism, handling the contradictory relationships with managements in ways that elicit membership support, particularly in these circumstances (Green *et al.*, 2000). More than this, these developments could lead to a broadening of union concerns, through the revival or re-creation of combine committees. Such initiatives could contribute to building workplace forms of representation across workplaces, and opening up a broad range of issues, such as government strategies for manufacturing (Danford and Upchurch, 1999; see also Spencer, 1985). The result is the possibility of a recomposed form of unionism, resting on active and outward-looking workplace-based steward structures, although the signs are limited.

The Fragmentation of the Public Sector

In the public sector, there has been a different pace of development although the trajectory of change has been the same. Bargaining arrangements remained centralised until well into the 1980s, concerned with universal terms and conditions of employment in the different sections that made up the public sector. These arrangements were mostly based on Whitley-type procedures, a feature of the industrial relations procedures in the public sector from the 1950s onwards. The result was a relatively stable and centralised pattern of bargaining until the 1980s, with limited attempts, by management and unions, to open up more devolved patterns of bargaining arrangements. Nonetheless, there had been a growing concern amongst policy-makers with the development of managerial practices within the public sector, although this was fairly limited in its effect.

Reshaping the Public Sector

In all sections of the public sector there has been an attempt to redefine managerial hierarchies at a more devolved and decentralised level. In the civil service, health, education and local government, restructuring has resulted in a devolution of managerial responsibility to more local levels, covering issues such as hiring and firing, deployment of labour, the allocation of work loads, and the award of pay related bonuses and benefits (on the civil service, see Gagnon, 1996; on health, see Bach,1998 and Thornely, 1998). It is in these contexts that managers have sought, with few exceptions, to either incorporate the local union leaderships into this patterning of change or to define managerial prerogative in such ways that collective worker organisation is made irrelevant to the process of change. A range of issues are now subject to negotiation at a local level, but on terms that have largely been set by local managements (Fairbrother, 2000: 237-42). Such developments both create problems for union memberships, but also open up possibilities.

There was a major restructuring of the public sector during the 1980s and into the 1990s, with a redefinition of management structures and the introduction of new work and employment practices (Fairbrother, 1989, 1994a and 1994b). The trends toward fragmentation and a reconfiguration of managerial hierarchies in

the public sector became clearer, initially in relation to manual workers and then extended to the non manual workforce. Lower levels of management were given new and additional responsibilities for budgeting and that managerial lines of control and accountability have been recast. New work routines were introduced, often in tandem with computerised technologies, and recruitment patterns have changed, with moves towards varied employment patterns (Foster and Hoggett, 1999: 25-8).

These changes have had marked implications for bargaining in the public sector. In part, as a result of the Donovan reforms, there was the introduction of limited local bargaining for manual workers in the public sector, mainly local government and the utilities (Terry, 1982). But, the major changes came in the 1980s, with the onset of state restructuring. Across all sections of the public sector, there was an effective moratorium on national bargaining, although there were exceptions, as for health workers, including ambulance staff, as well as teachers, in the mid-1980s. As the 1980s progressed there was a shift in focus from the national level to local level arrangements. Increasingly, public sector managers and their union counterparts became involved in negotiations over staffing levels, hours of work, work procedures, and related conditions of employment. This shift took place in the context of extensive institutional reorganisation, such as the introduction of Agencies (semi-autonomous functionally-based institutions) within the civil service; local management of schools and the reduction of local authority control over schools; the establishment of health trusts on the basis of hospitals in localities; and the reorganisation of local government authorities on the basis of business-type units.

These organisational developments forced managements to confront a diversity of issues raised at a local level, in the case of local government around the purchaser provider split and the externalisation of services, for the civil service in terms of the employment relation and an intensification of work procedures via computerisation. One aspect of this reorganisation was the on going feature of work and employment change (Foster and Hoggett, 1999: 334). The problem for local union groups is that where they are unable to meet the challenge of local negotiations they become by-standers. Where management set the agenda of change then it is often extremely difficult for unions to adapt to or meet these new circumstances; they become reactive organisations in a social world that is constructed around them.

There is evidence in each of these sectors of this process of restructuring (Fairbrother, 1994a; Fairbrother *et al.*, 1996; Fairbrother, 2000). In these circumstances it is difficult for union leaderships and their memberships to confront the uncertainties of change. What appears to be happening is that there is now little room for the 'grey' area of union organisation, where limited union activity could be sustained by active full-time officer support (Fairbrother *et al*, 1996 and Carter and Fairbrother, 1999: 144-5). No longer is this an option in the devolving world of the public sector and the services. The scale of support required is now beyond what most unions could realistically achieve or aspire to realise. It is in this respect that there has been a move towards a more comprehensive and multi-faceted process of local bargaining and negotiation but it also the case that union memberships are becoming more fragmented with marked divisions between those that organise effectively and in a semi-autonomous way and those which are merely a facade of organisation and action.

The Internationalisation of the Privatised State

The British state has unleashed a pattern of development in which the state has been the prime mover in opening up public services to international ownership and control, laying the foundation for an internationalised public sector in ways that were not anticipated in the early 1980s (PSPRU, 1996: 16). As part of the deregulation and marketisation of the British state, privatisation has been part of a process of internationalising the economy. In this context, the privatisation of state enterprises provided an opportunity for the state to lay the foundation for services and products to be offered to the public on a commercial basis (Colling and Ferner, 1995). One feature of this set of developments is that there has been an internationalisation of ownership, particularly in the case of privatised utilities, which weighs heavily against labour.

Where corporations were subjected to the rigours of commercial and market relations, it has been relatively common for managements to seek to establish the negotiating fora which suit the new marketised world in which they operate. While, it is difficult to disaggregate the institutional effects and consequences of the privatisation process, there now appears to be strong

evidence that the process of marketisation has had a direct impact on industrial relations outcomes (Colling and Ferner, 1995; Pendleton, 1997). In particular, privatisation has provided the occasion for a deterioration in pay and terms and conditions of employment (McCarthy, 1988; Colling and Ferner, 1995). In a review of this literature, Pendleton (1997) has argued that the shift in ownership per se has not had 'a consistent or strong effect on pay and employment' (p. 573). As he notes, this conclusion is in line with other studies of industrial relations in the privatised sector (Ferner and Colling,1991; Pendleton and Winterton, 1993).

Bargaining arrangements were changed so as to reflect the new organisations that were in the process of emerging. Initially, in many privatised corporations this did not signify major change in industrial relations procedures and practices, although as these corporations located themselves on this new terrain, there were substantive as well as procedural changes in industrial relations practices (Martin and Parker, 1997). Specifically, the reconfiguration of managerial hierarchies has involved both a devolution of operational responsibilities and an attenuation of financial and strategic relations. For unions these developments provide opportunities for more discrete and localised bargaining, on the one hand, and increased difficulties, on the other, as the locus of power and decision-making shifts from the national to the international (cf. Colling and Ferner, 1995).

A series of studies have addressed the question of the impact of the privatisation process on industrial relations processes and institutions (Colling, 1991; Ogden, 1992; Pendleton and Winterton, 1993; Colling and Ferner, 1995). Generally, this reorganisation took the form of a devolution of bargaining fora, from a national to a more localised level. This devolution involved a shift from national to company level bargaining, evident in water and electricity supply (Ogden, 1992 and Ferner and Colling, 1991) or from company to business unit sectors as was the case in steel and telecommunications (Blyton, 1993; Fairbrother, 1994b). Of equal interest, in 1990 the Girobank was sold to a non-union building society and then sold on again; privatisation provided the occasion for an emphasis on organising and the development of workplace union structures that were relatively independent of the national union organisation. Local unionism in this case was both renewed and legitimised by this process (Dundon,1998: 131-33).

Assessment

These developments have led to debate and dispute within unions about the relationship between the national and the local, between policies concerned with 'social partnership' or 'critical accommodation'. Although the responses within unions have been varied, there has been a hesitant recognition, at least in practice of the importance for trade unionism of local organisation and activity (Fairbrother *et al.*, 1996; Dundon, 1998; Fairbrother, 2000: 167-08). The problem is that unions have continued to organise in traditional ways, reliant on full-time officials or a layer of lay activists to maintain a union presence. They now face difficulties in developing models of unionism which permit adequate responses to the varied dimensions of restructuring.

The Reconfiguration of Trade Unionism

Against this background, the prospects for unions in the United Kingdom are uncertain. Clearly there have been major set-backs for unions, with a loss of members, bargaining changes, and financial uncertainty. They faced a raft of legislative provisions weighted in favour of employers. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the state was at best indifferent, at worst hostile, about union representation. Unions, both individually and as part of the TUC, sought to address these problems. It was in these circumstances that union modernisation became an issue. In some cases union leaderships, particularly in the public sector, sought to reform their internal organisation by promoting local forms of representation (National Union of Public Employees, 1981; Drake *et al.*, 1982; epic, 1983; Hyman *et al.*, 1988; Terry, 1996; UNISON, 1997 and 1998). So as to address the problem of declining membership union leaderships began to promote strategies concerned with enhancing the service provision to members (Kerr and Waddington, 1998). These initiatives received support and encouragement from the TUC (Trades Union Congress, 1997a).

The TUC: Looking Down and Out

During the 1980s and into the 1990s, the relationship between the affiliated unions and the TUC underwent a change with affiliated

unions increasingly acting without reference to the TUC and in turn the TUC attempting to redefine its position in relation to its affiliates. During the 1980s the TUC attempted to establish a new procedural consensus among affiliated unions, although this had a very limited success against the divergent approaches by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunication and Plumbing Union (EETPU). The initial approach by the TUC was to promote a service focused unionism, with the TUC offering a broad range of services to affiliate unions, including pension services, personal insurance, financial services, and legal services (Trades Union Congress, 1989: 9). While these services were of particular benefit to smaller unions, the take up by larger unions was less forthcoming (Fairbrother and Waddington, 1990: 22-23). In addition, from the mid-1980s onwards the TUC conducted a series of internal reviews aimed at providing the basis for a repositioning of the TUC (Trades Union Congress, 1988a; 1988b; 1989; 1994).

As indicated there has been a debate within unions about the appropriate forms of unionism for these changing circumstances, with implications for the relation between affiliated unions and the TUC. These debates have gone through different forms and stages but have coalesced most clearly around the desirability and effectiveness of the 'service' model of unionism or the 'organisation' model. In part derived from similar sorts of reflections in the USA and Australia, these models are defined as a union movement where unions organise so as to service the membership more effectively and efficiently and where leaders are there to support a beleaguered and often vulnerable and atomised membership or an organising model where members are active participants in the way unions organise and operate, thereby contributing to the collective focus and practice of the union (Bronfenbrenner *et al.*, 1998: 37-42).

Increasingly, the emphasis on service and organisation has been integrated rather than contrasted as alternatives as was initially the case. In 1996, the TUC relaunched itself, reforming its representative arrangements, presenting itself as the spokesperson of labour, and encouraging 'union organising' (Heery, 1998: 341-43). The organising focus was underwritten by the establishment of a 'New Unionism Task Force' in 1996, focusing on problems of recruitment, the ways of extending the representational base into unorganised or lowly-organised

areas, and the development of the organisational base of unions. An Organising Academy to train and support organisational activity within unions has been set up and there has been an extensive focus on the problems and difficulties of union recruitment (Heery, 1998: 341-43). These developments are also reflected in union initiatives, where there has been a sustained focus on the question of recruitment, and to a lesser extent organising (e.g. Kerr and Waddington, 1998 and UNISON 1997 and 1998).

More recently, there has been a move away from the emphasis on 'service' and instead focusing on 'social partnership'. By partnership is meant an accommodative, co-operative and engaged form of unionism prepared to work with employers, governments, and other relevant agencies at workplace, regional and national levels. Such a notion has been derived from a European model (in particular the Netherlands) where the emphasis has been on securing social partnerships with employers and governments (Heery, 1998: 355). The notion of partnership involves a focus on promoting employer and trade union agreements, with implications of more developed tripartite arrangements. At the workplace, partnership involves six principles: 'commitment to success of the enterprise', 'recognising legitimate interests'; 'commitment to employment security'; 'focus on the quality of working life'; 'transparency'; and 'adding value' (Trades Union Congress, 1999: 13). More generally, partnership is located within a tripartite arrangements between trade unions, governments and employers on jobs, investment, training and Europe, Trades Union Congress, 1997b). These concerns are reflected in the debates within the TUC and have resulted in a series of agreements signed between trade unions and employers (Trades Union Congress, 1999: 19-30; Heery, 1999). While of limited practical significance to date, the emphasis on social partnership seems to counter the importance of the focus on organisation, potentially laying the foundation for an active and participative unionism, as indicated by the aims and objectives of the Organising Academy (Heery, 1999).

These initiatives were, by and large, predicated on a view that work and employment relations had become more individualised and individualistic, and that this should be reflected in the ways unions organise and operate (Kelly and Waddington, 1995). However, as Williams (1997) points out this ignores the way in which union forms of organisation have long been based

on a subtle and changing interplay between individualism and collective forms of organisation. But, more than this, these assessments of unionism ignore and overlook the way in which the form of unionism that has long prevailed in this country is at a cross-roads. No longer is the shop steward form of engineering and manufacturing unionism a model of effective and participative unionism. It is now much more likely that such union groups will restrict their concerns to their workplaces, and immediate employers, pursuing their economistic concerns, via negotiation, consultation and occasional militancy.

In contrast, unions elsewhere, particularly in the public sector and the privatised utilities, have begun to reorganise in striking ways, placing on the agenda, yet again, the position of unions in the polity. These previously centralised and often acquiescent unions have faced a dramatic restructuring of the social relations of production and service of equal if not greater magnitude than in manufacturing. In such circumstances, these union groups have begun to reassess their organisational basis (Drake *et al.*, 1982; PCS, n.d.; Hyman *et al.*, 1988; Terry, 1996; UNISON, 1997 and 1998). It is here that questions have been raised about public policy and steps taken to address questions relating to gender, race, youth and disability, in ways that have not been evident in unions elsewhere (on UNISON, see Terry, 1996). But, it is also here that some union groups, faced with near continuous change, have all but disappeared (National Union of Mineworkers). It is in these sectors that the debate, about the way unions are changing and the form of unionism that is emerging in the British polity, is being played out.

The dilemma facing unions in their relation with the TUC is how to ensure that the changes taking place within and between trade unions are reflected in the agenda pursued by the TUC. In view of the analyses that have informed the debates within the TUC one resolution to the dilemma is to return to a consideration of the bases of union renewal. This draws attention to the articulation of relations between the local level of unionism, the institutional linkages between the local and the national, and the inter-connections between unions and the confederation. Such relations can be constructed in unidirectional ways, from the top-down (the prevalent emphasis) or the bottom-up or indeed in terms of mutually reinforcing relations, involving a productive interconnection between localised practice and national or international contingencies.

The Rediscovery of the Workplace

In the case of unions in manufacturing, particularly the manual unions, there have long been traditions of organising locally around the workplace steward. The developments of the last few years have served to consolidate and further these patterns of unionism. There was a dual aspect to these developments: on the one hand, the workplace steward form of organisation was beleaguered with questions about survival; on the other hand, there were indications of an outward looking set of developments, often argued for in the difficult circumstances of managerial hostility (Spencer, 1985; Fosh, 1993; and Fairbrother, 2000: 311-37). In the public services and utilities, particularly in the non-manual areas, previously centralised unions began to reconsider and reorganise in more devolved ways, although not without struggle and a harking back to the certainties and predictabilities of the past. More frequently, local union groups have often taken the initiative to expand the range of activities that take place at a local level. In most cases this has involved an exploitation of the space provided by managerial reorganisation and decentralisation rather than challenging the centralised structures and practices of their union organisations.

Furthermore, the recent restructuring highlights different trends and patterns in union concerns. On the one hand, restructuring in manufacturing has generally meant a reaffirmation of an economistic remit. Unions have been concerned to address the issues and problems within the workplace rather than to look to the complex of relations that underpin and provide the opportunity for restructuring. Even where government policies can be seen to have a direct bearing and are detrimental to specific industries, such as telecommunications policies, unions have, perhaps because of the force of circumstance, pursued a narrow range of policies and concerns, particularly at the workplace level. On the other hand, unions in the utilities, particularly during the privatisation periods, and unions in the public services, have of necessity addressed state policies more directly and explicitly. However, the important and complex question to ask is how are these concerns articulated with workplace organisation. Increasingly, state restructuring has provided the opportunity for workplace unions to broaden their remit beyond a narrow economistic one and question aspects of state policy as it impinges on the local

level (Terry, 1996; Fairbrother *et al.*, 1996). And, while this does not necessarily mean such an outlook will be maintained it may be the case that in forging workplace union practices in these conditions there may be a greater likelihood that unions will be able to maintain this spectrum of concerns (Ferner and Colling, 1991).

There are emergent forms of unionism appearing in the context of changes in management, the organisation of work, different negotiating and bargaining arrangements, and a disaffection with past union forms (cf. Kelly,1996: 102, n.2). The logic of the argument is that a rearticulation of class relations in each sector is taking place, with implications for both managerial organisation and activity as well as unionism in these sectors. Further, these initiatives do not involve the individualisation of the social relations of production as such but the attempt to reorganise collective workforces on an individualistic basis. This has involved the introduction of employment and work arrangements aimed at defining workers as individuals rather than as part of a collective. It is thus a complicated and uneven process of change.

Union Form

The analysis presented suggests that unions face an uncertain but potentially positive future. There is no fixed uni-dimensional process of change taking place. Not surprisingly, such uncertainty gives rise to different possibilities and choices. At its starkest, the choice in the late 1990s is between a form of unionism that still focuses on centralised and national bargaining (Undy *et al.*, 1996; Willman *et al.*, 1993) and one that places a premium on independent and workplace-based unionism (Fairbrother, 1996). A more complex account would focus on the possibility of achieving a fruitful and productive balance between active workplace unionism and forward-thinking central leaderships (On workplace unionism, see Fairbrother and Waddington, 1990; for arguments advocating centrally organised leaderships, see Heery and Kelly, 1994; McIlroy, 1997; Terry, 1996). However, where the balance in these relations falls remains an issue.

The first choice is likely to entail further sophistication in the development of centralised and responsible forms of unionism. Advocates of this form of unionism emphasise the importance of developing more active and participative structures,

albeit within a centralised framework which will ensure common purpose and unity between the sections that make up the union (McIlroy, 1995 and 1997; Terry, 1996). This advocacy implicitly recognises the inadequacies of the 'responsible' unionism of the past, but the proponents of this case do not question the assumption that the future of unions lies with an accommodation with sympathetic governments, in this case a Labour Government. On the contrary, they make the case for a renewed and revised partnership with New Labour as a critical feature of this form of unionism. In making this case, they overlook the changes that have taken place in the political economy of employment and work relations. This is an argument for a return to the virtues and benefits of social partnership between the two wings of the labour movement in achieving a just and equitable society, at least in relation to work and employment (Flanders, 1970). The problem with this type of analysis is that it ignores the changing base of unionism in the current political economy and the implications this has for the way they organise and operate, as well as their relationship with the state and employers (Fairbrother and Waddington, 1990).

The second choice is much more open. It is one where the incipient developments within a small number of unions, if taken to their logical conclusion would lead to an independent workplace-based unionism, with accountable and responsive national leaderships, and where union members assert their immediate interests in a changing world (Fairbrother, 1996; Carter, 1997; and Carter and Poynter, 1999). The strength of this union form of organisation is that it is the institutional expression of the collective worker in a capitalist society, although it also carries with it the dangers of an assertive sectionalism. Nonetheless, the basis of such unionism is rooted in the notion that as employees, workers combine together for the purposes of production and the provision of services. In this respect, the union form of organisation represents the possibility of these workers expressing their common concerns and interests. They represent a moment of collective organisation and interests that is unusual in such societies. It is for this reason that unions give attention to the basis of organisation, in the workplace and at a local level. The difficulty is to achieve the necessary balance between localised and workplace based activity and the collective interests of the membership as a whole; in this form of unionism the focus is from the workplace out and not vice versa. It is in this

respect, that there is thus a case for unions to seek to establish their organisational independence and autonomy from all liberal democratic governments.

Unions and Labour Party Politics

The focus and locus of power within the current political economy has shifted away from the traditional bases of union power, particularly in the manufacturing sector, and towards the public sector and privatised sectors (including private services such as finance) of the economy. One consequence of this shift in the political economy is that the material basis for the past social partnership between unions and the Labour Party no longer exists, at least in any comprehensive way (McIlroy, 1995 and 1997; Taylor, 1994). On the one side, 'New Labour' is in the process of redefining social democracy so as to embrace the core features of a neo-liberal 'reform' agenda where trade unions have a narrow and limited role, either as subordinate partners or as special interest groups. On the other, many unions are refocusing their concerns in ways that result in the possibility of more sceptical views of the Labour Party, when compared with the century-long relationship that has entwined union politics with those of the Labour Party. As the public sector and privatised utilities take centre-stage, unions are increasingly faced with outcomes of state policies aimed at redefining the relationship between unions and politics.

With the election of the Labour Government in 1997, trade unions, including the TUC, faced a contradictory situation. On the one hand, there is the appearance of success as the Fairness at Work legislation (Employment Relations Act, 1999) is implemented and a Statutory Minimum Wage introduced. While partially representing the achievement of union aspirations relating to worker and trade union rights, they are less than had been hoped for prior to the election of the Labour government. On the other hand, the government has made it clear that the trade union movement, including the TUC, do not have privileged access to the government and that the old notion of labour movement partnership no longer applies (McIlroy, 1995: 299-304, 410-11).

Nonetheless, this does not rule out different choices in the future. It remains possible and indeed probable that those unions who were formally linked to the Labour Party will remain so. The

difference with the past is that this link will no longer be built on a solid identity of interests between the Labour Party leaderships and trade union leaders. Rather union leaders who see their political futures linked with the Labour Party will continue to construct an accommodative relationship between the two wings of the labour movement. More broadly, it is likely that many unions will continue to look to Labour Governments, at least in the foreseeable future as the most congenial and supportive party in government. It is the Party that may recognise and deal with the particular concerns of organised and unorganised labour. As unions continue to redefine their purpose and objectives they will look to the Labour Party for support. The point is that this is an attachment based on the past. It overlooks the way in which the Labour Party has repositioned itself in relation to a broad political constituency, which includes business interests, particularly 'global' business.

However, there are also other possibilities. It is likely that unions, such as those organising workforces in utilities, will be caught up in a range of developments that will take them away from the Labour Party agenda. Increasingly, many unions deal with transnational companies, often with remote and distanced managements, while, on the other hand, states retain a concern with the way these industries are regulated. Thus, unions in these sectors will increasingly operate on an international scale and will be looking to governments to facilitate and support their active involvement and concern with the policies and practices of these companies. However, such developments draw attention to the possibility of union leadership remoteness unless ground in mutually reinforcing relations between the workplace and the national levels of representation.

Further, public sector unions (and their equivalents) face choices that are encapsulated in the tensions between organisation and partnership. On the one hand, these unions will continue to build in the workplace, redefine their concerns in ways that distance themselves from all governments (local authorities, devolved governments, and the national government) and pursue their concerns accordingly. Of course, New Labour for these workers is more congenial than the Conservative Government, but there is no reason to expect favour or particular consideration from New Labour. It is also not clear to date that devolved governments will take heart and work with these unions to build an alternative social democracy at the devolved level. In such circumstances,

these unions are on their own in their relationship with the state and the renewal of these unions is likely to proceed accordingly.

A Final Comment

Over the last three decades the place and position of trade unions has changed, from a situation where there was politicised engagement between unions and the Labour Party, which provided the platform for union activity and involvement to a more distanced one in the 1980s and into the 1990s. Against the background of dramatic change, involving political and economic restructuring, provide a platform for a reconsideration of union organisation and activity. While the broad patterns of change were differentially experienced by unions in each sector, the importance of workplace unionism was reaffirmed, albeit in hesitant and uneven ways. In this process, commentators on the prospects for British trade unionism invoked different conceptions of unionism, either workplace-based or centralised and responsible. How this will be resolved is as yet unclear.

There is thus the foundation for union renewal, where the focus is on a workplace form of organisation. Such a process would be centred on the workplace, involving the survival and rebuilding of union bodies at this level, and the development of mutually reinforcing relationships within and between unions at the regional, national and international levels. If unions maintain their past forms, as if little has changed, then they are likely to ossify, become narrowly focused, with little real presence in the workplace. However, where the complex processes of union renewal are embraced then there is the prospect of revived if contested forms of unionism emerging. The question facing these memberships is what choice will they make.

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