

## **Trade Unions and the unemployed: towards a dialectical approach**

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### **Abstract**

*The relationship between trade unions and the unemployed is complex and, to some extent, ambiguous. The article first presents the main features of such a relationship, synthesising evidence from various cases (historical and contemporary). Then, using a Marxist dialectical approach, it looks at the features that characterise trade unions in order to explain why they act as they do towards the unemployed. The author pays attention to union constituency, unions as bureaucratised organisations, the place of trade unions in the capitalist system and their relations with political parties.*

### **Introduction**

Alongside a 'core' of white, male, adult, skilled workers in large plants with secure jobs, other categories of workers lie on the 'margins': female workers, young workers, 'atypical' workers, immigrants... These people often face major difficulties to have their voice heard in the unions. Things are even more difficult for the unemployed as they have lost – at least temporarily – contact with work and its actors. At the same time, the unemployed occupy a peculiar position on the labor market as a high unemployment rate can have deleterious effects on the wages, on the working conditions and on the combativeness of the 'active' workers. Therefore the organisation of the unemployed by trade unions is an important issue, especially in periods of major crises such as the 1920s, the 1930s, the 1980s or the current years, since the consequences of unions' attitudes go far beyond protecting only the unemployed themselves. However, academic literature especially dedicated to the relationships between trade unions on the one hand and the unemployed on the other remain scarce.

The purpose of this article is to sketch a general explanatory framework so as to grasp this relationship. The approach used here focuses on the trade unions, in order to explain their attitudes towards the unemployed. I will refer only on some occasions to the viewpoint of the unemployed themselves, although I am well aware that their possible attitudes towards trade unions should be questioned as well.

In the first part, I present the main features of such a relationship. Synthesising evidence from various national cases (historical and contemporary), I try to offer a broad view of the various ways trade unions in the West feel concern about the situation of the unemployed, and also look at their attempts (or their reluctance) to integrate the jobless within their own preoccupations and actions. Then, I look at the features that characterise trade unions in order to explain

why they act as they do towards the unemployed. The approach used is deliberately generalising, in order to identify the roots of unions' attitudes beyond national or regional peculiarities and to draw a broad explanatory framework. Following Hyman's works (1971, 1975), I use a Marxist dialectical approach. In my view, such a perspective seems to be the most appropriate conceptual framework to do so, as I argue in the second part of this article. It enables me in the third part to stress four important features of trade unionism that influence the attitudes towards the unemployed. Two relate to the internal functioning of trade unions, and two are related to their position in the socio-political system. The combination of these four elements considered in a dynamic perspective offers key explanatory elements regarding the attitude of the trade unions towards the unemployed.

### **Trade unions and the unemployed: some empirical evidence**

The relationship between trade unions and the unemployed is firstly determined by union views on unemployment. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, unions have been observing the damage joblessness involves, not only for those losing their jobs but also for the entire membership of a union or, from the viewpoint of more wide-ranging unions, for the whole working class. The effects of what Marx called the 'industrial reserve army' (Marx 1867, chap. XXV) were soon to be clear: a downward pressure on wages and working conditions.

Hence trade unions often pay close attention to the economic situation affecting the working class or, at least, their own members. Full employment is a major preoccupation one can find in union congress resolutions (Faniel 2009). In different countries, trade unions have also developed services in order to help the unemployed— or, at least, their jobless members— find new jobs: creation of Job Fairs, *viatiques* (aids to work mobility) in France or Belgium in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, involvement in the British Unemployed Worker Centres in the 1980s etc. (Forrester and Ward 1986, 1990, Lewis 1990).

In different countries, trade unions also started to organise collective forms of protection based on their members' subscriptions. As their members were made redundant, they received an indemnity (Scruggs 2002, Western 1997: 50-65). The unions' aim was twofold: help their members to avoid starvation and from having to accept badly paid jobs at the risk of dragging their colleagues' wages down. In some countries (Western 1997: 51 lists ten European countries, ranging from Italy to Norway, and from Britain to Switzerland), such benefits gave way to official unemployment schemes which, in certain cases, still exist today.

Nowadays, unions are involved in the management of unemployment schemes in various countries. This function gives them an overview of the benefit rules and is meant to enable them to improve the condition of the unemployed. However, trade unions are often prone to assume their managing role with a great 'sense of responsibility'. This can lead them to concede some sacrifices, especially in periods of crisis, and to accord more importance to financial

objectives rather than the improvement of the condition of the unemployed – for instance, the ‘managing’ attitude of the CFDT and FO was particularly criticised by the French unemployed protesting in winter 1997-98 (Royall 1998: 361).

Union involvement in unemployment schemes can take even more pronounced forms in the so-called ‘Ghent system’ countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden and, in a different way, Belgium) where trade unions play a direct role in the payment of unemployment benefits. Based on historical developments, such systems greatly contribute to ensure high union density (Scruggs 2002, Vandaele 2006, Van Rie, Marx and Horemans 2011, Western 1997) while most unemployed people join a union or retain their former affiliation. Moreover, active workers are encouraged to join unions in order to receive some protection if they lose their jobs. Such systems induce a special relationship between unions and the unemployed. Given that the jobless form a sometimes significant proportion of union membership, unions are better informed of their situation, and – more than elsewhere – unions integrate the defence of the interests of the jobless in their strategies. But they hardly ever incorporate such interests in their top priorities (see Faniel 2006 and 2009 for Belgium and Linders and Kalander 2007 for Sweden).

Outside ‘Ghent system’ countries, the ties between trade unions and the unemployed are usually looser. Some union statutes simply forbid the affiliation of jobless workers. Other unions develop some strategies in order to retain those members losing their jobs (see e.g. British unions in the 1980s; Barker et al. 1984: 399 and Lewis 1989: 272-3). This is not always easy as the unemployed do not necessarily see what they get back in return for their subscriptions. Conversely, most unions are centred on their activists, and do not necessarily seek to affiliate unemployed people. This greatly influences the ways trade unions represent the unemployed and try to defend them.

### **Trade unions and the collective action of the unemployed**

This complex and, to some extent ambiguous, attitude of trade unions towards the unemployed is even more pronounced in the field of collective action. Including the jobless in union protests raises different questions. How should unions organise the unemployed? Inside professional unions, together with the active rank-and-file? Or on a separate basis, gathering all the unemployed notwithstanding their professional skills? This alternative raised intense debates in unions as different as those of Belgium, Britain or France. When groups are specifically created for the unemployed, it seems they never have the same status and the same weight inside unions’ decision bodies as the professional unions (Demazière and Pignoni 1998: 84-5, Faniel 2006: 36-7, Lewis 1990: 23).

Whatever solution is chosen, one can observe that trade unions, considered at the top levels, hardly hasten to organise their unemployed members in order to have them engage in disputes (Faniel 2009, Linders and Kalander 2010; Ness 1998, Richards 2000), even when union rank-and-file or local sections are more

open to help such mobilisations. Organising the jobless is often seen as difficult. However, throughout time and space jobless people have demonstrated their capacity to mobilise on their own (Chabanet & Faniel 2012, Flanagan 1991, Folsom 1991, Perry and Reiss 2011, Richards 2002). Unions can offer them resources to enable them to organise. But most often unions are quite reluctant to devote helpful resources to the organisation of the unemployed, with the exception of some local unions (see e.g. Reiss 2008 on local trades councils in 1930s Britain) or more radical ones (e.g. Cobas or Sincobas in Italy (Baglioni 2012: 146-147) or the CGT or SUD in France (Chabanet 2012)).

More broadly, one can wonder to what extent trade unions represent the unemployed. Richards (2000) and Royall (1997: 157) point out that trade unions often adopt a wide-ranging argument, focusing on class solidarity. However, building solidarity among the workers, especially between active workers, precarious workers and the unemployed is neither easy for the unions, nor always one of their main aims.

Nevertheless, unions generally prefer organising the jobless within their own structures rather than facing competition from self-organised jobless associations. On the one hand they wish to preserve class unity and avoid competition between active and unemployed workers. On the other hand they seek to keep mobilised groups of jobless people under their wing (Bagguley 1992: 455) and, if possible, to keep them under their control. When this is not possible, the relationship with non-union groups of unemployed people are most often very tense. Historical and contemporary examples provide evidence: the relationship between the TUC and the NUWM on the one hand, and the NLB on the other (Britain during the interwar period); the attitude of the French CGT or the Belgian union confederations towards their own unemployed committees and other organisations of the unemployed (since the 1970s)... (Croucher 1987: 69-71, Faniel 2006, Lewis 1990: 24-5, Maurer and Pierru 2001, 387, Reiss 2008, Richards 2000).

Union leaders see such external mobilisations as competing with their role of organisations of social movement (Ness 1998, XVI). Moreover, accepting the self-organisation of the unemployed outside the union structures would acknowledge a failure to organise them inside the union movement. Finally, non-union groups of the jobless often adopt very critical attitudes towards union practices, especially in the field of unemployment scheme management or regarding the relationships between the trade unions and the political parties whom they are close to, as evidence shows in France, Germany or Sweden (Baumgarten and Lahusen 2012: 68, 75-76, Linders and Kalander 2007: 433-4, Maurer and Pierru 2001: 387, Royall 1998: 361). Nevertheless, union rank-and-file members sometimes involve themselves, on a personal basis, in non-union groups of the unemployed. Some radical unions also helped in creating non-union groups amongst the unemployed (e.g. dissidents of the CFDT creating AC! and later SUD).

Hence, important questions can be raised regarding union movements of unemployed people: are such organisations set up *for* the jobless, in order to

offer them some services or even to control them, or *by* the jobless, in order to engage in disputes (Bagguley 1991: 117-39, Barker et al. 1984: 400-3, Forrester & Ward 1986: 49-55, 1990: 387-9)? Moreover, what freedom of manoeuvre can such groups expect from union leaders?

Unemployment and its consequences, as well as the situation of the unemployed themselves, can thus represent major issues for trade unions and for their 'active' members. However, organising the unemployed inside union bodies and defending their situation and priorities is not natural for unions and it can take various forms. This can lead to underrepresentation of the unemployed (in the unions and more broadly in the society), internal tensions or even conflictual relations (inside unions or with external organisations). Some of the examples presented above show that collaborations between unions and unemployed activists or organisations can nevertheless occur. In such cases, trade unions can provide important resources for the unemployed. But unions' attitudes are still driven by their own interests and strategies and can be strongly modified when circumstances change, as the attitude of the German DGB towards the protests of the unemployed showed in the end of the 1990s, when the SPD came back to power (Baumgarten and Lahusen 2012: 76). Such changes can have damaging consequences for the organisation and mobilisation of the unemployed.

### **A Marxist dialectical approach to trade unions**

This overview of the relationship between trade unions and the unemployed sheds light on the different features of unionism. Setting aside the specific dynamics of the mobilisation of the unemployed (for recent collective works in this field, see Chabanet and Faniel 2012, Croucher et al. 2008, Perry and Reiss 2011), I will now focus on the features of unionism in order to identify the elements explaining their various attitudes towards the unemployed.

The approach developed hereafter adopts a Marxist dialectical viewpoint. In my view, this is essential in order to grasp every dimension of unionism and industrial relations. Pluralism has been widely criticised as being too static and conservative an approach (e.g. Hyman 1979: 420). The empirical evidence presented above has shown the conflictual dimension of the relationship between trade unions and the unemployed. Neo-corporatism does not sufficiently take into account the disruptive dimension of unionism and its role in social movement. On the contrary, perspectives centring on that dimension of unionism (e.g. Olson 1965, Crouch 1982) neglect to some extent the more institutionalised dimension of industrial relations. Touraine's works on the labour movement (1966; Touraine et al. 1984) separate workers' movements too much from trade unions, thereby neglecting to analyse unions *per se* (Hyman 1997: 10-1). By contrast, Rosanvallon (1988) focuses on trade unions' functions but fails to take into account the evolution of the internal dynamics of unionism, including the evolution of the workforce.

Marxism allows us to explain the relationship between trade unions and the unemployed in a dynamic perspective, taking into account the conflictual

dimension of unionism and industrial relations, and examining both the processes at stake *inside* trade unions and their actions *outside*: collective bargaining, disputes and socio-political roles in society. Such a view has to be balanced and can take into account union complexity and contradictions (Gagnon 2003, 15 and 29; Hyman 1975, 16-7 and 66).

Marx and Engels, followed by prominent Marxist authors, wrote about trade unions (Bérout and Mouriaux 2001, Hyman 1971, Kelly 1988). The former stressed the economic and the political roles of trade unions, organising workers and threatening capitalism as they develop class consciousness and form 'schools of war' against capitalism (Engels 1845, see also Hyman 1971: 4-7, 1997: 11, Marx 1847a). Marx and Engels in their later works, followed by Lenin, Luxemburg, Michels,<sup>1</sup> Gramsci and Trotsky, also analysed other aspects of unionism, such as the dominance of the 'labour aristocracy', setting-up of union bureaucracies, development of class consciousness, or the integration of trade unions and, under union guidance, of the workers into capitalist societies.

Moreover, Marxism provides some key concepts and analytical tools so as to observe industrial relations. Hyman (1975, 1979) explored them with very interesting results, and pointed to the limits of earlier Marxist analysis of industrial relations. His open-minded, scientific, pragmatic and non-dogmatic approach remains of acute relevance. It also responds to the need to adopt "a Marxism lined with uncertainties, recognising its deficiencies, searching for new paths open to a greater receptiveness to questioning and to the imagination" (Liebman 1983: 63).

Analysing industrial relations from a Marxist viewpoint, Hyman (1975) stresses the need to take into account four dimensions: "Totality, change, contradiction and practice"(4). This implies a dialectical approach (Gagnon 2003: 15 and 29). Ollman (2005) sees dialectic as "a way of thinking which directs our attention towards the whole palette of possible changes and interactions which are practised in reality"(23). "Dialectic restructures our thoughts on reality by replacing our notion of 'a thing' arising out of common sense, according to which a thing has a history and external relationships with other things, through the notion of 'process', which contains its own history and possible futures, and by that of 'relation', which contains as an integral part what are its links with other relations"(2005: 24). Hence, I propose to analyse, in a dynamic perspective, the contradictions at stake *within* trade unions and to relate them with the whole system *in which* unions are embedded. In my view, this is absolutely necessary in order to explain the relationship between trade unions and the unemployed described above. I will therefore explore:

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<sup>1</sup> Michels cannot be fully considered as a Marxist author. Nevertheless he contributed to a Marxist critique of the bureaucratisation of labour organisations.

- (1) The features of the constituency of trade unions, since they shape the physiognomy of unions themselves in a way that place the unemployed in a peculiar and uneasy position;
- (2) The organisational characteristics of unions, in order to outline the balance of power within unions, and its effects on the various categories of members;
- (3) Their relationship with capitalism, since this influences their perceptions of unemployment, of the situation of the unemployed and of the role they should play in the indemnification of unemployment, but also of their role in contesting or maintaining the existing economical and political system;
- (4) Their relationship with political parties, since this can provide unions with major opportunities when defending interests of their members and/ or the unemployed, but as it also exerts a strong constraint on their strategies and freedom of manoeuvre.

### **Tensions and contradictions of trade unions**

The four dimensions of trade unionism I examine must be considered together to allow for an analysis of the attitude of trade unions towards the question of unemployment and towards the unemployed. These four dimensions are intrinsically linked together. It is however simpler and clearer to examine each in turn.

### **Union 'core' constituency**

"While trade unions unite workers, they also divide them" (Hyman 1989: 230). This first paradox is at the heart even of trade unionism. The appearance of trade unions is intrinsically linked to the development of capitalist production itself (Erd and Scherrer 1985: 116). The relationship which ensues between owners of the means of production and workers obliged to sell their labour force to survive is fundamentally uneven. Their disunity generates competition which can only benefit the employer and gives rise to a continual decline in their pay and working conditions. It is particularly in this regard, confirmed by their observations, that Marx (1847a, 1847b) and Engels (1845) developed their thoughts on trade unionism.

This inequality is felt very soon, and the aim of workers who organise themselves in trade unions from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on has been to present a united front to their employer with a view to modify the balance of power. Historically, this process involves first of all skilled workers. The latter identify closely with their profession, have close relationships at their place of work and benefit from a relatively stable work environment, which encourages their grouping together (Erd and Scherrer 1985: 118, Hyman 1998: 131-2, Robert et al. 1997). They seek in particular to keep to certain rules which favour them, and if need be prevent less qualified workers from joining their associations (Hyman 1975: 43-4).

This gathering together unites workers. Sharing the same profession allows for the growth of a feeling of belonging to a group whose members have common interests, encouraging the emergence of forms of solidarity between these workers and collective action. These workers likewise set up benefit funds designed to help their members in cases of illness, accident, unemployment etc. These funds were at the origin of the Ghent system unemployment scheme mentioned above. Those workers thus do not necessarily turn their back to their colleagues becoming unemployed. Nor do they automatically limit the scope of their action to their own conditions since some of those unions bear wider social or political claims.

But these structures likewise reflect and deepen certain divisions within the working class (Erd and Scherrer 1985: 118). These trade unions bring together workers coming from the same trade while excluding those coming from other trades. Subsequently, the growth of industry-wide unions, based on the sectoral activity and no longer on a trade, reflects this same process of 'divisive unification'. Lenin (1902) and Gramsci (1977) thereby underlined that the growth of trade unions followed the path of the division of labour imposed by the capitalist system itself (see Kelly 1988: 54-5).

Furthermore, the fact that the trade unions are mainly made up of what Engels (1892) and Lenin (1915, 1916) were to call the "labour aristocracy",<sup>2</sup> engenders another kind of division, in relation to the least favoured segments of the working class. The low qualified workers, amongst whom one again finds the majority of foreign workers or women workers, and the unemployed are either excluded from the first unions, or, when large-scale and/ or industry-wide unionism takes hold, excluded most of the time from the management bodies running these organisations.

From here on, one can suggest (Hyman 2001: 30-1) that most of the trade union organisations are essentially built on a kind of 'core' constituency (Hyman 1998: 132), are limited even, to the latter, making the skilled worker, adult, male, native, employed, with a full-time stable job, the typical trade unionist. This profile varies different times and places, corresponding more to miners, to metalworkers or/ and to civil servants etc.

This preponderance of members of the 'core' in trade union activities and decision-making does not necessarily mean that the trade union reasoning is solely centred on these workers and the defence of just their interests. Many trade union bodies adopted solidarity between the different grades of worker as one of the central virtues at the heart of their reasoning (Richards 2000). Not just from the willingness to use the collective force of some to protect others but also because this all-embracing notion fosters worker unity coming from different sectors around common values and concerns (Gagnon 2003: 25, Hyman 1998: 143). Moreover, solidarity towards the weakest amongst the wage earners so as to improve the pay and working conditions of the latter seems to

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<sup>2</sup> However, the working class has never constituted a homogeneous group but has always been distinguished by a certain heterogeneity.

some trade unionists as necessary so as to limit the competition these workers might threaten with regard to the core workers and their own pay and working conditions.

It would however be naïve to take such reasoning as a true reflection of internal trade union relations. Most trade union organisations are basically built around workers from the core and led by people issuing from it (Hyman 1998: 142-3). Consequently, they generally tend towards defending in the first place – but not only – the interests of this dominant class of workers (Hyman 1998: 131-2, 2001: 30-1, Hyman and Fryer 1975: 164, Richards 2000). It is all the more so when these interests come into conflict with those of other groups of workers, less well organised and represented within the unions, or when the trade union struggle seems more difficult, for example because of economic or political circumstances (Richards 2000: 169-70). Women, immigrant workers, white collar workers, precarious or unemployed workers, are thus described as fitting less well in the world of trade unions, and their interests less or less well taken into account by the latter (Hyman 2001: 30-1, Kelly 1988: 55, Taylor 1989: 188). Even these groups are sometimes ostracised by the core workers and by their trade union organisations (Hyman 1975: 45-6). Sexism, racism or other forms of exclusionary behaviour are not exceptional inside trade unions.

The centrality of core workers in unions' structure makes it difficult for the unemployed to find their place in unions. In many unions, the model of organisation is based on the workplace and delegates are chosen at that level. This excludes *ipso facto* the unemployed from a major place of union activism and consequently from decision bodies. Moreover, internal divisions based on branches or professions shape the organisation of many unions, leaving few space for a specific organisation of the unemployed, which has an interprofessional character. Hence, creating such structures questions the traditional model of organisation of those unions, therefore engendering strong internal reluctances to such a structural change, without completely making it impossible to occur. Finally, the centrality of core workers also influences the unions' agenda setting. Union priorities are more likely determined by the situation of the 'active' workers and the claims they make. Whether these coincide or not with those of the unemployed is often of major importance to understand why the unions also defend the interests of the unemployed or prioritise those of the core workers.

### **Bureaucratised organisations**

So as to consolidate and underpin their collective action, workers endow themselves with increasingly elaborate organisations. Amongst them, some are given the responsibility, at the professional level, of running these organisations, to structure them, to manage them and ensure they are protected. But these people eventually comprise a socially specific group, whose conditions for existence and self interest can diverge significantly from those of the body of members of the organisation. Mainly concerned with the

preservation of the organisation itself and, more broadly, its own interests, this union bureaucracy comes to increasingly defend this structure and its own concerns over the real and major working and living conditions of the whole of organised labour. Consequently, the union bureaucracy will of course contribute to protecting workers and improve their condition, but it is going to put a brake on their combativeness in those cases where collective action seems to it to challenge the stability of the organisation, as well as its own situation – which is linked to this stability – and its own interests.

The existence of organisations with a certain solidity is essential so as to underpin the union struggle (Hyman 1975: 162, Marx 1847a: II,5). But 19<sup>th</sup> century working conditions hardly allowed one to deal efficiently with the management and growth of trade unions (Mandel 1978: 5, Weber 1975: 272). For these organisations to be able to strengthen both themselves and their scope, it was imperative that certain militants concentrate on their management and their running (Michels 1911).

This structuring and professionalisation are indispensable to allow for the expansion of the trade union movement and obtaining concrete gains *by and for* the latter (Hyman 1971: 15). This consolidation also allows for going beyond the framework of single undertakings, to pursue broader and less corporate claims, which in return also reinforces the trade union movement (Hyman 1975: 162-9, Mandel 1978: 11). Max Weber saw in the bureaucracy the best means of developing specialised know-how as well as an efficient and continuous action (Bérout and Mouriaux 2001: 101-2).

In many cases, the workers thus seconded and remunerated to run the trade union organisation come from the 'core' (Hyman 1975: 72-8). Consequently, "this worker bureaucracy is the political spokesman of the worker aristocracy, and not of the main mass of the proletariat" (H. Weber 1975: 248). This can explain why many union representatives do not really know the reality the unemployed face, as they have not necessarily been confronted with such a situation in their personal story. But this is not the only characteristic of that bureaucracy.

### *Classical Marxist authors and union bureaucracy*

From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx and Engels note that the revolutionary struggle of the working class is held back by corruption – both material and ideological– of some of its leaders (Hyman 1971: 9). Lenin (1915) and Trotsky (1969), or even Michels (1911) underlined that by becoming professional militants, the staff of the workers' parties or the unions cut themselves off from their position as workers and the harshness of the latter (Bérout and Mouriaux 2001, 103-9; Hyman 1971: 15-20, Kelly 1988: 44-5, Mandel 1978: 21-2, Weber 1975: 248-9 and 276-7). Their material well being may likewise improve. Besides, their new workload activity, while not being an easy life brought them "a position of influence, a wide area of autonomy, a sense

of meaning and importance, a status in the community, which few trade unionists can expect from their ordinary employment" (Hyman 1975: 78).

As outlined by Luxemburg (1906), Gramsci (1977) and, to a lesser degree, Michels (1911), the ideological environment also influences the bureaucratisation of the unions (Bérout and Mouriaux 2001, 105; Hyman 1975: 90-1, Kelly 1988: 56-7 and 77, Weber 1975: 226-32 and 277). So as to speed up their immediate claims, the unions have to get themselves accepted as valid intermediaries by both employers and the state. For most of the time this puts constraints on the leaders to moderate and select amongst workers' demands so as to render them acceptable and workable.

At least four consequences arise:

1. The union representatives become intermediaries between the mass of the workers and the state or the employers. This role raises their standing and confers on them a key position.
2. This process brings with it a development of their skills and technical acumen necessary for the handling of their files. This contributes to the gap which separates them from the rest of the workers and their training levels and makes more difficult the latter's control over them, in the absence of the skills necessary to do so. These two aspects increase the authority of these representatives at the heart of the union body.
3. The union leaders are brought around to regularly rub shoulders with the employers or the state. Besides the material advantages this may bring them, this also shapes their view of things and strengthens their trend towards conciliation, class collaboration even.
4. The union representatives risk, bit by bit, regarding the acquired improvements obtained, although quite real ones, as decisive and sufficient progress. They arrive henceforth at losing sight, according to Luxemburg (1906) and Gramsci (1977), of the fact that these victories are relatively unreliable and in any case partial, and of considering negotiation and the stability of the union organisation as aims in themselves.

The tendency is for the staff members comprising the union bureaucracy to arrive progressively at collectively making the preservation of the union organisation a more important objective than that of the improvement, through the latter, of living and working conditions of the wage earners they are deemed to protect. The means gain the upper hand over the ends as a phenomenon of 'goal displacement' (Hyman and Fryer 1975: 156-7).

Little by little, the union leaders turn to defending primarily their own interests which depend closely on the stability of this structure they are running (Hyman 1975: 66, Hyman and Fryer 1975, 157). Consequently, the union bureaucracy sets up different ways of conserving and enlarging its power at the heart of the

trade union organisation (Hyman 1975: 78-9; Weber 1975: 273-4) and keeps an eye on the maximum preservation of this organisation so as to protect its own interests, to the point of putting a brake on workers' action if it judges that the latter risks challenging the stability of the organisation and its self interest. This process brings to the fore the deeply conservative character of the union bureaucracy as raised particularly by Luxemburg and Michels (Hyman 1971: 16, Weber 1975: 224-5). Very far off the positive character M. Weber ascribed to the bureaucracy, this aspect of the attitude of the union representatives constitutes the other side of the union bureaucratic coin.

These features of the unions reinforce the capacities of the core workers to impose their claims on union agenda, sometimes at the expenses of those of the unemployed. They also often bring union representatives to develop an attitude of 'good manager' of the unemployment scheme when they are involved in its management, since preserving that position can appear to be as important as using it to improve the situation of the unemployed. Involvement in the management of the unemployment scheme can give union representatives a prominent status as it gives them an official recognition. It can also give them more financial means as union unemployment funds are backed by the state. This serves both the reinforcement of the funds protecting the unemployed and the expansion of the union bureaucracy. But it can also deprive them from some resources as those management activities take much time and human resources that cannot be devoted to organising more combative actions, especially during periods of crisis, when lots of members are unemployed (see Vanthemsche 1994 for evidence from Belgium). Moreover, the importance of the bureaucracy and its strategic choices explain the tendency of many unions, especially at their top level, to prevent the unemployed from mobilising on too radical a manner or even more from organising themselves outside union structures, out of union control.

#### *Union bureaucracy, internal democracy and unity*

Generally, union organisations are built along democratic lines (Hyman 1975: 70-4, Hyman and Fryer 1975: 164). Trade unionism likewise emphasises the principle of unity. The collective weight that workers look for when they come together as a trade union body can only be reached on condition that the latter acts in a concerted and disciplined manner (Anderson 1967: 276, Hyman 1975: 65, 1998: 134). The bureaucratisation of trade unions is ill suited to a real internally democratic operation. To establish their control over their organisation, to preserve the latter and their own interests, the union representatives call upon the need for the unity and discipline of the workers, or even the principle of union democracy, so as to influence decision making, and stifle conflicting views. The skills and technical abilities their function has conferred upon them serve likewise to control the organisation. Moreover, emphasis on the technical aspects of the files reduces the practice of democracy within unions since the bureaucrats can claim to be the only ones capable of assessing all the implications of certain problematical situations and of taking

decisions (Bérout and Mouriaux 2001: 111, Gagnon 2003: 24, Hyman and Fryer 1975: 159-60, Weber 1975: 274).

Reduction of internal democracy often gives rise to apathy among rank-and-file members and their disinterest in the running of their trade union organisation, reinforcing the diminution of union internal democracy (Hyman 1971: 14-7, 1975: 92, Hyman and Fryer 1975: 165, Michels 1911). This increases the possibility of union representatives controlling the position taken by their union organisation. However, this passivity of members also undermines the union organisation itself, their weakness being paradoxically the exact opposite of the aim pursued by the union bureaucracy. Nevertheless, this tendency towards the reduction in the democratic character of union practices did not occur immediately, nor without resistance. It is not self-evident and is not inescapable (Hyman 1971: 32-3, 1975: 69-83).

Looking at the organisation of the unemployed inside Belgian unions, Faniel (2006: 58-62) points to the gap between, on the one hand, union officials and their experts involved in the management of the unemployment scheme, using official jargon and focusing on technical aspects of the rules governing that scheme, and on the other hand the small union groups of unemployed aiming at obtaining modifications of those rules in order to improve their daily situation. The lack of communication between the two groups, their misunderstanding even, and the ascendancy of the former on the latter inside union structures and in union policy making often lead those few unemployed involved in union activism to disappointment and feeling of ineffectiveness, with potential demobilising consequences.

### *Disciplining the working class*

Hyman (1975: 26-7 and 65) distinguishes 'power for' and 'power over'. By uniting together, the workers acquire collective force which confers on them a power *for* them, so as to defend their interests faced with other actors (employers, the state etc.) But in taking control of the trade union organisation and restraining its internal democratic working, the union bureaucracy diverts the strength of organised labour in a unified and disciplined way so as to establish power *over* the latter, which risks overriding the power *for* the latter (Hyman 1975: 195).

Mills (1948) clearly underlined the wholly dialectical tension to which a union leader is subjected. "Yet even as the labor leader rebels, he holds back rebellion. He organises discontent and then he sits on it, exploiting it in order to maintain a continuous organisation; the labor leader is a manager of discontent. He makes regular what might otherwise be disruptive, both within the industrial routine and within the union which he seeks to establish and maintain" (8-9). This famous quote stresses the double-sided face of union bureaucracy: strengthening and leading union action but maintaining it in 'reasonable' proportions.

According to Gramsci (1977), the bourgeoisie and the state have well understood all the gain they could derive from the stabilising and conservative magnitude of the union bureaucracy. This is why the repression of the burgeoning union movement gave way bit by bit to the creation of negotiating structures, constraining union representatives to moderate the demands they bring, and end by stifling the radicality of the workers' movement and reinforce the union bureaucracy itself (Kelly 1988: 77). Mills (1948: 119) emphasises that the union leaders have also fully understood the advantage they could gain from this collaboration with the employers or the state bureaucracy so as to safeguard the organisation and defend their interests. Trotsky goes further when he adds "the perspective of an *active* and *deliberate* strategy by government and industry to emasculate the threat inherent in unionism" (Hyman 1971: 17), made possible by the use of the bureaucracy. For him, "trade unions can either transform themselves into revolutionary organisations or become lieutenants of capital in the intensified exploitation of the workers. The trade union bureaucracy, which has satisfactorily solved its own social problem, took the second path. It turned all the accumulated authority of the trade unions against the socialist revolution and even against any attempts of the workers to resist the attacks of capital and reaction" (Trotsky 1969: 54). In other words, the union bureaucracy has thus transformed the power *for* the workers into a power *over* the latter.

In periods of crisis, unions involved in the management of unemployment schemes often accept restrictions in the levels and conditions of indemnification provided the whole system be maintained and/ or the role of the unions remain unchanged (see Faniel 2006 for Belgium or Veil 2010: 74-75 for Germany). Consequently, union top leaders try to avoid uncontrolled mobilisations by the unemployed that could challenge their position. However, local union activists and officials or radical unions are more likely to mobilise against such reforms as they can feel less bound by the system. At the same time, this can also explain why union leaders can oppose strong reforms of unemployment scheme if such reforms endanger the position of their organisations in the management of the scheme, as shown by LO's attitude against proposals of the rightist Swedish government in the second part of the 2000s (Jolivet and Mantz 2010: 145).

#### *"Dialectic of partial conquests"*

So why do workers accept to remain members of such organisations and continue to give their support to these leaders? To improve their situation in concrete terms, these workers have to act collectively, and they need a solid organisation which underpins and furthers their collective action. Union representatives gain skills that make them necessary to the workers' battle. Consequently, and the workers are very mindful of it, it is through their union organisation and thanks to the organisational work on the collective struggle led by (or sometimes despite) the union bureaucracy that improvements in their situation can be obtained.

Nevertheless, the acquisition of these improvements is likewise at the root of the conservatism of the union bureaucracy. Mandel (1978) talks in this respect of a "dialectic of partial conquests" (6-7). The union bureaucracy channels "all the weight of the collective force of the working class" (21) and guides it so as to obtain improvements in the living and working conditions of the latter. But it equally puts a brake on new struggles and limits workers' action to partial conquests when the consequences of a new demand seem to endanger the workers' former gains, the stability of the organisation and/ or the situation and own interests it derives from its position at the heart of this organisation. In some cases, the union bureaucracy will negotiate what constitutes objective steps back for some of the wage earners, provided it does not affect a priori the union organisation itself, its own interests and those of its leaders. It develops this attitude all the more so faced with a revolutionary prospect, considered too adventurous and risky.

These findings broaden the understanding of the attitude of unions faced with the unemployed. On the one hand, the unions are sturdy organisations which can bring precious resources to bear for the unemployed so as to organise themselves and lead collective action. On the other hand in some countries, the unions are involved in the management of unemployment schemes. This leads them to appear 'responsible', as being invited to do so by employers and the public authorities. The demands of the unemployed very often appear too radical. Besides, not belonging to the union 'core', the unemployed have more trouble especially in getting themselves organised within the union structures and having their interests taken on board by the latter. Delegation democracy which is the foundation of union organisation is built on the worker collective, from which the unemployed are excluded. Moreover, union democracy is somewhat diverted by the union bureaucracy which is itself comprised of people coming from certain proportions of the wage-earners from which the unemployed are likewise excluded.

## **Trade unionism and capitalist system**

From a Marxist perspective, obviously, no serious analysis of industrial relations is possible without a central emphasis on the determining role of capital (Hyman 1975: 97).

The existence of trade unions in the West is closely linked to the birth and growth of the capitalist production method. It is in opposition to this or, at least to some of its consequences, and with the aim of fighting the latter or to alleviate them that workers organise themselves in trade unions. It is also, however, the capitalist system and the actors who dominate it which determine the framework in which the unions evolve. Consequently, while it is the disappearance of the capitalist production method which would most surely allow the unions to achieve their objectives in a decisive rather than temporary

manner,<sup>3</sup> this same capitalist context contributes to divert their action from such a radical struggle.

### *Threat to the capitalist system*

The growth of trade unions allows workers to struggle with a degree of efficiency against their employers, whose aim is to increase profit levels by further exploitation of wage earners by lowering earnings, increasing productivity, reducing the number of employed workers, etc. Since Marx (1865) and Engels (1881), the Marxist analysis of trade unionism has emphasised the economically important, but limited, role of the unions. Marxist authors therefore emphasised the need for workers to also develop political action so as to end the capitalist system. However, the economic demands of the unions already by themselves endanger that system (Hyman 1971: 37-8, 1975: 87).

The first reaction of the owners of the means of production, supported in this by the state control institutions, is to prevent the setting up of trade unions, by violence if need be. This repression emphasised the early shakiness of the first unions. But it also contributed to foster the combativeness of organised labour and to radicalise them, hardening as a consequence employer and state repression itself (Hyman and Fryer 1975: 158).

Progressively, some employers preferred to start up negotiations with certain unions in order to make more controllable the conflictual situations they had to face up to. They are akin in this respect to certain union leaders and militants who were themselves seeking this recognition and the advantages that negotiation allows (Hyman 1975: 157-8).

But the acceptance of negotiation by some bosses is conditional on the moderation of the workers' demands and restricting them to certain precise fields. This trend is backed up by a more ideological pressure that the capitalist system exerts not only on union leaders (see above), but as well on the whole of the wage earners. The dominant ideology hammers out the need for workers and their organisations to be 'responsible' and "encourage trade unionists to disavow as 'subversive', 'irresponsible' or 'economically disastrous' any but the most modest of objectives" (Hyman 1975: 88). For the trade unions involved in the management of the unemployment scheme, this adds to the pressure to behave as 'good managers' already mentioned above and hinders union representatives from adopting more a disruptive attitude in that field.

### *Role of the state*

The state is not neutral. In a capitalist system, it ensures the domination of the bourgeoisie over the other social classes, above all the working class. The state

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<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that trade unions themselves necessarily pursue such a goal, as the diversity of ideological and strategic positions of the trade unions illustrates.

can be used to repress the organised labour movement, whether through the law, or by the use of force. The 19<sup>th</sup> century provides numerous examples across Europe, but more contemporary cases also illustrate this statement, on occasions of strikes or demonstrations framed or even repressed by state power.

Progressively, bearing in mind the stabilising role that trade unionism could assume for the capitalist system, the dominant elites of the European states recognised little by little the fact of trade unionism and legitimised it by way of transforming it into a "means of integrating the working class into capitalist society, thus serving as a mechanism of social control" (Hyman 1975: 143).

States thus created collective bargaining bodies and called on unions and employers, by force if necessary, to get involved (Hyman 1989: 224). Coupled with the workers' struggle, this integration of the latter and of their organisations with capitalist society allowed workers to garner significant and unquestionable improvements in their circumstances. The growth of welfare state systems is the clearest illustration of this. But this integration into the system, the inclusion of union leaders in decision making procedures, and constant ideological pressures by the state, brought the union representatives to feel more and more concerned with safeguarding the system in which they are involved and to emphasise demands considered acceptable by the system itself (Hyman 1975: 89-91). This phenomenon also applies to the relationship between the unions and the unemployed. Major unions, whose philosophy is centred on work, can defend the improvement of the unemployment benefits (rather in good economic circumstances than during crises), but they are completely opposed to supporting groups promoting the right to laziness, like the German 'Happy Unemployed' (Baumgarten and Lahusen 2012), or are in conflicting positions inside some groups of unemployed, like AC! in France, with activists defending the right to a basic income (Cohen forthcoming).

### *Consequences for union action*

From being protesting movements, trade unions became "dialectically both an opposition to capitalism and a component of it" (Anderson 1967: 264). We touch here on "the central contradiction of trade unionism [...]: at the same time as it makes possible the consolidation and increased effectiveness of workers' resistance to capitalism, it also makes this resistance more manageable and predictable and can even serve to suppress struggle" (Hyman 1989: 230). This influences the union strategy: "Struggle tends to be channelled into conflicts over issues on which compromise is possible through collective bargaining; hence 'economic' demands are encouraged and 'control' demands discouraged" (idem). Recognition as interlocutor by employers and by the state implies not only a certain moderation on the part of a trade union, but likewise reinforces it (Valenzuela 1992: 57). All the same, such moderation is not automatic and the unions have regularly drawn up much wider and radical demands (Hyman 1975: 87).

Not all trade unions are inspired by the same political philosophy and by the same conception of the world. However, Hyman (2001, 38-65) considers that the Christian-democrat, social-democrat and – more recently – communist inspired practices of the unions tended to converge after WWII in the ambiguous framework of 'social partnership'. The search for negotiation and the preservation of it as a means of action will tend therefore not only to restrain union demands, but equally to get them to converge, globally.

If negotiation can effectively bring some progress, the moderation to which unions are constrained allows for restraint in union demands within the limits acceptable to the capitalist system. In a period of recession the unions which had made of social partnership a favoured practice risk being brought to negotiate setbacks rather than improvements for the workers (Hyman 1971: 19-27). In any case, the unions allow the demands of workers to be brought forward (or at least *some* demands of *some* workers) and to try and get them settled but they tend also to get workers to accept the reality of the capitalist system which creates the wage and working conditions against which, precisely, they are battling. Hence, even more radical unions can somehow have stabilising effects for the capitalist system.

In several European countries the unions play a role in the management of the unemployment scheme. Consequently, beside the fact they care somewhat less about the demands of the unemployed than those of the 'core' workers, union leaders tend to set aside the demands of those without work when they seem too radical for the capitalist system (e.g. the right to laziness), and more broadly, when they could jeopardise the position gained by the trade union organisations, particularly that of managers of the unemployment scheme.

### **Unions and political parties**

Many unions have become aware of the need to supplement and reinforce their economic struggle with political action. Many workers' parties have likewise looked to organise and raise the level of workers' consciousness through those trade union organisations closest to them. More or less close alliances have been built up between union organisations and already existing supporters or created at the instigation of one or the other. Such links allow unions to move forward on some of their demands and, in some cases to strengthen their structure and position in society. But this type of relationship also compels them towards certain concessions, sometimes to the detriment of (some of) their members. Hence, the links established between unions and political parties tend sometimes to encourage the workers' struggle resulting in real gains, sometimes putting a brake on it, to the point of damaging the interests of (some) wage earners.

### *Need for political action*

The need to link political and economic action appeared quite early. Marx (1866) emphasises the need for unions to commit themselves clearly to social and political struggles. Nonetheless, "the texts of Marx say nothing more than the necessary, the indispensable transformation of economic struggles into political struggles, the responsibility of the trade union movement in the setting up of a distinct workers' party. They do not specify the methods of achieving cohesion between economic conflict and political battle" (Mouriaux 1985: 38-9).

A certain variety became clear regarding the ideological conceptions which permeated the unions. Simplifying somewhat, a first demarcation line can be drawn between the trade union organisations of the reformist kind and unions with revolutionary designs such as, at the outset at least, communist movements and anarcho-syndicalists. Another division can be identified between the unions (communists, anarcho-syndicalists and, at the outset at least, social democrats and socialists) convinced of the necessity of implementing a change in society so as to truly improve workers' conditions, and organisations such as the Christian unions or those practising 'business unionism', which consider that the conversion of the capitalist society and harmony between employers and workers will allow for an improvement in the well being of the latter.

### *Link between political parties and trade unions*

The political philosophy of the different unions gives rise to an equally differentiated relation to the political parties. Some unions thus contemplated with suspicion parliamentary action and the organisations which put it forward and considered that direct action by workers organised in unions would suffice to lead the political struggle of the workers. Consequently, revolutionary unionism and anarcho-syndicalism refused to link up with political parties (Hyman 2001: 23, Mouriaux 1985: 34-6).

Other trends sought, by contrast, to develop solid links between unions and political parties, based particularly on the idea that the political weakness of the unions compelled the latter to such alliances to prolong their combat in the political realm (Taylor 1989: 47 and 70). According to the different leanings (communist, Christian democrat, socialist or social democrat), the links created took on a different countenance, were concluded at a different pace (Valenzuela 1992: 61-3) and this at the behest of one actor or the other. These different 'models' of relations between unions and political parties share in common the point of establishing the separation between economic and political struggle, reserving to the trade union actors the care of leading the first and to the partisan bodies that of leading the second. In this way, likewise, these trends differ from anarcho-syndicalism.

### *"Political exchange"*

At the heart of the relations uniting social democratic or Christian democratic parties and unions one finds the notion of 'political exchange'. Such a relationship implies that both types of actor give each other mutual help so as to gather up benefits for the other. By so doing, they intend to strengthen their own situation in return (Taylor 1989: 45-9 and 70-1, Valenzuela 1992: 60).

In this transaction, each brings certain resources to the other. The union actor offers the party the strength of the mass of organised labor under its aegis and the financial support, in the struggles and at the ballot box. Some political leaders arise from the union ranks. On its side, the party hands over the demands (or at least some of them) drawn up by its union ally and tries to get them to succeed through its political action. More widely, it tries to strengthen the situation of the unions (or at least those to whom they are closest) with the aim of increasing the strength of the latter and to make sure of the support.

Ghent system countries clearly illustrate this relationship: political parties historically played a key role in the establishment of subsidies reinforcing union funds against unemployment, enabling unions to attract new members likely to support those parties (see Faniel 2009 for Belgium or Rothstein 1990 for Sweden). In the social democratic model, the party also draws up the political doctrine making up the ideological framework from which the unions will draw inspiration more or less directly. The development of an inclusive vision of the world can encourage militant commitment, including at union level, and induce the unions to go beyond the strictly corporate defence, thus furthering their growth.

If at the outset the relationship was sometimes very close between the parties and social democratic or Christian democratic unions, their links quite clearly loosened, each actor going their own way in relation to others to varying degrees according to the countries and the era (Hyman 2001: 19-21, Taylor 1989: 45-9, 70-2 and 94-5). Generally, this process happened only progressively, over the long term, and these actors often preserved their privileged links.

### *Consequences of the political exchange for the unions*

Thanks to these privileged relations, the unions can secure improvements for workers they protect by means of political action led by their sister parties. However, the social democratic parties, or even more so the Christian democratic ones, accept the capitalist system as a framework of their action, with the aim of reforming it or converting it for the benefit of the workers. Such a strategy has restraining effects and pushes towards acceptance of compromise by the dominant actors in the system. The development of bureaucratisation and its consequences is likewise observable in the case of the big workers' parties which developed in Western Europe.

In normal times, these parties prove to pose relatively little threat to the foundations of the capitalist system. Sometimes, they are led to taking decisions

in favour of social categories other than wage earners or prejudicing the interests of the latter. In some cases, they moreover use the relation that links them to the unions to restrain the latter's members to accept these decisions or to limit themselves to calling them into question. Such pressures can be carried out by means of organic links binding partisan and union organisations, or through interpersonal relationships (Hyman 2001: 20).

The acceptance by union leaders of parliamentary government as the only legitimate form of action and of the pre-eminence of their sister party in the field of political struggle, their willingness to conserve their links with this party, as well as their own characteristics outlined above, quite often bring them to bow before such pressures. Besides, to distance themselves from their sister party when the latter is in power can seem an even worse solution, risking to deprive them of their favourite ally in the political field (Taylor 1989: 49 and 187).

This does not mean that union organisations and their leaders remain completely passive with regard to such policies. Most of the time they look to put pressure on the sister party to shift its policy or, at least, to alleviate the harmful effects for (some of) their members (Valenzuela 1992: 66).

Such links between parties and unions allow most certainly for gains for the union organisations and their members, but it also obliges them, in order to preserve the privileged link established with the party, to accept what are sometimes unsatisfactory compromises or setbacks, to abandon some struggles or bring them to an end. The analysis of relations between unions and the unemployed provides a good illustration of this position. In their sister parties the unions found important allies in the building of the current unemployment schemes. However, since the middle of the 1970s, many of these sister parties brought in reforms of the social protection systems. The unions are thus confronted with difficult choices: to oppose their sister parties or accept compromises, particularly to the detriment of the unemployed. Finally, the presence of the sister parties in power or in the opposition also determines the behaviour of the unions towards the struggles of the unemployed. Evidence from Belgium, from Germany or from Sweden for instance (Baumgarten and Lahusen 2012; Faniel 2006; Linders and Kalander 2007) show that trade unions can support some mobilisations for the unemployed as long as their sister parties are in the opposition but that they can change their attitude quite promptly (but not necessarily without internal tensions) when those parties come back to government.

## **Conclusion**

In many Western countries, the unions speak on behalf of the whole of the working class, the unemployed included. Even so, they keep up a problematic relationship with the unemployed. While the unions protect the conditions of the unemployed in certain cases, it is clear they rarely regard this objective as a priority. Besides, they maintain an ambiguous relation to the organisation and

collective mobilisation of the unemployed. A Marxist dialectical approach to trade unionism allows one to understand the reasons for these union attitudes towards the unemployed.

The unions protect the workers and unify them. They are very aware of how the risks of unemployment weigh heavily on the whole of the working class. It is consequently logical that they are attached to the defence of full employment and to the situation of the unemployed. But the core constituency of the unions influences the priorities of these organisations. As a consequence, the organisation of the unemployed and their concerns often ranks second in the union priorities. For the unemployed, probably the best opportunity to have their claims strongly defended by the trade unions is when the latter analyse the priorities of the former as being perfectly compatible with the interests of the 'core' union rank-and-file, i.e. the 'active' workers.

Unions are bureaucratised organisations. They have at their disposal a large collective body that they can put at the service of the struggles. Including those of the unemployed. In some cases, the unions offer the unemployed invaluable resources to help them get organised. However, the union leaders, especially on whom is placed the pressure of the capitalist system as a whole, also keep a watch on constraining the demands of workers and put a brake on their radicality.

In many countries the unions also play a role in the management of the unemployment scheme. They can use their position to push ahead with certain demands to the advantage of the unemployed. But the union representatives are also subject to pressures, especially ideological ones, coming from the public authorities, from the employers or even from their sister parties (especially when the latter are in the government) aiming at the moderation of their demands. The union management of unemployment schemes as a result takes a more technocratic turn than militant. This is made possible by the absence of any significant organisation of the unemployed at the heart of the unions or the little weight they carry within the union bodies. Finally, the willingness of the union leaders to maintain this position at the centre of unemployment schemes, as well as privileged relations they maintain with their sister parties lead them equally to moderate their demands, to the point of accepting significant climb downs to the detriment of the unemployed and, more widely, of the protection of workers as a whole.

This attitude of the union leaders also explains that they give more importance to the representation of the unemployed *in their name* than the self-organisation of the latter within their own structures. Nonetheless, when it becomes indispensable, these leaders prefer to set up groups of the unemployed within their organisation, and under the control of the latter, rather than let them develop outside the union structures and confront the competition of generally more radical groups which challenge the union monopoly of representation of jobless workers. Finally, if such organisations for the protection of the unemployed emerge nevertheless outside of the trade unions,

the relations they maintain with the management of the latter have more the imprint of hostility or of indifference than of collaboration.

A Marxist dialectical approach to trade unionism based on the combination of the four characteristics of unions developed in this article allows one to understand the discrepancy between on the one hand the trade union reasoning and commitments in support of the protection of the working class, including the unemployed, and on the other hand the acts and strategies really implemented by the majority of Western trade unions faced with the organisation and protection of the unemployed. But all trade unions are not the same and the peculiar position of each organisation regarding each of the four characteristics produces different combinations of relationships between unions and the unemployed. People then have some room for manoeuvre inside organisations shaped by structural dynamics.

Such a perspective makes it possible to understand why the unemployed, other union rank-and-file or some union representatives try to use the force of trade unions to enlarge the defence of the unemployed and to enhance the organisation of the unemployed and the mobilisation of and on behalf of them. It also reveals the possibilities these people can lean on in order to influence the union positions in a more comprehensive and more combative way favourable to the unemployed. But such a dialectical approach exploring the tensions existing inside unions on the four issues also stresses the structural difficulties those people face when trying to modify the relationship between trade unions and the unemployed.

Finally, it would be interesting to complement this approach centred on the trade unions with works considering the viewpoints of the unemployed on the unions. Do they see such organisations as appropriate structures for their own mobilisation? What kind of trade unionism seems to offer them the best help in their struggles?

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