Union Organizing in Comparative Perspective

Prof. Edmund Heery, Professor of Industrial Relations, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University

The labour movements of Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United States have shared the experience of membership decline over the last two decades. Despite this common experience they have varied in the effort they have committed to re-building union organization and in their approaches to organizing. This article describes this pattern of variation and offers an explanation. The latter emphasises three factors: the opportunity structure presented to trade unions by the institutions of industrial relations, the strategies of employers and governments and the meanings attached to union membership in labour movements with different inherited identities. These factors have combined to make organizing central to the attempts at revitalization of US and British unions but have reduced the incentive to organize in the labour movements of continental Europe.

1. Introduction

Despite a shared experience of membership decline since the 1970s, the five countries considered in this special issue have differed in the level of commitment they have shown to organizing the unorganized. In the USA and UK organizing has been a priority, as seen in the creation of the Organizing Institute by the AFL-CIO and the Organizing Academy by the TUC (Hurd et al. 2003: 101; Heery et al. 2000a). In the other three countries there have been recruitment initiatives but organizing has been less pivotal to the project of revitalization (Bacarro et al. 2003; Behrens et al. 2003; Hamann and Martinez Lucio 2003). The purpose of this article is to explain this seeming anomaly: why is it that organizing the unorganized is central to the attempts at revitalization in Britain and the United States but is less of a priority in continental Europe?

This task is performed in two main stages. In the first, an analytical framework is presented to help map the pattern of organizing in the five countries. The focus here is on the level and form of trade union organizing activity. All trade union movements must organize by virtue of their status as membership organizations but the degree of prominence they attach to the activity and the manner in which it is conducted can vary substantially. In the second stage an explanation is offered of variation in national patterns of organizing that draws upon theories of comparative industrial relations and the comparative analysis of social movements. This explanation emphasises the opportunity structure presented to unions by the institutions
of industrial relations, the strategies of employers and government and framing processes that attach varying meanings to union membership in different national contexts (Frege and Kelly 2003: 10—15). Necessarily it is tentative. Research on organizing to date has been largely restricted to the countries of the English-speaking world and consequently the analysis that follows presents an agenda for comparative research, as much as a summary of current knowledge.

2. The Pattern of Organizing

The pattern of union organizing developed by national labour movements varies along three primary dimensions. In the first case, movements can differ in terms of their level of commitment to organizing, which itself may be manifest across several indicators. A high level of commitment may be apparent in the development of formal organizing policies, either by central union confederations or individual unions, comprised of plans, budgets, objectives, targets and procedures for audit and review. Mechanisms of this kind can be viewed as channelling union resources towards organizing. Specialization is another indicator, apparent in the creation of a dedicated organizing function, consisting of conferences, committees, staff and representative roles. Union movements can also differ in the centrality they accord to organizing, its relative priority when compared with other methods of revitalization. Hard indicators of centrality include the proportion of union finance that is allocated to organizing and the relative size of the organizing function. Softer indicators include the prominence accorded to organizing policy compared to other spheres of activity and the extent to which unions have undergone ‘culture change’ or attained the status of an ‘organizing union’, which defines its central purpose in terms of extending organization (Fletcher and Hurd 1998).

The second dimension of organizing is the targeting of activity. A basic distinction that can be drawn here is between consolidation and expansion. Unions that choose to consolidate membership engage primarily in ‘internal’ organizing that raises density where they already have a presence. Expansion, in contrast, consists of attempts to build membership in hitherto unorganized sectors, employing organizations and sites and in this case recruitment is coupled with ‘recognition’, an attempt to establish new collective bargaining relationships with employers (Kelly and Heery 1989: 198—9). A second, and in many cases intersecting dimension, refers to attempts by unions to develop ‘field-enlarging strategies’ (Wever 1998: 392). Unions can pursue an organizing policy that reproduces the demographic and contractual status of their existing members or they can strive for field enlargement. Under the latter, women, minority, younger, contingent and part-time workers are accorded organising priority.
The third dimension of organizing relates to the methods used. One dimension of method is the degree to which recruitment is a diffuse or concentrated activity. Where recruitment is diffuse, union joining will be ongoing and conducted through relatively routine activities, such as a presence at induction for new employees, and stress will be placed on making the union available to those wishing to join through advertising, the regular mailing of membership forms and union websites. Where recruitment is concentrated, in contrast, it will be conducted through planned, dedicated campaigns that may last for a considerable period of time, absorb considerable resources and rely upon specialist organizers. A second aspect is captured in the distinction between organizing and servicing unionism (Carter and Cooper 2002: 713). Under the latter, unions tend to recruit on the basis of offering union representation and other services to individual members who are assumed to occupy a largely passive role within their unions. Under the former, unions seek to collectivize workers through a ‘rank and file organizing strategy’ that seeks to develop activism and collective organization (Bronfenbrenner 1997: 211). In short, unions can approach workers as providers of protective and labour market services or they can assume the characteristics of a social movement, and approach workers as potential activists.

Across the five case study countries, the American labour movement is distinctive in its degree of formal commitment to organizing (Fiorito 2003; Jarley 2002). Since the mid-1980s, the AFL-CIO and several of its major affiliates have developed formal policies, expanded the scale of the specialist organizing function and committed union finances to organizing, so that it lies at the heart of revitalization. This commitment has found expression in attempts to expand into non-union territory, coupled often with field enlargement, attempts to extend trade unionism to the low paid, contingent and immigrant workers. Organizing itself tends to be conducted through focused campaigns and there has been recent experiment with ‘strategic campaigns’, directed at lead employers or groups of employers in key industries. Campaigns seek majority support and use a variety of, often imaginative, tactics to contact, persuade, collectivize and mobilise workers (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; Fiorito 2003: 201). Occasionally, they spill into the wider community and involve coalition-building with other organizations in support of unionization. American unions do target individual workers, through associate member programmes. The primary method, however, is for unions to organize collectively, often in the face of intense employer opposition.

Many of the themes present in American organizing are also manifest in Britain, particularly since the mid-1990s. The TUC has launched a New Unionism initiative to promote organizing amongst its affiliates and a considerable number of individual unions have adopted formal organizing strategies and established dedicated organising departments (Heery et al.
There has also been a renewed focus on expansion, with unions seeking ‘recognition agreements’ from employers through concentrated campaigns. In addition, British unions have experimented with an ‘organizing model’, making use of a variety of ‘union-building’ techniques, imported from America, including workplace mapping, use of representative organizing committees, issue-based organizing, house-calling and recruitment on a one-to-one and like-to-like basis (Heery et al. 2003: 64). Despite these changes, organizing has not become as central to attempts at revitalization as it has in the USA. Other themes are prominent, the most important of which is the quest for company-level partnerships with employers. Elements of organizing practice also differ in Britain. The primary organizing effort is directed at consolidation, building membership where unions already have recognition (often amongst previously neglected groups, like part-timers), and is conducted on a diffuse, ongoing basis. Moreover, notwithstanding experiment with the ‘organizing model’, a proportion of unions target employers, using the offer of partnership agreements to win recognition, and there is a continuing emphasis on recruiting individual members through union services.

In Germany the degree of formalization, specialization and centrality of organizing activity are generally lower than they are in both Britain and the United States. Organizing has tended not to be a major focus of formal policy, organizing departments tend to be small, employing few specialists, and organizing has tended to have low status as a field of activity, attracting few resources (Behrens 2002; Dribbusch 2002). Changes to union structure through merger and the relaxation of jurisdictional rules have been the primary union response to decline, not organizing. Nevertheless, there has been a switch towards greater concern with organizing in recent years and DPG, IG BCE, IG Metall, and IG Bau have all launched formal initiatives (Behrens 2002: 198—208; Behrens et al. 2003: 28—9.). As in Britain, much organizing in Germany is directed at maintaining and raising density at sites with a union presence though there have been campaigns to establish a presence at companies that have remained aloof from industry-wide bargaining. There is also evidence of German unions pursuing field enlargement, including attempts to recruit younger workers and provide dedicated structures for workers in non-traditional employment in private services. Dedicated organizing campaigns are relatively rare in Germany and the bulk of organizing is diffuse, consisting of recruitment by works councillors at the point of entry into unionized firms and head office advertising campaigns (Behrens 2002: 190—91; Behrens et al. 2003: 28). The main focus of activity is the individual employee, primarily through individualistic approaches that emphasise service provision and offer incentives to existing members to recruit colleagues. Union-building of the kind seen in the US and UK is relatively rare.
The Spanish and Italian trade unions have shown least commitment to organizing. Both movements have prioritised field enlargement in recent years, seeking to draw women, temporary and immigrant workers into membership (Baccaro et al. 2003: 45; Miguelez Lobo 2000: 499). Both have also launched programmes of union modernization, a feature of which is the attempt to recruit individual members (including pensioners in the Italian case) through selective benefits and services (Chiarini 1999: 587; Hamann and Martinez Lucio 2003: 70). However, in neither case has there been the development of formal organizing strategies of the kind seen elsewhere or the creation of dedicated organizing departments. Political action has remained the primary method of Spanish and Italian unions, with organizing occupying a secondary, non-central position. It is important to recognise though, that in both countries unions engage in activities that are analogous to organizing. The main confederations use the periodic election of worker representatives, required under their respective labour codes, to acquire legitimacy and create an organizational presence at the workplace and company levels. The concerted campaigns waged to contest these elections correspond in certain respects to the concentrated organizing seen in Britain and the USA (Baccaro et al. 2003: 45—7; Hamann and Martinez Lucio 2003: 70). ‘Voters’ unionism’ (Hamann 2000: 156) of this kind may not generate a high density of membership or depth of organisation, particularly in Spain, but it can establish and legitimise a union presence.

3. Explaining Patterns
The one common pattern across all five countries is the attempt at field enlargement. With greater or lesser seriousness, the five trade union movements have tried to increase membership amongst women and minorities and those with an ‘atypical’ employment status. Initiatives of this kind can be viewed as an adaptive response on the part of national labour movements to relatively long-run social and economic change, including the feminization of employment, transnational migration and the shift of economic activity to services. On the other dimensions of organizing, however, there is notable variation, with a distinctive profile of organizing apparent in each national case. Variation of this kind is best explained by reference to institutional and strategic factors that themselves vary across national cases and it is to a consideration of these that we now turn.

Opportunity Structure: One source of variation is the formal institutions of industrial relations, comprising the structure of collective bargaining and the system of collective employment law. This institutional context can provide incentives for unions to engage in organizing activity in some national contexts, while depressing the need for organizing in others. This is particularly apparent in the division between the two Anglo-Saxon labour movements, Britain
and the USA, which have prioritised organizing, and the three continental countries, Germany, Italy and Spain, which have accorded it less prominence. The institutional context can also shape the pattern of organizing and in this case, there are instructive differences within the Anglo-Saxon camp, between Britain and the USA.

The institutions of industrial relations influence the level of activity by rendering national labour movements more or less dependent on organizing. In Britain and the USA dependency is high and organizing is an essential process through which unions can secure four key institutional goals. It provides a means to obtain subscription income, establish collective organization within undertakings, fix and maintain collective bargaining relations with employers and confers legitimacy on unions. In the UK and USA many unions are subscription-dependent, there is as yet no general system of statutory works councils and, in an institutional context characterized by decentralized bargaining and certification law, unions need to organize to secure legitimacy and establish relations with employers. In the three continental countries, in contrast, dependency is lower and there are alternative channels through which all four goals can be attained (Baccaro et al. 2003; Behrens et al 2003; Hamann and Martínez Lucio 2003). In Spain and Italy unions have access to an element of state funding, while in Spain, Italy and Germany works council and other statutory provisions provide a means for unions to establish a presence at workplace and company levels. The same provisions confer legitimacy, with unions in all three countries contesting and typically winning the bulk of works council and works committee elections. Electoral success, in turn, furnishes the basis for effective joint consultation with individual employers in the German case and collective bargaining in Italy and Spain. In all three countries, moreover, centralized bargaining and extension procedures reduce the need for organizing to establish new bargaining relationships: the proportion of non-bargaining employers is low, albeit growing, particularly in Germany.

The institutional context can also shape the pattern of organizing. In Britain (and in the other European countries), the union-shop is unlawful, imposing a requirement on unions to consolidate membership through diffuse, ongoing organizing activity. Much of this is directed at individual free-riders and so depends on offering selective incentives to workers to take out union membership, typically consumer, labour market and security benefits. The union-shop is unlawful in the USA in ‘right-to-work’ states and in the public sector but elsewhere consolidation is not a major requirement. As a consequence, union organizing concentrates on expansion, typically through concentrated campaigns that seek to develop majority support and collective organization at workplace level as a basis for winning a certification election.
Employer and Government Strategies: It has long been recognised that the strategies of governments and employers can shape the activities of trade unions. In the field of organizing, government strategy is probably the strongest influence on the level of activity. The relative neglect of organizing by the Spanish and Italian unions arises in part from their relations with the state (Baccaro et al 2003; Hamann and Martinez Lucio 2003). In both countries the state has bolstered the role of central union confederations as authoritative social partners, thereby reducing their need to rely on internal sources of strength, developed through organizing. In Germany, similar processes are discernible. The concern of German unions at their declining presence in parts of the economy has led to organizing activity but also to successful pressure on the Government to reform the Works Constitution Act to make it easier to establish works councils in subsidiaries and smaller enterprises (Jacobi 2003: 219—21). In the USA, in contrast, the state continues to pursue an effective policy of ‘union exclusion’ and so the labour movement is thrust back on its own capacities, with the result that organizing is central to attempts at revitalization. Public policy is less hostile to trade unionism in Britain, particularly since New Labour’s return to power but relations still fall short of social partnership rendering unions dependent on organizing activity.

The strategies of employers arguably exert most influence on the form of organizing and here the most instructive comparison is between Britain and the USA. In the latter, near universal employer opposition to unions and the development of sophisticated union-busting services create an extremely hostile environment for organizing. The result has been the continual refinement of union tactics and the emergence of sophisticated techniques for countering employer opposition. American unions have trained organizers, planned campaigns and use methods like house-calling, organizing committees, community coalitions and corporate campaigning because they need them to cope with a harsh environment (Hurd et al 2003: 102—3). In Britain, employers can be intensely hostile and some have begun to use US union-busting consultants. The overall degree of hostility is less, however, leading some unions to rely on partnership approaches to organizing or to rely on employer support and encouragement of union joining when building up membership through a strategy of consolidation.

Framing: The meanings that unions attach to membership decline and membership itself can vary, with important implications for the level and form of organizing activity (Frege and Kelly 2003: 14). In Britain and the USA, the level of membership has for long been accepted as an indicator of union strength and vitality, and consequently membership decline has elicited a series of initiatives to stem the fall in union density. In Germany, Italy and Spain, in contrast, alternative measures of union vitality, such as success in workplace elections, have lessened
concern with membership per se. In Italy and Spain, moreover, competing national confed-
erations have tended to focus on their relative performance with less regard being given to
changes in aggregate union density. In these two countries the traditional meaning attached
to union membership is also distinctive. Members have often been activists and supporters of
unions, who are prepared to abide by a call for strike action, frequently do not join (Miguelez
Lobo 2000: 503). The conception of members as an activist cadre, which has been particu-
larly strong in left unions in these countries, has probably reduced the salience of organizing.
In Britain and the USA, in contrast, where supporters are members and the union is con-
ceived as a membership as well as an activist organization, organizing necessarily has
greater prominence.

The meanings attached to union membership can change over time, often as a result of
leadership change and the exposure of trade unions to outside forces. In the USA, the in-
creased emphasis on organizing in the past decade has arisen from leadership change,
while new methods have been imported through the recruitment of non-labour activists into
the labour movement. In the UK a fresh emphasis on organizing has also been prompted by
leadership change and the transfer of methods from outside. In the latter case, however, it
has been the transfer of organizing methods from the American and Australian union move-
ments that has been the key mechanism. In the three other cases the emergence of an or-
ganizing leadership is not yet apparent. In Spain and Italy, moreover, the project of revitaliza-
tion has emphasised the ‘modernization’ and ‘professionalization’ of union activity, often
through deliberate reference to practice in Germany and Sweden. Northern European social
partnership, not American organizing, has served as the legitimating case for union change.

4. Conclusion

All five national trade union movements considered here will have to reverse membership
decline if they are to secure their long-term futures. If the analysis presented above is valid,
however, then they will continue to show varying commitment to organizing and will use dif-
ferent methods. Convergence on a strategy of revitalization, in which organizing is central will
only occur if there is change in the institutions of industrial relations, the strategies of em-
ployers and governments and in union leadership and ideology in those countries of conti-
nental Europe where organizing currently has low priority. In these cases, organizing will be-
come more central, to the degree that bargaining is further decentralized, governments and
employers further embrace neo-liberalism and activists and leaders seek to learn from what
they have often regarded as the failing labour movements of the English-speaking world.
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