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Trade Unions in Europe: Meeting the Challenge

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Over the two past decades it has become common to refer to the crisis of European trade unionism. Recent studies have offered some indication of the major facets and current dilemmas affecting trade unions in Europe, but the analysis has not always received a European approach in the wider literature. Numerous interpretations have been engaged with a national orientation while discussing the nature of the challenges facing trade unions in Europe. They have most notably dealt with issues covering union exclusion at the workplace, decentralization of collective bargaining, shifts in the sectoral composition of employment, expansion of temporary and atypical jobs, and new forms of international flexibility in each domestic environment, on one hand. On the other hand, how these challenges have been addressed in the areas of union retention and organization in the different national contexts has also been considered. Deborah Foster and Peter Scott's edited collection *Trade Unions in Europe: Meeting the Challenge* draws from examining the impact of economic Europeanization on the institutions of trade unionism at the European level in general, and on national trade unions in particular. Hence, under the new features of European economic integration, the analysis sets out to explore "the processes whereby unions are confronting changes potentially threatening their future relevance, viability and standing" (page 11). These processes can be summarized as follows: social dialogue within Europe, European Works Councils (EWCs) within transnational firms, Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the so-called open method of coordination (OMC). This is of crucial importance if we want to know whether, to a certain extent, it is possible to identify a particular European social model, which exhibits the attempt to

preserve a balance between social benefits and the spheres of economic activity. Through a carefully selection of debates and papers which were presented at the Conference entitled "European Unions 2000," organized by the University of the West of England (Bristol, UK), their book aims to examine how (if any) trade unions are meeting the challenge of representing the interests of labour in an increasingly complex and influential European environment. The book itself contains a challenging proposal, both theoretically and empirically, which consists in the interest to explore whether, or to what extent, it is possible to identify a common trade union policy for social Europe while trying to evaluate "the role and influence of trade unions and the nature of their responses" (page 9) at both the supra-national level and within the workplace.

Trade Unions in Europe: Meeting the Challenge consists of seven chapters (including the introduction), each contributing to the debate on the role, relevance and future of trade unions as collective voices for workers in the countries that make up the European Union. Embracing the idea of "social Europe" has involved a dialectic with traditional trade union national values, embodying notions of democracy, equity, internationalism, but also the pragmatics of regulating an increasingly supra-national economy. In the process, this implies articulating within the domestic context, between the trade unions and their members, and between the different strata of the national and supranational trade union movement, by referring to what Waddington and Hoffman term in their chapter in the book the "servicing" and the "organizing" models. Waddington and Hoffmann consider the regeneration of an articulated trade union organization

as integral to the Europeanization of union activity. In particular, they argue that such “articulation” between levels is becoming more critical to union effectiveness. Thus, they are concerned with the mechanisms trade unions put in place to articulate their interests while representing their members. The analysis also conveys discussion on those categories of workers who have been traditionally excluded from membership, such as women. More specifically, the dimension of gender inequality is illustrated by Jane Pillinger in a case study of trade unions in the public service in Europe. In her chapter, the author explains the attention on the incorporation of an equal gender opportunity perspective at the national level as the result of the positive attempt to establish a linkage with the initiatives undertaken by the European trade unions in terms of “gender mainstreaming.”

Developments in social dialogue and collective bargaining are also seen as directed towards the achievement of an articulated structure of trade unionism. In other words, as Keller argues in the chapter on social dialogue, the resistance of employers to developing more concerted activities at the European level must be overcome if weaknesses in trade union articulation are overwhelmed on one hand, and whereby more wide-ranging progress towards Europeanization is recorded on the other hand. However, according to Keller the likelihood of such a goal is currently threatened by two sets of factors: the weak willingness on the part of national actors to transfer responsibility for social and employment policies to supranational agents and the extent to which different national union traditions and experiences can be effectively accommodated at the European level. Although various European initiatives (such as the OMC) have been developed in this respect and they work as a form of cross-national benchmarking, Philippe Pochet argues that the significance of such initiatives

for trade unions has been relatively modest to date. This is because there remain considerable national differences in the extent to which trade unions as national social actors have succeeded in gaining an active role within the search for coordination through benchmarking activities across borders.

Whereas some forms of social dialogue, such as those between the European peak organizations at the inter-professional level, raise questions of democratic articulation and vertical coordination between the supra-national levels of European union movement and its national and sub-national manifestations, other forms of recognized social dialogue operate at the level of the individual employer through what Knudsen in his chapter refers to as the EWCs. However, again here the question is identified by Knudsen to ensure coordination between employee representatives at European level and trade unions. In brief, it is considered crucial within EWCs to ensure representation through unionized channels. This draws attention to another relevant issue addressed in the book – that is the level of trade union intervention in particular policy circumstances. By analyzing the implication of the process of EMU upon trade unions, for example, Foster and Scott’s chapter makes clear the case for an abiding union presence at the national level in arguing for the defence of public services.

Trade Unions in Europe: Meeting the Challenge is the first study-length to examine the challenges facing trade unions in Europe, and the attempt by unions to respond to these challenges, from a social European insider perspective – that is to consider the process of economic integration across national boundaries requiring a corresponding extension of social regulation where trade unions are requested to participate. It draws from the pragmatic examination of the problems and opportunities the constitution of the social Europe offers

to the trade union movement in favour of efforts to theorize the extent to which their scope for collective bargaining is made more encompassing. This book opening discussion on the impact of European-level regulation (for example, the establishment of EWCs and the processes of social dialogue) on union strategies is crucial within the relevant literature, and the qualitative and quantitative data contained in the chapters as the result of case study analysis and of surveys undertaken in both the private and the public sector, provide a window into what the European trade union movement (in particular the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and its associated European Industry Federations (EIFs) may think about the difficulties which need to be overcome to see progress and mutual learning among trade unions in Europe. In so doing *Trade Unions in Europe: Meeting the Challenge* transfers attention on a conventional downwards methodological approach, which is the one scholars of trade unionism have traditionally focused on while studying “the impact of EU as an actor upon trade unions” (page 24). However, although this is important we believe it may appear less original when the nature of the

transnational industrial relations system, if such can be called, and the role of the trade union movement in its construction needs to be extensively examined and revitalized. Conversely, the upward involvement of national trade unions in the process of European integration needs to be addressed, and any limit thoroughly explained within the history and the ideological traditions and orientations of national trade unions. Whereas the contributors in Foster and Scott’s edited book seem to depart from considering national unions as “social” actors within the wider “social Europe” overall, at the heart of their analysis is still the concern of the European level, and the impact of Europe at the national level. This approach risks treating trade unions as inherently passive and incapable of initiative. In addition, it weakly engages in discussion regarding the extent of union intervention strategies at the European level. One way, perhaps the most pragmatic, to overcome this may be to shift the focus to national levels, while trying to make sense of different inter- and intra-national differences in union positions towards Europe.

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Le syndicalisme québécois : deux siècles d'histoire

par Jacques ROUILLARD, Montréal : Boréal, 2004, 329 pages, ISBN 2-76046-0307-X.

Cet ouvrage n’est pas fondamentalement nouveau. Il reprend *Histoire du syndicalisme québécois*, publié en 1989, qu’il complète par un chapitre sur la période récente (1985-2003) et par une section fort éclairante ajoutée à chaque chapitre, hormis le premier, sur les résultats des négociations.

L’ouvrage est découpé selon un ordre chronologique : 1818-1900, 1900-1940, 1940-1960, 1960-1985 et 1985-2003. Chaque chapitre comprend essentiellement trois sections : l’historique des

principaux regroupements syndicaux; les rapports entretenus avec les gouvernements (remarquons que les deux derniers chapitres distinguent les rapports avec l’État provincial de ceux avec l’État fédéral : cette distinction est d’autant plus importante que les forces syndicales, comme beaucoup d’acteurs sociaux au Québec, ont tendance à minimiser les rapports avec ce dernier comme si elles vivaient déjà dans un Québec indépendant...); une analyse des activités de grève complétée maintenant