

# The Politics of Restructuring : Trade Unions on the Defensive in Britain Since 1979

Jeremy Waddington and Colin Whitston

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## Article abstract

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# *The Politics of Restructuring*

## *Trade Unions on the Defensive in Britain Since 1979*

Jeremy Waddington  
and  
Colin Whitston

*This paper shows that restructuring and the associated political programme have thrown British unions onto the defensive. It rejects arguments that unions have been 'tamed' and that unions are in terminal crisis, but argues that union structures and practices intended for application in the 1960s and 1970s were found to be inappropriate for the circumstances of the 1990s. Since 1979 a range of policy initiatives have been launched to address existing weaknesses. A review of these identifies several shortcomings and suggests that attempts to establish a 'new' agenda have only just begun.*

Restructuring in Britain since 1979 has been undertaken in a political environment characterised by the dismantling of the institutions of the post-war settlement. The effects of restructuring and this political project are inseparable. Indeed, underpinning the political programme of successive Conservative governments was market deregulation enabling employers to restructure, to adopt more flexible working practices and to raise productivity. Integral to this political programme was the reduction of union power in the labour market and at the workplace. No fewer than eight legislative measures were introduced to this effect between 1980 and 1993. The Conservative government also withdrew from tripartite institutions, effectively excluding unions from even a nominal macro-economic policy role. These political

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\* WADDINGTON, J., Industrial Relations Research Unit, University of Warwick, U.K.  
WHITSTON, C., Department of Human Resource Management, University of Keele and Industrial Relations Research Unit, University of Warwick.

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developments accompanied and enabled employers' strategies to restructure working practices, to 'individualise' aspects of the employment relationship by narrowing the scope of collective job controls, and to decentralise bargaining arrangements.

Supporters of the Thatcherite political project claim that unions were 'tamed' by these measures (Hanson 1991; Roberts 1987). They refer to some aggregate indicators to support their claim: union membership continually fell from 13.2 million in 1979 to 9.5 million in 1991; output per employee consistently rose throughout the 1980s; and the level of strike activity fell sharply (Certification Office 1981, 1993; Brown and Walsh 1991; Edwards 1992). They also argue that the political legitimacy of unions is now a thing of the past and that an ideological emphasis on individualism has undermined the basis for union collectivism (Phelps-Brown 1990). Others not associated with this political project have also indicated that collective organisation is in crisis (Müller-Jentsch 1988) or needs to adopt fundamentally different approaches (Leadbetter 1987).

These claims are rejected here as they take insufficient account of the policies and practices of unionism, and of the contradictions inherent in the political project. This article argues that during the 1980s unions were thrown onto the defensive as the policies and structures developed during the 1960s and 1970s were found to be inadequate in meeting new demands. It also argues that attempts to formulate a new agenda, and to establish structures within which this agenda may be pursued, have only just begun.

The article comprises two sections. The first outlines some of the policy challenges facing unions which arise from restructuring and associated political developments. Three areas are examined: the dimensions of employment restructuring, employer approaches to union recognition, and the impact of deregulation and decentralisation. Whereas the first section highlights only the policy questions facing unions, the second section examines three key policy initiatives launched by unions since 1979. The first and second of these concern the reform of national union organisation, and the extension of recruitment. Collectivism is shown to remain central to union membership. The third is the change in the nature of the tension between pressures towards centralisation and those towards decentralisation within unions. The internal politics of unionism are shown to manifest themselves in different forms than during the 1970s.

#### **UNIONS ON THE DEFENSIVE: CONFRONTED BY NEW CHALLENGES**

The unifying argument of this section is that structural employment shifts have created an imperative for recruitment in previously unorganised

areas, and that, although employers have tended not to reject an established union presence, moves to decentralise bargaining have rendered inappropriate some forms of union organisation.

### **Employment Restructuring**

Between 1979 and 1993 employment in manufacturing fell from 7.1 million to 4.2 million (a decline of 41 per cent), while in services employment rose by 15 per cent from 13.3 million to 15.2 million (Employment Department 1993). Employment thus declined in areas of traditional union strength and increased where organisation was weak. Compared with most of Western Europe, employment restructuring in Britain during the 1980s was pronounced. However, the direction of employment shifts away from manufacturing towards services was similar. Associated with these sectoral employment changes were structural and occupational shifts which exposed further union weaknesses. For example, employment at large manufacturing establishments, traditionally more heavily unionised than smaller sites, declined sharply. Also linked to the growth in employment in private services were increases in the participation rates of women, white-collar, and part-time workers, and the extension of other 'atypical' forms of employment. Each of these trends contributed to the movement of employment towards areas of relatively low unionisation.

It would be easy to conclude that these elements of employment restructuring must account for most of the massive decline in union membership between 1979 and 1992, but the evidence is not clear cut. While some of the decline was due to restructuring, persistently high levels of unemployment account for a substantially higher proportion of the membership decline (Booth 1989; Disney 1990; Green 1992; Waddington 1992). In other words, employment restructuring is insufficient as the sole explanation of the decline in unionisation, but was undoubtedly a contributory factor. Similar employment trends were in evidence throughout the 1970s, when union membership rose by 29 per cent as white-collar and women workers were drawn into membership in large numbers (Waddington 1992). These workers are not individually more predisposed to non-unionism, but are more likely to be found in sectors where unions are not available (Green 1990).

Irrespective of the extent of membership decline attributed to employment restructuring, it is clear that potential union members now tend to be located in different sectors of the economy than the majority of existing union members. Current membership remains concentrated in manufacturing and the public sector. A significant number of potential members are in private sector services where, in broad terms, they form two groups: professional, managerial and white-collar staff; and low paid, relatively insecure workers typified by

retail, catering and hotel employment. Employment restructuring has thus generated a requirement that unions recruit in sectors of the economy which hitherto they have failed to unionise, if they are to reverse the membership losses sustained during the 1980s. Furthermore, the interests of these workers will reflect their position in the labour market, requiring unions to establish mechanisms whereby these interests can be represented.

### **Employers and Union Recognition**

Collective bargaining coverage has declined markedly since 1979. Two factors have contributed to this contraction: derecognition of unions by employers; and the large number of recently established workplaces where unions have failed to secure recognition.

The decline in collective bargaining coverage can be illustrated by either the proportion of employees, or establishments, covered. Both measures indicate a sharp downward trend, particularly during the late-1980s. Estimates suggest that the proportion of employees covered by collective agreements fell from 72 per cent in 1973 to 64 per cent in 1984 and then to 47 per cent by 1990 (Brown 1993). A similar decline in the coverage by establishment has been recorded; from 71 per cent of establishments in 1984 to 54 per cent in 1990 (Millward et al. 1992:94).<sup>1</sup> The fall in the coverage of collective bargaining by establishment between 1984 and 1990 occurred in all sectors: in private manufacturing from 64 per cent to 51 per cent; in private services from 41 per cent to 33 per cent; and in the public sector from 95 per cent to 78 per cent (Millward et al. 1992:94). However, the decline in the public sector was distorted by the establishment of Review Bodies for nurses and teachers, which involved the suspension of national pay bargaining, although these groups retain a form of 'quasi-bargaining' (Bach and Winchester 1994). These peculiarities apart, the uniformity of the decline suggests substantial changes in the attitudes of employers towards bargaining and the role of unions at the workplace.

Contrary to experience in the United States, where decertification has had significant effects on union decline (Goldfield 1987:189-217; Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986:47-80), derecognition in Britain was not widespread, but was restricted to particular industries and occupations. By industry, derecognition was concentrated in shipping and provincial newspapers (Claydon 1989; Smith and Morton 1990). Even in these industries, the decline in

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<sup>1</sup> The Workplace Industrial Relations Survey conducted by Millward et al. excludes workplaces with 25 or less employees. The level of coverage is thus likely to be overstated as collective bargaining would not be established at the majority of establishments excluded from the survey.

in employment had a more marked effect on union membership loss than derecognition (Waddington 1992). Occupational derecognition was concentrated among management and professional grades, particularly as a prelude to the introduction of individualised pay arrangements (Claydon 1989).

Although derecognition remains uncommon, it has become more widespread since the late-1980s (Millward et al. 1992: 74-77). During this period derecognition tended to be concentrated at specific establishments within multi-establishment firms (Gregg and Yates 1991) or where union membership was withering (Millward et al. 1992: 70-75). However, some important groups of workers were derecognised in this period and the number of unions recognised at particular sites was sharply reduced. This pattern of derecognition is often closely linked to extensive changes in work organisation and employment practice. In the British oil industry, for example, only a minority of workers are now covered by collective bargaining, and individual contracts of employment have been extended, in some cases, to craft and process operatives (Taylor 1993). The overt anti-unionism of some American employers was thus not replicated in Britain. Where employers recognised unions in 1979 they tended to do so during the 1980s. Derecognition is only a partial explanation of the decline in bargaining coverage, but it does play a part in an extensive armoury of measures aimed at weakening the union presence, and may well increase.

A more significant contributory factor to the decline in collective bargaining coverage between 1984 and 1990 was the inability of unions to secure recognition at sites established since 1980 (Millward et al. 1992: 70-75). Employers were able more easily to resist union recognition attempts at new sites following the repeal in the *Employment Act 1980* of the 'section 11' procedure for reference of recognition issues to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). The 'virtuous circle of cause and effect in which the more that unions obtain recognition and succeed in participating in job regulation, the more likely they are to increase their recognition and deepen their participation in job regulation' (Bain and Price 1983:18) is now, at best, tenuous.

### **Deregulation and Decentralisation**

Policies of labour market deregulation and the decentralisation of bargaining arrangements contrasted markedly with practices of the 1970s, and presented unions with a series of challenges. There were two aspects to these processes. Firstly, Conservative governments abandoned most tripartite institutions in order to restrict union participation in the formulation and implementation of policy. In contrast to the period between 1974 and 1978 when union

participation was integral to national policy development in the form of the 'Social Contract', albeit with mixed results (Coates 1980), unions were effectively excluded from national level involvement. The effects of deregulation and new forms of regulation had a particularly marked impact in the public sector. Privatisation, the creation of agencies, and the progressive 'marketisation' of public services threatened collective bargaining and worker representation. Secondly, there was an acceleration in the trend towards decentralised collective bargaining. While this trend had its roots in private manufacturing during the 1960s (Brown and Walsh 1991), it comprised two elements throughout the 1970s and 1980s: a rapid decline in national multi-employer bargaining; and the devolution of bargaining within companies to division, plant or establishment level.<sup>2</sup> Three factors promoted decentralisation: a shift in bargaining power in favour of management (Sisson 1987); corporate diversification (Marginson et al. 1988: 183-226; Purcell and Ahlstrand 1989); and the rate and extent of workplace restructuring (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986:226-253).<sup>3</sup>

Deregulation has wide-ranging consequences for union organisation. Government withdrawal from tripartite institutions weakened the authority of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the central union confederation. Before 1979 the TUC acted as a conduit to government, a role from which it derived authority over affiliated unions. As the TUC has only the constitutional authority to expel or suspend affiliated unions, the authority it gained from tripartite involvement acted as a central cohesive force. The loss of this role coincided with the questioning, not least by representatives of affiliated unions, of a second function through which the TUC maintained some authority; namely, the adjudication of inter-union disputes over membership by reference to the Bridlington Principles.<sup>4</sup> Coupled with a failure to secure a consensus among affiliated unions in their response to the legislation enacted during the early-1980s, these features weakened the authority of the TUC and resulted in a debate as to its future role.

The sharp increase in the number of bargaining units resulting from bargaining decentralisation also created tensions within individual unions. Financially, unions were caught between falling levels of membership contributions and the rising administrative costs of servicing a larger number of

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<sup>2</sup> The development of decentralisation in Britain is charted in a series of surveys: Brown (1981); Daniel and Millward (1983); Millward and Stevens (1986); CBI (1988); Millward et al. (1992).

<sup>3</sup> Katz (1993) reviews the relative merits of these explanations of decentralisation.

<sup>4</sup> The Bridlington Principles were agreed at the TUC Congress in 1939. They laid down the rules relating to recruitment competition and the procedures whereby any disputes were to be resolved. Needless to say, changes in composition of employment and increases in the coverage of individual union memberships has rendered many of these Principles redundant.

bargaining units. By 1991 total union expenditure on administration was greater than income received from members (Certification Office 1993). Surveys suggest that full-time officers are facing increased work loads and are unable to take on additional recruitment responsibilities required to reverse membership decline (IRS 1992, 1993; Kelly and Heery 1989). Furthermore, in many sectors shop steward organisation appears unprepared to undertake the additional duties that decentralised bargaining requires of it. Full-time officers, for example, cite stewards as being reluctant to accept more responsibilities in pay bargaining and as having insufficient training to undertake such functions (IRS 1992). This latter shortfall can only be exacerbated by the provisions of the *Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993* (TURERA) which set in motion the staged withdrawal of state funding for trade union training.<sup>5</sup>

The decentralisation of bargaining also brought into question unions' capacity to maintain internal cohesion, particularly where national bargaining previously set actual pay, most notably in some private sector services and in the public sector. For example, National Officers 'led' negotiations on behalf of the 'union side' within national bargaining and used this position to maintain internal union cohesion. In the absence of national bargaining, National Officers have adopted more of a co-ordinating role by ensuring the bargaining units are aware of settlements agreed by comparable groups. Preliminary survey evidence suggests that this co-ordination function is not, as yet, as cohesive an influence as was national bargaining. In particular, many workplace activists now claim to be isolated and to receive inadequate support from official union structures (Waddington and Whitston 1992). This isolation is also associated with the more widespread usage of management exclusion policies which limit union participation at the workplace (Smith and Morton 1993). In some sectors members are also showing reluctance to stand as workplace representatives (Marchington and Parker 1990: 208-211; Millward et al. 1992: 109-149). Survey evidence also indicates that the scope of bargaining has narrowed and that individualised aspects of the employment relationship have become more widespread (Millward et al. 1992).

Policies of labour market deregulation and the decentralisation of bargaining have exposed areas of union weakness and led to more intense pressure on the provision of union services to support local negotiators. In combination with other factors already noted, this has led to the suggestion that unions face a 'crisis of interest aggregation' (Müller-Jentsch 1988). This proposition is

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<sup>5</sup> Training of trade union officers and lay representatives was supported by the state under the provisions of the *Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1976*. TURERA repeals this provision and intends that support be phased out, with 25 per cent annual reductions in the budget, by the financial year 1995/96.



examined below, in an assessment of three key policy responses initiated by unions during the 1980s.

## **POLICY RESPONSES: A MIXED BAG OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE**

Union responses to decline have been diverse and, often, of uncertain effect. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that unions have made no serious attempt to reform. Many problems faced by unions are not new, and have been experienced in other periods of rapid political or economic change. Workers' interests are in a continual process of reconstruction, and while the current period poses difficult challenges, it does not indicate an historic break in collective labour organisation. Three specific areas are addressed here: first, the reform of national union structures; secondly, the proposition that the employment relationship is based increasingly on an anti-collectivist individualism; thirdly, the tension between centralising and decentralising tendencies within unions.

### **The Reform of National Union Structures**

Restructuring in Britain featured marked changes to the composition of the labour force. Two direct effects of these changes on national union structures and politics are examined here: first, the merging of unions as a means to establish organisations more adapted to decentralised bargaining; and secondly, the role of the TUC in maintaining inter-union cohesion by setting a new political agenda. Integral to these analyses are the themes of diversity in union policy and increasing heterogeneity of membership.

#### *Restructuring Representation and Mergers*

Table 1 shows the distribution of membership among unions with more than 100,000 members in 1991 and their memberships in 1979. In addition to illustrating the scale of membership loss, Table 1 indicates the uneven effects of employment restructuring on the different membership concentrations. Among the eight unions that increased membership between 1979 and 1991 only two, the National Graphical Association 1982 (NGA82) and the Banking, Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU), recruited in the private sector, although most members of the National Communications Union (NCU) work in enterprises that were privatised during the 1980s. The majority of unions lost members. In broad terms, those unions with the heaviest concentrations of male, manual memberships employed in manufacturing sustained the largest losses. This changing distribution of membership has promoted shifts in the relative influence of unions and the restructuring of representation through mergers.

TABLE 1  
UK Unions With More Than 100,000 Members 1979 and 1991

	1979 <sup>a</sup>	1991
Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU)	2,086,281	1,126,631
GMB	967,153 <sup>b</sup>	862,785
National and Local Government Officers Association (NALGO)	753,226	759,735
Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU)	1,309,553 <sup>c</sup>	622,622
Manufacturing Science and Finance (MSF)	691,054 <sup>d</sup>	604,000
National Union of Public Employees (NUPE)	691,770	551,165
Electrical, Electronic Telecommunication and Plumbing Union (EETPU)	443,621	357,175
Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW)	470,017	341,349
Royal College of Nursing (RCN)	161,692	293,193
National Union of Teachers (NUT)	290,740	214,675
Union of Construction Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT)	348,875	202,334
Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE)	212,930	201,993
Union of Communication Workers (UCW)	203,452	191,662
National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)	152,222	179,937
Banking Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU)	131,774	162,429
Society of Graphical and Allied Trades 1982 (SOGAT)	205,784 <sup>e</sup>	157,341
National Communications Union (NCU)	125,723 <sup>f</sup>	150,703
Assistant Masters and Mistresses Association (AMMA) <sup>g</sup>	87,762	141,504
Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA)	223,884	124,566
National Graphical Association 1982 (NGA)	111,541 <sup>h</sup>	124,178
National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT)	170,294 <sup>i</sup>	114,138
National Union of Civil and Public Servants (NUCPS)	107,957 <sup>j</sup>	112,761
National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)	372,122	106,019

Source: Annual Report of the Certification Officer, 1980 and 1992.

Notes:

- <sup>a</sup> In 1979 the following unions also organised more than 100,000 members: Association of Professional Executive Clerical and Computer Staff, APEX; Amalgamated Society of Boilermakers Shipwrights Blacksmiths and Structural Workers, ASBSBSW; National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers, NUTGW, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, ISTC; and the Institution of Professional Civil Servants, IPCS. Since 1979 APEX, ASBSBSW and the NUTGW merged into the GMB while ISTC and IPCS remain independent but with less than 100,000 members.
- <sup>b</sup> In 1979, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW).
- <sup>c</sup> In 1979, the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers including Construction, Engineering and Foundry Sections, but excluding the Technical Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS) which became part of MSF in 1988.

- <sup>d</sup> MSF was formed in 1988 by the merger of the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS) and the Technical Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS). In 1979 the memberships of these unions was 491,000, ASTMS, and 200,054, TASS.
- <sup>e</sup> In 1979, the Society of Graphical and Allied Trades 1975 (SOGAT).
- <sup>f</sup> In 1979, the Post Office Engineering Union (POEU).
- <sup>g</sup> In 1993, AMMA was renamed the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL).
- <sup>h</sup> In 1979, the National Graphical Association (NGU).
- <sup>i</sup> In 1979, the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR).
- <sup>j</sup> In 1979, the Society of Civil and Public Servants (SCPS).

Since the mid-1960s the intensity of merger activity among British unions has been high with the result that the number of unions has declined and the membership of the unions that remain has become more heterogeneous (Buchanan 1974; Waddington 1988a). The notoriously complex structure of British unionism has thus not been simplified. Throughout the 1980s a diverse range of mergers were agreed, the intention of which was to spread the membership load and thereby ensure that membership losses in specific industries or occupations did not undermine entire unions. While the acquisition of small unions by their larger counterparts accounted for most of the mergers during the 1980s, a smaller number of formations by merger involved larger unions and hence, the majority of the membership involved in the merger process. The formation of UNISON in 1993 (from the National and Local Government Officers' Association, NALGO; National Union of Public Employees, NUPE; and the Confederation of Health Service Employees, COHSE) was the most notable of these and resulted in Britain's largest union. Irrespective of the different outcomes of mergers, their causes can be traced directly to restructuring; membership decline, often accompanied by financial weaknesses, promoted most mergers. However, mergers only mitigated the effects of membership loss. They 'located' unions in areas of employment growth, but have as yet not formed the basis on which large membership gains have been recorded.

Workplace restructuring eroded many of the recruitment demarcations between unions. In addition, as bargaining was decentralised, mergers were agreed in order to reduce the duplication of administrative effort: a post-merger union may send a single representative with a prepared brief to negotiations whereas two pre-merger unions would each send a representative. Both of these points would suggest the prevalence of an 'industrial logic' to merger activity. Undoubtedly such a logic has informed several of the most important mergers during the 1980s. The formation of the Graphical Paper and Media Union (GPMU) in 1992, for example, united the craft tradition in printing represented by NGA82 with the primarily non-craft Society of Graphical and Allied Trades 1982 (SOGAT82). Similarly, during the same year the formation

of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) combined unions that organised skilled engineering and electrical grades, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunication and Plumbing Union (EETPU) respectively, the demarcation between which had been eroded by the impact of technological change.

The effect of an 'industrial logic' was not all pervasive. A 'political logic' was also influential, particularly where marked extensions to recruitment bases were sought. From a primarily white-collar recruitment base, the Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS), for example, extended its coverage to skilled manual workers in engineering through the acquisition of four craft unions between 1981 and 1985.<sup>6</sup> Each of these unions had elected a left-led Executive as had TASS members. This political similarity facilitated these mergers. Merger overtures from the right-of-centre AEU were rejected by the craft unions although the terms for merger offered by TASS and the AEU were similar, and the membership of the AEU comprised similar grades to those organised by the craft unions. A 'political logic' thus overcame an 'industrial logic'. The case of the right-of-centre EETPU's merger involvement illustrates a second form of this 'political logic'. The merger policy of the EETPU was directed towards establishing a recruitment base among management and professional staff. No fewer than nineteen associations comprising such staff were acquired by the EETPU between 1980 and 1992, each of which was not affiliated to the TUC. Furthermore, following its expulsion from the TUC, the EETPU also acquired organisations that had broken away from TUC-affiliated unions. In other words, political similarities between acquiring and acquired unions enabled some of the larger unions to establish recruitment footholds in areas of potential membership growth. The different political positions expressed within unions influenced the direction in which recruitment bases were extended.

Formal arrangements for sectional representation have a long-standing tradition in British unions. Since its formation in 1922 the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), for example, has been organised into Trade Groups, each of which represented the interests of members that worked in a specific sector of the economy. During the 1980s, where mergers were used to extend recruitment bases, sectional representation was also extended or introduced for the first time. Many different forms of sectional representation developed: the TGWU established two new Trade Groups to accommodate the acquisitions of the National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers and the

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<sup>6</sup> Between 1981 and 1985 TASS acquired the National Union of Gold, Silver and Allied Trades; The National Union of Sheet Metal Workers, Coppersmiths, Heating and Domestic Engineers; the Association of Patternmakers and Allied Craftsmen; and the National Society of Metal Mechanics.

National Union of Dyers, Bleachers and Textile Workers; the GMB imposed seven occupationally-based Sections onto a regional structure extant since 1924 as the union embarked on an active merger policy; TASS formed four Craft Sectors for the craft unions it acquired; and, within the white-collar section of the EETPU, each acquired union retained sub-section status and several retained their original name.

Three features were common to most forms of sectional representation. First, some form of bargaining autonomy was allowed. Secondly, acquired sections were entitled to call upon central bargaining services (full-time officer support, research, legal, etc.) from the acquiring union in order to pursue this bargaining autonomy. In combination, these features enabled some accommodation to the decentralisation of bargaining. Thirdly, financial arrangements for acquisition usually ensured that central financial decision-making was pre-eminent. In other words, independence for bargaining and its servicing contrasted with financial centralisation. The changing nature of the tension between centralising and decentralising pressures is taken up in more detail below.

#### *The TUC and Inter-union Relations*

The absence of direct relations with government and internal questioning of the TUC's role in inter-union disputes promoted TUC interest in establishing a new framework for union cohesion. There were three aspects to this framework: extending the coverage of TUC affiliation; reform of the Bridlington Principles through which inter-union disputes were handled; and the adoption of a pro-Europe policy.

Throughout the 1980s the TUC remained the principal trade union centre, although its coverage changed substantially. The number of affiliated unions fell from 109 in 1979 to 74 by 1991, and affiliated membership from 90 per cent to 85 per cent of total membership. The decline of affiliated unions was primarily the result of mergers. Most of the major British unions are TUC-affiliated. Among the unions listed in Table 1 only the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) remain outside of the TUC. While the expulsion of the EETPU at the 1988 Congress contributed to the fall in affiliated membership, the industrial and occupational concentrations of membership loss were particularly hard-felt by TUC affiliates.

Although the TUC's coverage is comprehensive, new affiliations during the 1980s reflect attempts to consolidate representation of professional staff. The recent affiliations of the Society of Radiographers and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists were the first significant affiliations since those during the 1970s which completed the coverage of white-collar workers.

Associated with the extension of TUC coverage was a recognition of the changing composition of affiliated membership in the form of constitutional changes to the General Council of the TUC. The consequences of changes introduced in 1983 and 1989 were increases in the representation of public sector workers and the number of women that sat on the General Council: seats held by representatives of public sector unions increased from 12 in 1979 to 23 by 1992; while the number of women on the General Council rose from 2 in 1979 to 15 in 1992 (TUC 1979, 1993).<sup>7</sup>

Reform of the procedures for handling inter-union disputes was also high on the agenda of the TUC. Until 1987, however, differences between affiliated unions in their attitudes towards legal intervention and the effects of the miners' strike curtailed opportunities for reform. While these tensions came to a head in 1988 with the expulsion of the EETPU (see Waddington 1988b), the establishment of a *Special Review Body* by the TUC did much to focus attention on areas of common concern. The long-awaited reform of the Bridlington Principles in 1988, however, was superseded by the provision of TURERA which gives employees a wider choice in their selection of union. The legislation thus intervenes where inter-union procedures historically have prevailed. It remains to be seen whether the TUC will be able to re-assert its centrality in settling inter-union disputes. Closely associated with these developments are attempts to restructure inter-union relations at the company and workplace level. For example, the TUC promoted 'single-table bargaining', which unifies bargaining arrangements for different occupational groups, as a response to employer opposition to multi-unionism. Recent evidence suggests that some employers have responded favourably to this approach (IRS 1990).

A third initiative intended to restore the authority of the TUC is its policy towards Europe. Marked by the keynote address of Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission, to the 1988 Congress, the TUC embraced the European Community. The TUC sought and attained a leading role in the European Trade Union Confederation and has established a committee structure through which some of the European activities of affiliated unions are co-ordinated. While these activities have undoubtedly raised the profile of European issues within British unions, the centrality of the TUC's position remains precarious. Several affiliated unions, for example, have established their own offices in Brussels to facilitate direct links with the European Commission. Bilateral links between affiliated unions and their European

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<sup>7</sup> These absolute numbers exaggerate the proportional increases in the representation of public sector unions and women because, excluding TUC officers, the General Council was also enlarged from 41 to 49 members between 1979 and 1991.

counterparts have also burgeoned, as have workplace linkages within companies operating in a number of European countries.

Most recently the TUC has adopted a comprehensive organisational change, redefining the role of the organisation, culminating in an official 'relaunch'. Internally the TUC has streamlined its committee system, establishing an Executive Committee and special campaign 'task groups' to report to the General Council. The aim is to prioritise campaigning work of direct use to affiliated unions, and their workplace representatives, with an initial emphasis on full employment, training and 'quality jobs', equal rights and health and safety. For example, the TUC has targeted repetitive strain injuries, providing training and safety materials for workplace representatives, and a programme of conferences and seminars.

In pursuit of this programme, the TUC intends to highlight the challenges posed by new management and working practices coupled to heightened insecurity at work, by arguing the competitive advantages arising from co-operation with unions, and by pushing training and productivity to 'the top of the bargaining agenda'. The TUC is also emphasising its political independence, seeking contact with all major domestic parties, and engaging in more extensive lobbying activities of the kind long-established in the United States.

### **A Renewed Emphasis on Recruitment**

In response to the changing distribution of employment a series of nationally co-ordinated recruitment campaigns were launched. While the intention of these campaigns was to 'locate' unions in areas of employment growth, they also required the identification of the needs of potential members and a consideration of how such members could be represented. While a diverse range of national recruitment campaigns resulted, unions emphasised individualised recruitment methods in the form of financial services packages. It is argued that these recruitment devices have little appeal to new members, who are more concerned with collective approaches.

Each of the general unions initiated campaigns directed towards the recruitment of the low paid in private sector services.<sup>8</sup> The provision of support to those in relatively insecure jobs underpinned these campaigns. In contrast, unions historically reliant on craft organisation attempted to consolidate membership, irrespective of skill, in traditional areas of organisation. The AEU and EETPU, for example, were foremost in signing single union agreements, whereby they secured exclusive recruitment 'rights' from employers in return

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<sup>8</sup> The Transport and General Workers Union, GMB and the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers recruitment campaigns were respectively *Link-up*, *Flare* and *Shop Watch*.

for a tight procedure for the settlement of disputes. Other unions that organised in the same areas such as the AEU and EETPU, were thus excluded from access to potential members. Traditional craft unions therefore consolidated their recruitment activities within the core areas of the labour force. A third range of recruitment campaigns were launched by public sector unions. These campaigns were intended to retain existing members rather than extend recruitment bases. Common to most of them were constitutional amendments introduced to allow private sector recruitment thereby enabling retention of members working in privatised firms. The relative stability of the membership levels of most of the public sector unions, shown in Table 1, suggests that these campaigns have had some success. Diversity in the recruitment bases of these unions has thus been introduced by the effects of privatisation. As a result most public sector unions now comprise a combination of public and private sector membership, although they often merely retained the same group of members. In a few cases private sector membership is now the majority.

For many unions the members recruited through these campaigns were insufficient to reverse overall membership decline. Furthermore, the capacity of several unions to sustain these recruitment campaigns has been questioned as the existing workloads of full-time officers prohibit their extended involvement, and the resources for recruitment activities and their co-ordination are limited (Mason and Bain 1991). Increasing membership heterogeneity has resulted, as relatively large numbers of members were lost from core areas and a few members were recruited from areas of employment growth. In many areas this increasing heterogeneity has accentuated inter-union competition for membership and limited the capacity of unions to raise subscriptions without adversely affecting recruitment.

In order to pursue recruitment campaigns most unions adopted financial services packages. A variety of services were offered, including personal pensions, mortgages, loans and access to legal advice on non-work issues. The *Services for Union Members Report* of the Special Review Body (SRB) (TUC 1988) recommended this approach, which emphasised individual benefits of membership to the relative exclusion of its collective components. To a degree, this approach reflected the extent to which the ideology of the 'new right' had penetrated union thinking. Taking this approach to an extreme, Bassett and Cave (1993) proposed that unionism be based on the provision of individual bargaining services; thus enabling it to regain its relevance for members with individualised payment packages and where individualisation of aspects of the employment relationship is accelerating.

Detailed analyses show that individual financial services have little appeal to new members generally; or to new members in management and professional occupations, who the SRB envisaged would be particularly attracted



by them (Sapper 1991; Waddington and Whitston 1993). On the contrary, traditional collective reasons remain at the core of union joining: improved terms and conditions, and support should a problem arise at work, are consistently cited as the primary reasons for membership (Millward 1990; Kerr 1992; Waddington and Whitston 1993). Furthermore, among managerial and professional staff, where employers' policies to promote individualism are most widespread, a 'belief in trade unionism' has consistently been a stronger reason underpinning union membership than it is among those in manual occupations (Klandermans 1986). The strength of this belief has persisted into the 1990s (Waddington and Whitston 1993). Collective reasons thus remain central to union joining.

But have management practices promoted commitment to the firm rather than to the union during the 1980s? 'New' management practices are shown to have had little impact on the 'them and us' attitudes of workers towards management (Kelly and Kelly 1991), implying that potential union members are not wholly committed to their companies. Members' grievances continue to be rooted in management practices (Waddington and Whitston 1994). Management and professional trade union members also require their unions to be involved in setting the parameters within which individual career progression is determined (Waddington and Whitston 1993). In other words, these members want collective organisation to ensure procedural equality and fairness, but are prepared to negotiate individually within this collective framework.

This returns us to the question of interest aggregation. Surveys of non-union members do not show any widespread hostility to unions, but show that non-members were not convinced that unions could address their day-to-day workplace requirements (Dickson et al. 1988; Guest and Dewe 1988). Dickens and Colling (1988) highlight a further element of this same concern in arguing that the scope of bargaining is too narrow to address the concerns of women. A further survey of non-unionists found that a main reason for their non-unionism was that they had not been asked to join (Mason and Bain 1993).

An approach to recruitment conditioned by the perception of an individualised workforce has little appeal to new and potential members for whom collectivism remains central. Moreover, new members identify opportunities for collective forms of organisation to play a role where aspects of the employment relationship are individualised. Concern with the definition of a union agenda remains important for non-members. It is the establishment of, and mobilisation around, a 'new' bargaining agenda to which both new members and non-members point. Some elements of this mobilisation are examined below.

### Centralisation and Decentralisation: Same Tension, Different Pressures

Trade unions have always been subject to competing pressures towards centralisation and decentralisation. This tension underwent substantial change during the 1980s. Restructuring, the political programme of the new right, and employers' policies tended to fragment and isolate collective organisation. Thus the relationship between workplace organisation and the wider union is undergoing a redefinition as unions attempt to recover some initiative.

Before 1979 British unionism was often characterised by the autonomy of shop stewards, the tension between the leadership and workplace organisation, and the relative weakness of formal representative structures such as union branches. Public policy debates identified a dual system of bargaining; a formal structure from which national unions derived authority, and informal structures which enabled workplace organisation to act with some autonomy from the wider union (Donovan Commission 1968). Successive governments in the 1960s and 1970s tried to reform industrial relations by both formalising local organisation and increasing the authority of the centre, in order to exert control over bargaining. By contrast, informality and decentralisation were also regarded as integral to union democracy by critics of the reform movement, as it enabled workplace organisation to resist pressures towards forms of centralisation seen as inimical to participation and workers' interests (Fairbrother 1984; Hyman 1975: 64-93).

Both characterisations were only partially accurate because they downplayed variation in union structure and practice. Critics of centralisation often confused the locus of bargaining power with the degree of control over workers. For many workers centralised bargaining was an essential precondition of collective power.

In practice, however, 'activist-driven' unionism was not universal before 1979. Throughout several prominent sectors of the economy, such as engineering, printing and docks, local union organisation established some independence from formal structures. In other sectors this independence was never achieved. Where national bargaining remained the most important level at which wages were set, unions tended to be more centralised. Furthermore, in some sectors, such as construction and retailing, the small size of most sites and rapid labour turnover acted continually to undermine workplace organisation, thereby ensuring a greater membership reliance on full-time officers. During the 1980s employment contracted in those sectors where greater workplace independence had been achieved. Thus strong workplace organisation was not as widespread as many suggested during the 1970s, and it contracted from this relatively narrow base during the 1980s.

If workers in some key sectors of the economy relied on the decentralisation of power in the union to protect and extend bargaining gains during the 1960s and 1970s, many now face the opposite effect of isolation. The implications of deregulation and decentralisation for union recognition and collective bargaining coverage have already been dealt with, but their effects are compounded by a series of changes in managerial practice and work organisation often considered under the rubric of Human Resource Management. The meaning and extent of these changes cannot be addressed in detail here, but they undoubtedly have played a part in the changing status of workplace organisation, and its relationship with the wider union.

The strength of workplace unionism rests on its ability to construct solidarity through job controls, and to enforce a bargained approach to change. At organised workplaces this strength was built over many years by 'capturing' established sets of payment systems and work patterns for collective control. Intensified competition during the 1980s and a hostile legal environment provided employers with an opportunity to institute new methods of labour regulation. It is not necessary to accept the existence of a new system of management; based on an individualised employment relationship, consent, commitment and participative work practices, to see how elements of HRM can serve to undermine established patterns of steward authority and influence.

New management practices are undoubtedly increasingly in evidence, but they do not represent the emergence of a coherent pattern, and least of all worker empowerment and the erosion of a material basis for collective organisation (Waddington and Whitston 1994). Rather, they indicate extended managerial authority, closer control of labour, and reductions in the core workforce. In these changed circumstances, established workplace organisation may find it difficult to maintain influence, even where it is not directly attacked. In workplaces without any such traditions, the same labour practices, coupled with decentralisation, can rapidly diminish the areas of working life under union influence or control. In both cases activists are looking increasingly to the external union for guidance and best practice over a range of issues from team working to individual contracts.

At the same time, unions as national institutions are now often impelled to confront decentralisation by the encouragement of local organisation and initiative. This is why the decentralisation of bargaining brought workplace union organisation into the forefront in areas hitherto dominated by national bargaining and national union structures. In some areas where bargaining was decentralised, there is evidence of workplace union resistance to managerial initiatives (Heaton and Linn 1989; Fairbrother 1989). However, these instances tend to be restricted to privatised, former public sector, enterprises; or the gradual 'clawing back' of job controls lost during the early-1980s in the

private sector. Although participative forms of organisation are shown to have been most capable of developing and maintaining workplace union strategies (Cohen and Fosh 1988; Fosh 1993), there is no evidence indicating the widespread emergence of participative workplace organisation in the areas to which union recruitment has been directed.

Some initiatives have been taken by national unions to foster more participative workplace organisation. Regional Offices have been set up by several unions (Institution of Professionals Managers and Specialists, National Union of Teachers, Society of Telecom Executives, and the National Union of Civil and Public Servants) which hitherto had relied on only a central office in London. From these Regional Offices local full-time officers provide a more immediate support to local organisation. Similarly, during the 1980s there was a growth of regional specialists (in law, research, health and safety, etc.) with a brief to support local activists. There has also been a rise in the appointment of Women's and Equality Officers and in the establishment of structures to promote the involvement of women members in union affairs. Just how effective these measures have been in promoting membership participation remains in doubt: union procedures and promotion criteria militate against the involvement of women, even when such support structures are in place (Rees 1990). The relationship between local and national union structures is in the process of change; local structures and the promotion of local participation appear to be more reliant on initiatives taken within union Head Offices. The absence of widespread participative local union organisation in areas of new recruitment suggests that activism as a counterweight to centralising tendencies has diminished in impact, but that both the workplace and the wider union are losers in this process.

Legislation has been a second key influence on internal union tensions. Conservative governments were able to exploit union unpopularity to enact a series of measures regulating union practices under the slogan of 'making unions more accountable and responsive to their members' (DE 1983, 1987), while in practice intended to make unions into agents of shop floor control over workers. In line with the neo-liberal ideology of the governments' political programme, these measures comprised two inter-linked features designed to redefine the relationship between members and unions as purchasers and providers of services. Firstly, legislation incorporated a highly atomised, individualistic view of the rights and obligations of trade union membership (McKendrick 1988); and secondly, there was an emphasis on parliamentary rather than participative forms of union democracy. These parliamentary forms are identified with ballots, which were imposed before industrial action, every five years for the election of union Executive committees, and for the election of union general secretaries and presidents. To assist union members enforce a range of statutory rights against their union, introduced in successive

legislative measures, a Commissioner for the Rights of Trade Union Members (CROTUM) was also established.

Existing evidence suggests that government intentions have not been met in full. Legislation had no marked effect on the political composition of most unions' Executives and leaderships; it 'enfranchised activists within union political processes' through their involvement in workplace ballot procedures (Smith et al. 1993: 378), and led to very few cases assisted by support from the CROTUM. Similarly, legislation requiring pre-strike ballots has not undermined union cohesion, although it formally individualises decisions about strikes (Martin et al. 1991). However, it is the effect on union policy that may be the most significant impact of legislative intervention.

The rhetoric of the unions' response to increased legal intervention in their internal affairs was initially hostile, although they offered little formal resistance. In practice unions relied on the return of a Labour government which would repeal the legislation. After the failure of the Labour Party at the 1983 General Election, there was a gradual shift in approach towards the law, marked in 1986 by the abandonment of the TUC's boycott of the postal ballot fund scheme. By the run-up to the 1987 General Election, documents endorsed by both the TUC and the Labour Party made no commitment to repeal much of the Conservative legislation, but offered to establish a wide-ranging platform of individual and collective employment rights.<sup>9</sup>

This changed approach undoubtedly had a tactical element: to outflank the Conservatives by advocating individual over collective rights. In fact its implications are potentially far-reaching. On the one hand, individual worker rights offer unions opportunities to represent and police workers interests, even where recognition is denied. On the other, too radical a trade off between collective and individual rights could lend itself to the fulfilment of the Conservative aim of removing unions' role at the workplace, and undermining their relationship with members.

While changes have subsequently been introduced to the content of the initial proposals, the point remains that unions are still committed to a policy that includes internal ballots and a range of legal measures to be enforced at the workplace. This shift is also quite consistent with union support for the European Union. The Social Charter of the European Union, for example, envisages a similar platform of individual and collective rights, and the necessity to conform with this programme was the reason given by the Labour Party for supporting an end to the limited legal status of the closed shop.

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<sup>9</sup> TUC-Labour Party Co-ordinating Committee, *People at Work: New Rights, New Responsibilities*; and *Low Pay: Policies and Priorities*.

Two points thus emerge. Firstly, unions appear to accept that parliamentary forms of internal representation are likely to become more dominant. In other words, new forms of internal union relationships are accepted. Secondly, a key future role for unions will revolve around the enforcement of a platform of individual rights. The dangers of over-reliance on the law are widely documented (see Hyman 1987). Put starkly, repeal of legislation that supports collective rights can entirely undermine union organisation whose purpose is to enforce individual rights. Furthermore, in order to be involved in the effective enforcement of employment rights, significant demands are placed on local union organisation. It remains very much in doubt whether local union organisation is prepared for this role or the unions have the resources to carry out the preparation. Nevertheless, much of the future character of unionism in Britain will depend on how reformed relations between union centres and their workplace base evolve. This evolution will not be predetermined, but will depend on the reformation and redefinition of occupational and wider solidarities.

## CONCLUSION

The effects of restructuring and the associated Conservative political programme have thrown British unions onto the defensive. Union structures and workplace practices developed under the aegis of the post-war settlement and dilute forms of tripartism were found to be limited as a basis for handling developments since 1979. A steep and protracted decline in membership, coupled to employment restructuring, led to a new orientation to recruitment. Management decentralisation also exposed weaknesses in union organisation, particularly in the restructured public sector. While some policy responses are *emerging, they are not without their shortcomings. The particular traditions of each union produced considerable diversity in policy responses and unevenness in their application. As a result the outcome of union policy initiatives is far from certain and will differ between and within unions.*

In broad terms, three interlinked tensions will effect future policy development within each union. How these are addressed will influence the outcome of the policy initiatives taken. These tensions concern:

1. *administration and support: the provision of services integral to current policy initiatives remains has to be viewed alongside the parlous state of union finances (see Willman, Morris, and Aston 1993), and the new demands of decentralised bargaining.*
2. *individualism and collectivism: the aggregation of interests underpins union activity but has to overcome attempts by both employers and the state to impose more widespread individualisation.*

3. participative and parliamentary forms of representation: there is a tension between these forms of representation which influences the ways in which unions aggregate the interests of members, as well as the form of institutional structures within which these interests are expressed.

How these tensions are resolved will, in no small part, depend on future political developments. The Conservative government elected in 1992 has continued the legislative assault on union organisation, thereby accentuating the pressures examined in this article. In contrast, the Labour party is committed to introducing some form of recognition procedure, which may enable more extensive recruitment in the expanding sectors of the economy, and the introduction of a platform of employment rights. While these measures may ease the pressure on unions, it is likely that they will also promote reform as unions continue to adapt to changing circumstances.

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## ***Les politiques de restructuration en Grande-Bretagne depuis 1979***

### ***Les syndicats sur la défensive***

L'idée maîtresse de cet article est que les syndicats britanniques se retrouvent depuis 1979 dans une position défensive face à la restructuration économique et aux politiques qui l'accompagne. Bien que les formes d'organisation et d'activités que les syndicats ont développées au cours des années 1960 et 1970 soient devenues inadéquates dans ce contexte, les auteurs réfutent la thèse de la marginalisation de l'action syndicale avancée par certains dans les années 1980. Ils montrent, à contrario, que les syndicats élaborent maintenant un nouveau programme et les structures favorables à son implantation.

L'article comprend deux parties. La première section considère trois défis majeurs qui, étant associés à la restructuration économique, confrontent les syndicats. L'étude considère donc l'impact des changements dans la structure des emplois, des stratégies patronales envers la reconnaissance syndicale, et des diverses formes de déréglementation. La deuxième section analyse trois solutions de rechange mises de l'avant par les syndicats, soit la réforme des organisations nationales, les campagnes de recrutement de nouveaux membres et les changements dans le degré de centralisation des structures syndicales.

La première section évalue la nature des défis qui confrontent les syndicats depuis le premier gouvernement Thatcher. Il est proposé que les effets de la restructuration économique sur le syndicalisme sont largement exagérés. La restructuration de l'emploi, par exemple, n'explique pas à elle seule le déclin du syndicalisme. Au contraire, ce déclin est surtout attribuable à l'inhabileté à recruter des membres parmi les nouveaux secteurs de l'économie plutôt qu'à la perte de membres dans les secteurs traditionnels. La déréglementation du marché du travail et la décentralisation de la négociation collective ont, par contre, un effet plus direct et néfaste sur les syndicats. Particulièrement affaibli par les forces décentralisatrices, le Trade Union Congress ne représente plus la même force de cohésion qu'auparavant. D'autant plus que la décentralisation de la négociation collective s'accompagne de tensions nouvelles au sein des organisations syndicales. Les permanents syndicaux sont submergés de travail alors que les délégués d'atelier n'ont pas la formation nécessaire pour assumer correctement les responsabilités nouvelles et élargies rattachées à la négociation salariale. La baisse du nombre de membres et la hausse des coûts administratifs ont rendu la solution à ces problèmes plus difficile, plusieurs grands syndicats subissant des pertes financières.

Les réponses syndicales à ces défis font l'objet de la deuxième section. Bien qu'elles varient selon la composition des différents syndicats, il est possible d'identifier des éléments communs de réponse à cette crise. Ainsi, depuis 1979, les fusions intersyndicales et des activités de recrutement mieux coordonnées caractérisent les politiques syndicales. L'analyse de ces politiques et de ces activités révèle que malgré le déclin persistant du nombre de leurs membres, les syndicats britanniques représentent aujourd'hui une force beaucoup plus hétérogène que par le passé. La motivation derrière l'adhésion au syndicalisme de groupes de plus en plus hétérogènes demeure associée à des enjeux collectifs, quelque soit la profession et le secteur d'activités. Face à cette nouvelle composition de leurs effectifs, la représentation de ces intérêts diversifiés demeure un défi de taille pour les syndicats.

Une panoplie de mesures ont été mises de l'avant pour atteindre cet objectif de représentation. Malgré leurs lacunes, ces nouvelles mesures constituent un renversement significatif et à long terme des politiques syndicales. Entre autres, l'acquiescement, malgré bien des réticences initiales, des syndicats et du Parti Travailliste au cadre juridique institué par les gouvernements conservateurs est certes le fait le plus dominant. En conclusion, les auteurs évaluent les conséquences de ce nouveau régime juridique. De nouvelles formes de représentation interne sont à prévoir, alors que les syndicats semblent amenés à jouer un rôle plus important dans la protection des droits individuels des salariés dans l'entreprise.