

The limits and potential of militant trade unionism in France and Britain: A Comparative Study of SUD-Rail and RMT unions

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of economic recession a wave of industrial and social unrest has recently built up across Europe as workers resist attempts by governments and private companies to impose austerity policies, drive down wages and rescue some nations from near-bankruptcy. Huge protest rallies have taken place in cities across Spain, general strikes have paralysed Greece, and there has been industrial action at airports, oil plants and railways in France, and at airports, railways, London Underground and within the civil service in Britain. While some media predictions of a 'spring of discontent' across Europe in 2010 (see *The Independent*, 24 February, 2010) may well prove to be exaggerated, such widespread industrial militancy does at the very least raise the potential for a renewal of collective solidarity and mobilisation within the European trade union movement.

Of course for many academics the prospects for union growth and revival appear bleak, with unions facing insurmountable challenges. For example, in Britain McIlroy and Daniels (2009: 122) have pointed out that 'union membership has stabilised but density continues to fall...union have enjoyed some success: they have halted the retreat. But it can also be claimed...unions have proven incapable of mount[ing] a revival of any substance'. Simms and Charlwood (2010: 127) have also concluded that 'society has now changed so profoundly that efforts by unions to renew themselves show little evidence of success and are unlikely to do so...we are pessimistic about the revival for any sustained revival of fortunes'. Similar arguments have been made about the possibilities for trade union renewal in France. Thus Groux (2009) has commented that 'French trade unions, without exception, are in crisis and face an uncertain future'. But arguably such self-proclaimed 'sober' assessments are unduly pessimistic, providing fairly broad brush-stroke canvases which fail to capture evidence of continuing resilience and even combativity in certain areas of employment, notably (although by no means exclusively) within the railway sector (Darlington, 2010b).

In both the French and British railway sectors a distinctive form of militant and political trade unionism has emerged in recent years, with the political economy context contributing to the broad underlying *industrial* discontent and *politicisation* of trade unionism that has occurred within both countries. Whether it has been the impact of privatisation – with the transformation of a relatively well-functioning integrated railway network into a highly fragmented business involving widely different collective bargaining arrangements and terms and conditions of employment, as in Britain, or the threat of privatisation - driven by European Union

directives to break up public monopolies and introduce market mechanisms into the rail industry, as in France - the consequence in both countries has been growing levels of employment insecurity, downward pressures on pensions and working practices, and conflict-prone industrial relations. In the process it has led to the development of highly militant and politically-influenced forms of trade unionism, reflected in a willingness to take industrial action, an ideology of conflicting interests, and a reliance on the mobilisation of members (Kelly, 1996).

PAPER

This paper presents a Franco-British comparison of militant trade unionism within the railway sector, focusing on the union SUD-Rail (*Fédération des Syndicats Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques*) in France and the National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) in Britain. The paper argues that the similarities in trade union approaches evident in both countries have been somewhat surprising considering that France and Britain are often contrasted in terms of their institutional industrial relations frameworks and traditions of trade unionism. Thus France is categorised as a 'Southern European' model of politically polarised unionism with a system of dual representation in the workplace, whereas the UK by contrast is viewed as reflective of the 'Anglo-Saxon' model of unpolarised politics and single representation system. Yet in both countries there is evidence of the way in which the liberalisation and privatisation imperatives, further compounded in recent months by the impact of economic recession, have created the conditions in which both railway unions have played a prominent role in mobilising workers for collective action and utilising the defence of public service as a key mobilising discourse.

The paper draws on extensive empirical research conducted by the authors over the past seven years on SUD-Rail (Connolly, 2008; 2009; 2010a; 2010b) and the RMT (Darlington, 2007, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2010a), as well as more recent unpublished field work (involving extensive tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with a range of union informants within both unions, analysis of documentary material, and personal fieldwork observation), to provide a comparative analysis of the limits and potential of militant unionism in the French and British railway sector.

The paper has three main themes. First, it documents the dynamics of union militancy over the last 10-15 years, making a comparative assessment of the conditions, issues and causes that have given rise to conflict. It locates such militancy within the specific industrial context that has placed both SUD-Rail and the RMT in an unusually strong bargaining position and lent feasibility to the strike mobilisation approach adopted, and it explores the extent to which union leadership, notably left-wing activists inside both unions, has been important contributory catalyst, symptom and beneficiary of strike activity relative to other variables.

Second, the paper provides evidence to suggest that the militant approach adopted by these unions, in a broader context of union decline in both their respective national contexts, has not only proved 'effective' and 'delivered' (Bryson, 2003; 2006) in terms of collective bargaining gains but also in terms of measures such as stronger workplace union organisation, growing union membership, support in workplace elections, and/or increased levels of membership activism. In the process, the paper contributes to current debates on possible strategies for union renewal and revitalisation (Frege and Kelly, 2003; 2004), suggesting that a militant approach to unionism which includes political mobilisation might represent in certain circumstances a viable alternative to strategies such as partnership and/or organising *per se*.

Third, the paper evaluates the extent to which, despite the successes of SUD-Rail and the RMT union, there have also been important common limitations involved in their adoption of a militant union approach. These relate to the inherent dangers of a necessarily 'high-risk' strike mobilisation orientation that can sometimes be ineffective or fail; the inability of both unions to gain much broader support for their approach within their respective national contexts; and the persistent pressures (similar to those faced by more traditional unions) to become more moderate, pragmatic and responsible, reflecting the universal tension between the contradictory identities of *movement* and *organisation* within unionism (Hyman, 2001; 2004).

The paper also considers the extent to which both unions represent deviant cases, in so far as their approach is unlikely to be replicable by other unions that operate in less favourable arenas of employment where bargaining leverage is much weaker. However, in spite of the limitations and challenges of the approach, the paper argues that militancy as a trade union strategy represents possibilities for renewing collective solidarity and interests amongst workers.

DYNAMICS OF UNION MILITANCY

In France over the last 15 years the trade union landscape has changed and become more fragmented with the arrival of new radical movements which have challenged the hegemony of the five main trade union confederations. The emergence and rapid growth of the radical movement *Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques* (SUD) since 1988 and its spread in the 1990s and 2000s, has helped to reinforce the French trade union movement's historical traditions of politicised unionism and militant action. The majority of the SUD unions were formed by breakaway groups from the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT), the second largest trade union confederation in France behind the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT). Thus the two largest SUD unions - in the post and telecommunications (SUD-PTT) and railway sectors (SUD-Rail) - both broke away from the CFDT after strikes in their respective industries (in the case of SUD-Rail in 1995). There are now over 30 SUD unions of various sizes across both the public and private sector. Continuing internal ideological crisis inside the CFDT has provoked the majority of the splits, with SUD unions recently being created in air transport, banks, and large private companies (such as Michelin in 2001). The SUD unions organise on the basis of specific industrial sectors, companies or occupations, and prioritise the Federation level - rather than the traditional confederation-based unions - although they have also become associated with the inter-professional confederation *Union Syndicale - Solidaires* (Damesin and Denis, 2005).

The ideological splits in the CFDT have had their origins in the confederation's *recentrage* at the end of the 1970s when it abandoned the goal of social transformation, and increasingly placed emphasis on social dialogue, negotiation and the signing of collective agreements at workplace level (Pernot, 2005). In 1986 the CFDT dropped all references to socialism (42). This shift in ideology was to have significant repercussions for the CFDT, as well as for the French trade union movement as a whole, as Trotskyist groups within the CFDT, and other broader layers of radical activists, influenced by references to workers' self-management and direct action during May 1968, became increasingly disenchanted with the confederation's new orientation. Ironically the SUD unions were established on the basis of radical ideas and practices in trade unionism which at different times throughout the 20th century had been an important (sometimes majority) trait within the traditional French trade union confederations themselves, notably the principles of 'revolutionary syndicalism' originally adopted in the *Charte d'Amiens* by the CGT in 1906. The SUD name, '*Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques*,' was based on the

founding values of the CFDT. In the process the SUD model of unionism was influenced by the generation of activists who emerged in the protest movement of May 1968, and who viewed the creation of SUD as an opportunity for a new form of radical union action (Sainsaulieu, 1999; 2006). Significantly many SUD activists (21 percent in SUD-Rail according to Paccou, 2006) belong to left-wing political groups, including the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) – now the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) – Lutte ouvrière (LO) and other anarchist groups.

SUD's stated conception of trade unionism is one of 'social transformation' (Solidaires, 2007: 59), although they have rejected a single, general discourse in favour of a complex balance of ideas and policies (Sainsaulieu, 1999). The movement has been identified with a social movement model of unionism, basing their collective struggles around employment and social themes. Thus the SUD unions are linked to a variety of social movement organisations and are involved in campaigns on wider social issues such as globalisation (ATTAC), the homeless (DAL), the unemployed (AC!) and undocumented workers. They also organise workers with more precarious employment contracts, as well as sub-contracted cleaning and distribution workers (Connolly, 2010b).

SUD-Rail has explicitly sought to challenge so-called 'reformist' trade union identities in the sector by adopting an alternative union strategy involving a relatively consistent antagonistic approach to employers combined with support for members' militant action. In 1995 and again in 2003 the railway sector unions in France managed to fend off plans to make changes to occupational pensions systems. SUD-Rail was a prime instigator of these strikes and of broader social unrest in the country. The union's strategy has been focused on repetitive strike action, not only on immediate industrial issues such as the liberalisation of freight, but also on broader political questions such as planned health sector reforms. Since January 2009 SUD-Rail has made several calls for 'inter-professional' strikes – which took place on 29 January and 19 March in 2009 and 23 March in 2010 – and has instigated a number of strikes at the national level in the government-owned SNCF (*Société Nationale des Chemins de fer français*: French National Railways) – 26 May and 20 October 2009, and 3 February and 6 April 2010. Qualitative research also shows that there are repetitive localised actions which are not necessarily discussed outside specific workplaces (Connolly, 2008; 2010a).

During SUD-Rail's congress in October 2009, the union reaffirmed its identity as a 'fighting union' (*syndicalisme de lutte*). The union has benefited from high levels of media attention from its strategy of direct action and prolonged strike action. In December 2008, in a localised action around the Gare St Lazare in central Paris, SUD-Rail members went on strike for a month over issues of staffing and security. The union used an innovative form of action, calling a strike of 59 minutes at the beginning of every day. This type of action was used to take advantage of a loophole in the 'minimum service' legislation and also to ensure a minimum loss of income for workers. On the 12 January 2009, during the strike, one of their members, a driver, was physically attacked and called a 'salaud de greviste' (*bastard striker*) by a group of seven people. The following morning all drivers in the region withdrew from work using the legal right to stop work under dangerous conditions ('droit de retrait'). SUD-Rail accused the SNCF of provoking the attack from its propaganda and campaigns against the union. The regional director closed the station on the 13 January 2009 for fear of public reaction to the strike, and the public outcry as a result led to the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, to call SUD-Rail an 'irresponsible' organisation during a public speech (*Le Figaro*, 15 January, 2009). This has heightened the profile of the union as a confrontational union. In the workplace elections in March 2009 SUD-Rail gained 5 per cent in the region of Gare St Lazare, which demonstrates the

effectiveness of the strategy adopted by the union and the broader (albeit minority) support for the action.

In Britain, in contrast to the position adopted by most unions, both in the railway sector and beyond, the RMT has combined a distinct version of the organising approach with an explicit rejection of partnership and accommodative forms of unionism in favour of the mobilisation of members through the repeated threat and use of strike action, alongside a politically engaged form of left-wing trade unionism. Indeed, in many respects the RMT's 'brand image' is essentially that of being a striking union. For example, on London Underground between January 2002 and December 2009 the union balloted in favour of industrial action on at least 54 different occasions, with ballots leading to strikes (mainly 24 or 48-hour) on 22 different occasions, and involving 42 strike days overall. On the national railway network during the same period the union balloted in favour of industrial action on at least 88 different occasions, with ballots leading to strikes on 37 different occasions, and involving 130 strike days overall. In the two industries combined this represented a total of 141 ballots, 59 of which led to strikes, and no less than 172 days of strike action overall. Per thousand members, the RMT has probably organised more ballots for industrial action and more strike action than any other union over recent years. Significantly, almost every single one of the union's ballots on the Underground and the railways during the period 2002-09 returned overwhelming majorities in favour of action, with a mean of 83 per cent. The proportion of union members participating in such ballots was also creditable with a mean of 39 per cent on the Underground and 66 per cent on the railways (Darlington, 2010a).

Frequently such ballot results have been used as a form of sabre-rattling designed to bolster the union's bargaining leverage, with no action resulting, although sometimes with significant concessions being extracted. For example, on the railways the threat of 24-hour and 48-hour strikes by 7,000 Network Rail guards, signals and maintenance staff in June 2004 forced a climb down from a proposed plan to close a final-salary pension scheme for new starters. Spurning so-called 'modern' campaigning techniques, RMT leader Bob Crow boasted: 'We didn't do it with balloons, we didn't do it by being nicey-picey, hoping they will feel sorry for us and take pity on us. We did it by threatening industrial action' (*Guardian*, 2 July 2004). On occasions RMT strike *threats* have led to full-blown strike *action*, sometimes with devastatingly high-profile public effect. For example, a 72-hour strike by 2,300 Metronet maintenance workers on the London Underground in September 2007 wiped out the vast majority of the Tube network, inconvenienced 3 million people and caused an estimated £100m damage to London's economy. Taking advantage of its members' distinct strategic bargaining position the RMT has also organised a number of 24-hour strike threats over the peak-passenger Christmas and New Year period, as well as threatened strikes on or just before the political symbolic Greater London Assembly and Mayoral election days, purposively designed to have maximum effect in order to put pressure on the employer.

Strikes have occurred on issues such as pay and working conditions, pensions, outsourcing and the effects of privatisation. A threatened national railway strike by Network Rail signalling and maintenance staff in May 2010 – at the time of writing the union was re-balloting its members after being forced by a High Court injunction to call off a previous strike threat - is merely the latest manifestations of the willingness of RMT members to wear the 'militant' union badge proudly. The crucial forthcoming 3-year pay and conditions negotiations in the lead up to the 2012 London-based Olympic Games are commonly viewed as likely to be the 'Mother of All Battles'.

Such industrial militancy has been more than matched by *political* opposition to many contentious New Labour government neo-liberal policies, notably its refusal to countenance re-nationalisation of the railways, part-privatisation of the London Underground, retention of the Conservatives' employment legislation, marketisation of public services, and military intervention in Iraq. After reducing affiliation fees to the Labour Party for allegedly 'deserting its working class roots' and 'jumping into bed with its big business friends' (*RMT News*, July/August 2001), the RMT's decision to allow local union branches to affiliate to and campaign for non-Labour Party political organisations and candidates at local and parliamentary elections resulted in its expulsion in 2004 from the party it has helped to set up 100 years earlier (Berlin, 2006). The historic break with the Labour Party has been emblematic of the militant trade unionism and left-wing radicalism embodied by the RMT.

Bob Crow (elected the RMT's general secretary in 2002) has played an important part in transforming the union, stamping his oppositionist leadership style towards the employers and the New Labour government and helping to shape strategic and tactical issues, with a consistent stress on so-called 'old-fashioned' virtues of collectivism, solidarity, resistance and activism. But in addition a significant layer of left-wing activists (including members of radical left parties, as well as many independent non-party industrial militants), organised at every level of the union (from executive committee to local reps), have also played an influential leadership role in identifying, formulating and articulating grievances, encouraging a sense of collective identity in antagonism to the employers, and providing leadership to the mobilisation of workplace strike activity (Darlington, 2007, 2009a; 2009b).

In January 2006 the RMT, following an initiative from the union's left elements, hosted a conference open to trade activists from other unions to discuss 'The Crisis in Working Class Political Representation' which delivered a damning indictment of Labour and scorned the possibility of resurrecting it as a workers' party. Even though the RMT leadership have refused to commit the union to launching a new political party, the left's activities have contributed to opening up arguments about a potential political realignment around a new left-wing project backed by the unions. In 2009, in the first major backing for a political initiative outside of the Labour Party for years, the RMT leadership set up a No2EU-Yes to Democracy electoral coalition, which stood candidates in the European elections on a platform of opposition to the Lisbon Treaty and against EU-led privatisation and deregulation of public services. In the general election of May 2010, as well as supporting left-wing Labour Party MPs seeking re-election such as John McDonnell, it also backed independent (including a number of RMT) candidates standing as part of an alternative Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition campaign. In addition, the union has taken the initiative to sponsor the launch of a National Shop Stewards' Network, viewed as the first step to revitalise the grassroots of the trade unions and build a fighting union movement generally in Britain. It has also taken some important steps to broaden the agenda of trade unionism by making common cause with a range of social movements, including the Stop the War Coalition, Unite Against Fascism and anti-capitalist European and World Social Forums. All these initiatives have been well supported by left activists in different Regions and branches of the union, and mark a limited but notable attempt to reorient the union as a social actor towards a broader political agenda (Darlington, 2007; 2009a; 2009b).

MEASURES AND CONDITIONS OF/FOR EFFECTIVE MILITANCY

In France, the SUD unions' approach has been relatively successful and they have achieved rapid growth in the sectors in which they have emerged, both in terms of membership and support in workplace elections. In 2003 SUD-Rail's estimated

membership was 5,848 against the CGT and CFDT estimates of 35,000 and 9,000. Perhaps more significantly – in light of the greater importance placed on workplace representative election results as a way of ‘measuring’ success in French unions – in 2004 it became the second most supported trade union in the railway sector and during the period 1998-2009 it increased its support in workplace elections from 6.5 per cent to 17.67 per cent and is currently the third most supported union in the railway sector behind the CGT and UNSA (a moderate union representing mainly administrative staff). In the process, the SUD unions have generated a renewed interest in radicalism and militancy amongst members of other unions and workers more generally, and the movement has created an impetus for union leaders to renew their links with members (Sainsaulieu, 2006). SUD-Rail in particular has built its identity around militancy and has prioritised strategies of direct action and mobilisation.

There are a number of favourable contextual factors which help explain union militancy on the railways, conditions that are not necessarily present in other sectors. First, as in other European countries, the railway sector has traditionally been highly unionised in France (with union density currently around 30 per cent compared with the national average of around 8 per cent), and railway workers have a strong occupational identity. But the occupational identity of railway workers in France has come increasingly under threat in the last decade as moves towards European integration have led to cuts in public expenditure and moves towards railway privatisation. The need for collective interest definition and identity has become increasingly apparent and SUD-Rail has been active in responding to the current threats, utilising the defence of public service as a key mobilising discourse. With their strategies of mobilisation and direct action the unions in the railway sector have managed to stave off plans for reforms in the sector, and have also been able to sustain a broader awareness of the potential impact of reforms in the sector by having a high profile in the media. At a workplace level there is also evidence to show that SUD-Rail activists were engaged in a constant process of trying to link workplace issues to broader social issues thus encouraging a sense of collective interests and identity amongst workers (Connolly, 2008).

Second, the context of guaranteed employment is more favourable towards the emergence, sustaining and building of new forms of union organisation than in the context of a private company, where economic survival and job security are not guaranteed (Damesin and Denis, 2005). Thirdly, trade unions in France have access to a number of employer-funded resources which help to create and embed trade union organisation and activity (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2006). Resources are designated for worker representatives, but the evidence suggests that SUD-Rail used these resources to develop union militancy and forward their organisation’s antagonistic identity in a context of competitive unionism. Whilst the resources pertaining to representative positions are available to unions in all large enterprises, public and private (for works councils in companies with 50 or more employees, and for workplace representatives (*délégué du personnel*) with 10 or more employees), in public enterprises such as the railways, unions are embedded within the organisation to such an extent that they have the strength to ensure employers respect representatives rights and resources, which in turn reinforces the strength, at least in terms of resources for representative activity and maintaining organisation, of the trade unions.

In Britain, the RMT’s militant approach has also been successful in terms of a variety of measures (Darlington, 2007; 2009a; 2009b; 2010). First, the union has provided verifiable evidence of its ability to deliver substantial material improvements in members’ pay and conditions, something which has been achieved invariably

through the threat and/or use of strike action. Thus, the union has won numerous above-inflation pay rises, as well as the 35-hour working week on many sectors of the railway network and London Underground. It prevented attempts by Network Rail (2004) and other rail companies (2006) to end final salary pension schemes for new starters, and it contributed to bringing the return of infrastructure maintenance in-house in Network Rail (2003), and forced Transport for London to agree to take over and bring back in-house the failed Metronet Public Private Partnership (PPP) contract (2007). In addition, there have been many other forms of collective bargaining success, including the industry-wide campaign by railways guards on train operating companies to prevent the introduction of driver-only operations that would erode guards' safety responsibilities (1999-2007). Compared with the setbacks experienced by many other unions in recent years, such gains have been impressive.

Second, the union has not only stemmed the relentless decline in membership it previously experienced in the 1980s and 1990s, but also, unlike many other unions, in recruiting substantial numbers of new members in recent years. Membership in the London Transport Region has increased from 9,457 to 13,570 during the period 2002-2009 (or 43 per cent), and membership across the union as a whole over the same period has increased from 63,084 to 79,499 (or 26 per cent). Even though the absolute numbers are not large, it means the RMT is one of the fastest growing unions in Britain, which is no mean achievement in the context of merely stable or even declining membership for many others.

Third, the union's industrial and political militancy appears to have energised a wide layer of reps and activists involved in organising from the bottom up, and contributed to the development of relative vibrant and combative forms of workplace union organisation in many areas. Strike mobilisation has strengthened the RMT's bargaining position and provided material evidence of the union's power and effectiveness vis-à-vis the employers. It has boosted members' morale, confidence and sense of collective power generally. In turn, this has encouraged union recruitment and reinvigorated reps/activists who see that the union can 'deliver'. As a result there has been a direct relationship (or 'virtuous circle') between the RMT's 'striking' approach, its effectiveness in obtaining bargaining gains, membership growth and union revitalisation.

Apart from the role of national leadership and left-wing activists, there have been some other contributory factors to the RMT's success, including: the vibrant campaigning work of an Organising Unit in embedding recruitment activity at every level inside the union and encouraging strong workplace union reps organisation; the industrial and inclusive all-grades nature of the RMT, which has provided it with a clear core motivational identity and encouraged a high degree of attachment and loyalty from members; and the highly democratic form of union structure and organisation, which has helped to stimulate devolved membership engagement.

In addition, a highly significant contextual factor has been the operational vulnerability of the railway and underground networks to strike action, with the RMT's strategic position, both industrially and within society more generally, providing it with enormous potential bargaining power. The nature of both sectors, with their tightly integrated service networks which are not easily substitutable by other means, has provided an important source of workplace bargaining leverage in which strikes have a much greater and immediate impact than in many other industrial sectors. Employers are confronted by a number of interrelated pressure points: (a) *industrial pressure*: strikes either force managerial concessions or risk high stakes in terms of operational paralysis; (b) *customer pressure*: the effect of strikes on passengers are immediate and extremely inconvenient and (c) *media pressure*: stopping

railways/tube travel is dramatic and unwelcome news across the country, even the world; (d) *business and financial pressure*: strikes provoke the wrath of large companies and the City of London ; and (e) *political pressure*: strike disruption is an electoral liability that elicits both political party and government intervention (Darlington, 2009c). Similar conditions pertain to the French context.

LIMITS OF UNION MILITANCY

Despite the apparent successes of the militant approach adopted by SUD-Rail and the RMT, there have also been some important limitations and challenges. First, strikes are necessarily 'high-risk' and a successful outcome far from certain - ineffectiveness/failure can weaken union organisation, undermine morale and result in membership loss. Second, there is employers' counter-mobilisation, with attempts to utilise strike-breaking managers and agency staff and/or employment legislation to obtain court injunctions to prevent strikes. Third, there is the danger of counter-productive targeting of union action (for example, New Year's Eve on the tube in Britain and holding strikes for prolonged periods in key commuter stations in France). Fourth, there is the negative impact of repeated suspension/cancellation of strike threats on the confidence of union representatives and members. Fifth, there is considerable variation in union organisation/strength between individual rail/tube companies and different specific grades within companies. Sixth, there is the problem of inter-union rivalries (in Britain with Aslef and in France mainly with the CGT) also undermining action.

In relation to the SUD unions in France, critics have argued they only reflect and compound divisions and weaknesses in French trade unionism, with the fragmented nature of trade unionism one of the most often quoted reasons for the low membership density of French workers (Amadiou, 1999; Touraine, 1996). It has been suggested that rather than increasing overall membership the emergence of the SUD unions has encouraged a 'migration' of disappointed members and activists from other rival unions (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2007). Meanwhile Groux (2009) has recently argued that the level of collective mobilisation and militancy in France reflects the *weakness* of the trade union movement. People outside France tend to think of it as a country where strikes occur relatively frequently, and where unions have formidable powers of collective mobilisation. Several large-scale movements over the last 15 years – in 1995, 2003, 2006 and 2007 – which brought sections of the French economy to a standstill are seen as evidence of the power of the union movement. Nevertheless, the impressive scale of these social movements may have been misleading. According to Groux (2009), from 2003 to 2007, despite high levels of mobilisation, major industrial disputes have obtained little or nothing for the strikers and generally seem to operate purely as protest. Groux argues that they are best seen as outbursts of frustration with little long-term impact. Since 1995, the French trade union movement has appeared to be exhausted by its 'confrontations with the government and employers' (Pernot 2005). The unions can still mobilise and be disruptive but, considering the scale of mobilisations, the concessions obtained are generally meagre. In fact, the activism and determination of French unions is more often a sign of weakness than strength.

While the evidence of SUD-Rail's apparent membership/organisational accomplishments somewhat undermines the power of such arguments, its relative limited success in recruiting members *en masse* and inability to build a membership beyond a minority of workers should not be overlooked. Likewise, notwithstanding the RMT's success, the militant and left-wing political model of trade unionism it embodies undoubtedly remains a distinctly minority phenomena.

A broader underlying dilemma for both SUD-Rail and the RMT is the universal tension identified by Hyman (2001; 2004; see also Cohen, 2006) between the contradictory elements of 'movement' and 'organisation'. On the one hand, trade unionism *as an organisation* enshrined in formal, official and often bureaucratic 'representative' structures that prioritise collective bargaining and institutional survival related to bricks and mortar and financial assets. On the other hand, trade unionism *as a movement*, an organisational form that prioritises workplace resistance, direct democracy, membership mobilisation and radical economic and political aspirations.

For example, while SUD-Rail emerged with the aim of forging a conflict-based and social movement orientation, combating centralised and bureaucratic trade unionism and revitalising grassroots democracy, it has also been confronted with the tension between developing this as radical class-based identity and the need to reach a tacit accommodation within the existing order, of ensuring its organisational development by an institutionalisation of its structures and through engagement with industrial relations processes and workplace representative institutions of works councils. In the process a related tension has been evident between the espoused ideology of participative democracy and the leadership role of a core of more experienced and motivated activists in the union, manifest within internal debates on the problem of bureaucracy (Connolly, 2009). The organisation/movement dialectic has also been at play within the RMT, with sharp criticism of full-time union officers by local reps/activists for calling off threatened strikes in the face of legal challenges and/or ending strikes on terms that have been perceived as falling short of original demands.

RADICAL POLITICAL UNIONISM

Some overall conclusions can be drawn from comparing SUD-Rail and the RMT. First, there is the important role of union leadership and particularly left-wing leadership for understanding the nature and extent of militancy and mobilisation (Darlington, 2002; 2009b; Connolly, 2010a). Kelly's work (1997; 1998) has usefully drawn analytical attention to the role of leaders in the processes of mobilisation. First, they use arguments to frame issues so as to promote a sense of injustice amongst workers. This process of persuasion involves the use of 'collective action frames' which can be defined as 'action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns' (Snow *et al*, 1986). They either 'underscore and embellish the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable' (Snow and Benford, 1992:137). Collective action framing is the attempt to link the ideologies, goals and activities of the union to the interests, values and beliefs of workers (Snow *et al*, 1986). The abstract ideologies that circulate within the labour movement, such as varieties of Marxism or Christian socialism, play an important role in promoting a sense of injustice, as they help to supply a set of emotionally loaded categories and ideas for thinking about issues, events or situations (Kelly, 1998). Second, leaders encourage group cohesion and identity, which encourages workers to think of their collective interests in opposition to their employer. It is vital that aggrieved individuals blame an agency for their problems and that they have a sense of themselves as a distinct group defined in opposition to an 'out-group', which has different interests and values (Kelly, 1998: 29-30). Third, leaders incite and justify the need for collective action and fourthly, they legitimise this action in the face of counter-mobilisation by employers.

The evidence from SUD-Rail and the RMT confirms the way that leaders and activists have played a crucial role in helping to collectivise workers' discrete experiences and aspirations in forms which have encouraged combativity and strike

mobilisation. But an additional factor, often been overlooked in studies on trade union renewal and revitalisation strategies, has been the importance of *left-wing* political leadership and *class-based* notions of trade unionism in processes of collective interest definition and union organisation (Darlington, 1994; 2002). Such left-wing activists have enjoyed considerable success in taking up and articulating members' grievances and sense of injustice, suggesting means of redress, organising collective forms of union organisation and action, and generalising politically from such endeavours.

Second, there is the significance of the way in which both SUD-Rail and the RMT have embraced broader political and social movement concerns as part of their organising approaches. Other comparative studies of union renewal have suggested that in order to revitalise, unions need to broaden their perspective beyond the workplace level (Turner, 2004). Frege and Kelly (2003; 2004), in drawing attention to strategies that can broaden the perspective of trade unions and help reverse their decline, identified six strategies in their comparative study of five countries: the UK, the United States, Germany, Italy and Spain, namely: organising, labour-management partnership, political action, reform of union structures, coalition-building and international solidarity. The authors concluded that despite differences in the focus of union efforts to revitalise, a common response observed in all countries was the unions' engagement in political action. Likewise Bacarro *et al* have argued that 'unions are everywhere re-launching themselves as political subjects, as actors engaged not just in collective bargaining and workplace regulation, but also in the broader aggregation of political and social interests' (2003: 119). Thus the development of unions as political actors and as social movements is considered to be an important feature of union revitalisation.

Significantly Upchurch *et al* (2009a; 2009b) have analysed the politicisation of trade unions within Western Europe in relation to the 'crisis of social democratic trade unionism'. They have argued that 'the continuing adaptation to neo-liberalism as a means of capital accumulation by social democratic parties in power will mean a continuation of the crisis, and a parallel "opening up" of workers' organised political dissent within wider civil society'. In Upchurch *et al*'s model of alternative trade union futures both the RMT and the SUD-Rail union would come under the category of what they term 'radicalised political unionism'. Both unions have clearly focused on developing themselves as political actors and as social movements, a development which has contributed to the process of union revitalisation. Moreover, in both unions there has been some realignment with new political parties and movements to the left of the established labour/socialist/communist parties.

As we have seen, there *are* challenges with the approach that has been adopted, particularly in terms of sustaining militant action and in encouraging a widespread adoption of a politicised militant approach for revitalisation within the *broader* trade union movement. Undoubtedly the scale of the current economic recession and employers' offensive is posing more formidable challenges for union organisation in both countries. But arguably Simms and Charlwood's (2010: 127) expressed 'pessimis[m] about the opportunities for any sustained reversal of fortunes because of the challenges in constructing a broad-based understanding of collective interests', ignores the way in which union renewal has been accomplished within an important arena of employment. Whilst recognising the limitations and challenges of developing and sustaining a militant approach, the experience of SUD-Rail and the RMT underlines the possibilities for militancy as a strategy for union revitalisation. However, the paper also highlights the relatively advantageous industrial context within which strike activity has occurred, such that the successes of both unions

cannot necessarily be assumed to be automatically replicable by other unions that operate in less favourable contexts.

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