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# Trade Unions in Western Europe

*Hard Times, Hard Choices*



REBECCA GUMBRELL-MCCORMICK  
& RICHARD HYMAN

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Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick  
and  
Richard Hyman

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To the memory of Georges Debunne (1918–2008) and  
Jack Jones (1913–2009), inspirational European trade unionists

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## Preface

For several decades, trade unions in Europe have been on the defensive. They have lost membership, sometimes drastically. Their collective bargaining power has declined, as has their influence on government and, in some countries, their public respect. Unions in western Europe achieved their greatest socio-economic status half a century ago, in the context of large-scale industrial production ('Fordism') and the rise of the Keynesian welfare state. Leading employers were 'national champions', and national governments self-evidently shaped social and economic policy; it seemed obvious that unions were a crucial actor in a triangular relationship.

Today the landscape has changed irrevocably. Governments profess their inability to resist the dictates of global economic forces; major companies are almost universally transnational in ownership and in their production strategies; trade unions are often disoriented. Many show obvious uncertainty as to their role in the 21st century, giving rise to internal conflicts. Some observers ask whether unions remain relevant socio-economic actors. But hard times can stimulate new thinking and hence provide new opportunities; the challenge is to review unions' purposes and priorities and to devise new ways of achieving these. This can involve hard choices: not all objectives can receive priority, particularly when resources are scarcer. In our view, participation in the search for effective responses is a key task for socially responsible researchers.

Why do we insist that trade unions are (still) important subjects for scientific analysis? First, unions provide a collective 'voice' through which employees can counter unilateral, and potentially autocratic, management control (Freeman and Medoff 1984); they bring a measure of democracy to the employment relationship. Second, they constitute a form of 'countervailing power' to the socio-economic dominance of capital (Galbraith 1952); this function is even more important, if also far more difficult to perform, in an era of multinational corporations (MNCs) and the financialization of the global economy. Third, unions are, at least potentially, a 'sword of justice' (Flanders 1970): they have historically fought to defend the weak, vulnerable, and disadvantaged, have expressed a set of values—or 'moral economy' (Thompson 1971)—in opposition to the dominant dehumanizing political economy, and have offered aspirations for a different—and better—form of society.



This book is the main outcome of a research project for which we received funding between 2006 and 2009 from the Danish Social Research Council (*Forskningsrådet for Samfund og Erhverv*), enabling us to undertake our fieldwork. The original aim was to address trade union responses to globalization. It soon became obvious that this definition was both too broad and too narrow. Too broad, in that globalization is a portmanteau concept with no agreed definition: it can be stretched to encompass virtually every major social and economic trend. Too narrow, in that unions face many challenges—the difficulty of recruiting younger workers, to give just one example—which it would be far-fetched to attribute primarily to globalization. Our research developed in line with the unfolding global financial and economic crisis: this was inevitably the main preoccupation of many participants in our fieldwork, becoming a dominant background theme to the research. Since we focused on different countries at different phases of the crisis, comparative analysis became particularly challenging.

Our study includes larger and smaller countries from each of the four commonly identified varieties of west European capitalism: in the Nordic case, Sweden and Denmark; the ‘central’ group of Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Belgium; in ‘southern’ Europe, France, and Italy; and the ‘liberal market economies’ of Britain and Ireland. It would have been valuable to include countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), but the limitations of our linguistic abilities precluded this: we strongly believe that serious comparative research requires the capacity at least to read the languages of the countries covered.

In each country we recorded interviews with key officials at confederal level and in sectoral unions—normally including metalworking and public services—and in some cases at regional as well as national levels. This provided a range of perspectives, but certainly not a full picture. Normally the interviews were in the relevant national language. We also interviewed academic experts and other informed observers. Beyond this, we accumulated a large volume of primary documentation as well as digesting a mass of secondary literature. Studying trade unions, which are elaborate social organizations with often opaque internal political dynamics, in ten countries at a time of economic turmoil has involved issues of some analytical complexity. To return to the initial conception of our project, economic internationalization has clearly been a source of many of the key challenges facing trade unions, but change in industrial relations ‘is not so much driven by the juggernaut of global product markets but is the result of a complex interaction of markets, institutions and actors’ (Kelly 2012: 354). In the book that follows we

have attempted to do justice to this complexity, while also seeking to identify broad general trends and processes.

We are very grateful to the *Forskningsråd* for its financial support, and to our colleague Steen Scheuer, now at Syddansk Universitet, who was the main award holder. Without the cooperation of our interview partners who willingly gave of their time, often when themselves under great pressure—we recall one general secretary who had to interrupt our conversation in order to take a call from the prime minister—this study would have been impossible, and we offer our profound gratitude. We also record special thanks to Stefania Marino, who provided major assistance with our research in Italy and compensated for limitations in our command of the language. Finally, we thank Heiner Dribbusch, Roland Erne, Janine Goetschy, John Kelly, Salvo Leonardi, Guglielmo Meardi, Steen Scheuer, and Kurt Vandaele, who made valuable comments on a draft of this book. The usual disclaimers apply.

We commence with two introductory chapters, the first mapping the trade union landscape in the ten countries and the second presenting an overview of key challenges and responses. The next five chapters are arranged thematically, each examining union initiatives in a key policy area. We make no attempt to present detailed conclusions to each chapter, for the separate sections stand on their own. We end, not with an overview of the book as a whole—an impossible task—but by returning to these themes by exploring ways in which unions can integrate strategic action with democratic involvement.

Our hope is that this work will be of value, not only to scholars but more importantly to trade unionists themselves, as they struggle to find solutions to immense challenges. Hard times, hard choices; but strategic initiative is still possible.

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# Contents

|  |      |
|--|------|
| <i>List of Figures</i>   | xiii |
| <i>List of Tables</i>  | xv   |
| <i>List of Abbreviations</i>   | xvii |
| 1. Mapping the Terrain: Varieties of Industrial Relations and Trade Unionism     | 1    |
| 2. Hard Times: Challenges and Responses  | 29   |
| 3. Renewing Power Resources: Recruitment, Representation, and Mobilization       | 52   |
| 4. Restructuring Trade Unionism: Mergers and Organizational Redesign             | 81   |
| 5. Bargaining in Adversity: Decentralization, Social Partnership, and the Crisis | 102  |
| 6. Unions and Politics: Parties, Alliances, and the Battle of Ideas              | 132  |
| 7. Beyond National Boundaries: Unions, Europe, and the World                     | 158  |
| 8. Hard Choices: Reconciling Strategy and Democracy                              | 191  |
| <i>References</i>  | 207  |
| <i>Index</i>   | 231  |

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# List of Figures

|     |   |     |
|-----|---|-----|
| 8.1 | Strategic unionism: A stylized framework for comparison | 195 |
| 8.2 | The ‘magic triangle’                                    | 198 |

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# List of Tables

|     |   |     |
|-----|---|-----|
| 1.1 | Labour market indicators, 2011  | 4   |
| 1.2 | Trade union density and collective bargaining coverage, 1980 and 2010 | 5   |
| 2.1 | Labour market insecurity, age 15–24 (2011)                            | 34  |
| 3.1 | Disaggregated union density statistics (%)                            | 54  |
| 5.1 | Strike days per 1,000 workers, annual averages                        | 105 |
| 5.2 | Dimensions of the crisis  | 123 |
| 6.1 | ‘Left’ seats in most recent national and European elections           | 139 |



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## List of Abbreviations

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| AbvaKabo | [public services union, Netherlands]                                   |
| ABVV     | Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond   |
| AC       | Akademikernes Centralorganisation                                      |
| ACLVB    | Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België                    |
| ACV      | Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond  |
| ACW      | Algemeen Christelijk Werknemersverbond                                 |
| AK       | Bundesarbeitskammer or Arbeiterkammer                                  |
| ATTAC    | Association pour la taxation des transactions pour l'aide aux citoyens |
| BASTUN   | Baltic Sea Trade Union Network   |
| CDA      | Christlich-Demokratische Arbeitnehmerschaft                            |
| CDU      | Christlich Demokratische Union   |
| CD&V     | Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams  |
| CEE      | Central and Eastern Europe   |
| CFDT     | Confédération française démocratique du travail                        |
| CFTC     | Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens                     |
| CFE-CGC  | Confédération générale des cadres                                      |
| CGB      | Christlicher Gewerkschaftsbund Deutschlands                            |
| CGIL     | Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro                            |
| CGSLB    | Centrale Générale des Syndicats Libéraux de Belgique                   |
| CGT      | Confédération générale du travail                                      |
| CISC     | Confédération internationale des syndicats chrétiens                   |
| CISL     | Confederazione italiana sindacati lavoratori                           |
| CME      | coordinated market economy   |
| CNV      | Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond                                       |
| CPE      | contrat première embauche  |
| CSC      | Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens                                  |
| CSR      | corporate social responsibility  |
| DBB      | dbb beamtenbund und tarifunion   |
| DGB      | Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund  |
| ECJ      | European Court of Justice  |
| EEA      | European Economic Area   |

## List of Abbreviations

---

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| EEC         | European Economic Community   |
| EFA         | European framework agreement  |
| EMCEF       | European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers' Federation<br>(now IndustriALL) |
| EMF         | European Metalworkers' Federation (now IndustriALL)                         |
| EMU         | Economic and Monetary Union   |
| ESF         | European Social Forum   |
| ETUC        | European Trade Union Confederation  |
| ETUF        | European Trade Union Federation   |
| ETUI        | European Trade Union Institute  |
| EU          | European Union  |
| EWG         | European works council  |
| FeLSA-CISL  | Federazione lavoratori somministrati autonomi atipici                       |
| FES         | Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  |
| 3F          | Fagligt Fælles Forbund  |
| FGTB        | Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique                                  |
| FIOM        | Federazione impiegati operai metallurgici                                   |
| FNV         | Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging   |
| FO          | CGT-Force ouvrière  |
| FOA         | [Danish union of public employees]  |
| FPÖ         | Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs  |
| FTF         | [Danish white-collar confederation]   |
| GEW         | [Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft]                                   |
| GMB         | [British general union]   |
| GPA         | Gewerkschaft der Privatangestellten   |
| GUF         | Global Union Federation   |
| HK          | [Danish retail and clerical union]  |
| HTF         | [Swedish retail and commercial union]                                       |
| ICFTU       | International Confederation of Free Trade Unions                            |
| ICTU        | Irish Congress of Trade Unions  |
| IFA         | international framework agreement   |
| IG BAU      | Industriegewerkschaft Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt                                    |
| IG BCE      | Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, Chemie, Energie                              |
| IG Metall   | Industriegewerkschaft Metall  |
| ILO         | International Labour Organization   |
| IMF         | International Monetary Fund   |
| IndustriALL | <i>see</i> EMF  |
| ITUC        | International Trade Union Confederation                                     |
| IWW         | Industrial Workers of the World   |
| KAD         | Kvindeligt Arbejderforbund i Danmark  |
| KriFa       | Kristelig Fagbevægelse  |
| LGBT        | lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender                                     |

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| LME          | liberal market economy   |
| LO (Sweden)  | Landsorganisationen i Sverige                                      |
| LO (Denmark) | Landsorganisationen i Danmark                                      |
| Mandate      | [Irish union of retail, bar, and administrative workers]           |
| MBL          | Medbestämmandelagen  |
| MEDEF        | Mouvement des Entreprises de France                                |
| MHP          | Vakcentrale voor Middengroepen en Hoger Personeel                  |
| MNC          | multinational corporation  |
| MOC          | Mouvement ouvrier chrétien   |
| NFS          | Nordens Fackliga Samorganisation                                   |
| NGG          | Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten                            |
| NGO          | non-governmental organization                                      |
| NidiL        | Nuove indentità di lavoro  |
| NKV          | Nederlands Katholiek Vakverbond                                    |
| NVV          | Nederlands Verbond van Vakverenigingen                             |
| ÖGB          | Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund                                 |
| ÖTV          | Gewerkschaft Öffentliche Dienste, Transport und Verkehr            |
| ÖVP          | Österreichische Volkspartei  |
| PCF          | Parti communiste français  |
| PCI          | Partito comunista italiano   |
| PCS          | Public and Commercial Services Union                               |
| PD           | Partito democratico  |
| PS (Belgium) | Parti Socialiste   |
| PS (France)  | Parti socialiste   |
| PSI          | Partito socialista italiano  |
| PvdA         | Partij van de Arbeid   |
| PWD          | Posted workers directive   |
| QMV          | qualified majority voting  |
| RILU         | Red International of Labour Unions                                 |
| RMT          | National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers             |
| RSU          | rappresentanza sindacale unitaria                                  |
| SACO         | Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation                           |
| SAF          | Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningen                                     |
| SAP          | Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti                          |
| SEA          | Single European Act  |
| SER          | Sociaal-Economische Raad   |
| SF           | Socialistisk Folkeparti  |
| SiD          | Specialarbejderforbundet i Danmark                                 |
| SIF          | Svenska industritjänstemannaförbundet                              |
| SIPTU        | Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union             |
| SMART        | specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-based (of goals) |

## List of Abbreviations

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|         |  |
|---------|--|
| SMIC    | salaire minimum interprofessionnel de croissance     |
| SMT     | senior management team                               |
| SN      | Svenskt Näringsliv                                   |
| SP      | Socialistische Partij                                |
| SPD     | Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands              |
| SPÖ     | Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs               |
| SUD     | Union syndicale solidaires                           |
| STvdA   | Stichting van de Arbeid                              |
| TCE     | Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe        |
| TCO     | Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation                   |
| TGWU    | Transport and General Workers' Union (now Unite)     |
| TIB     | Forbundet Træ-Industri-Byg                           |
| TUC     | Trades Union Congress                                |
| UCATT   | Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians |
| UIL     | Unione italiana del lavoro                           |
| UK      | United Kingdom                                       |
| UMF     | Union Modernisation Fund                             |
| UNI     | Union Network International                          |
| Unionen | [merger of Swedish SIF and HTF unions]               |
| Unison  | [British public service trade union]                 |
| Unite   | <i>see</i> TGWU                                      |
| USA     | United States of America                             |
| USDAW   | Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers       |
| VENRO   | [umbrella body of development NGOs]                  |
| ver.di  | Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft                 |
| WCL     | World Confederation of Labour                        |
| WFTU    | World Federation of Trade Unions                     |
| WKÖ     | Wirtschaftskammer Österreich                         |

*Note:* references in square brackets are for organizations which now use only initials, not a full title, or have adopted a name that is not an abbreviated title.

## Mapping the Terrain: Varieties of Industrial Relations and Trade Unionism

What is a trade union? More than a century ago, when Sidney and Beatrice Webb wrote their pioneering *History of Trade Unionism*, they offered the following definition (Webb and Webb 1894: 1): ‘a trade union, as we understand the term, is a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment’. In their subsequent analytical study, *Industrial Democracy* (Webb and Webb 1897), they described trade union functions as comprising ‘mutual insurance’ (by which they meant providing financial benefits when members faced adversity); collective bargaining (a term which they themselves invented); and ‘legal enactment’ (pressure for favourable government action).

These conceptions were limited by time and place. When they published a revised *History* in 1920 they referred to ‘the conditions of their working lives’, not just ‘employment’: a recognition that unions were concerned with the position of workers within society, not only in relation to their particular employer. They might also have noted that the growth in white-collar unionism made the reference to ‘wage-earners’ unduly narrow. Yet a more fundamental issue is that their much-quoted definition frames trade union purposes in terms of the defence of primarily economic interests, whereas the notion of ‘industrial democracy’ implied that unions were, at least potentially, vehicles of social and political transformation. In their book with that title, indeed, they distinguished two trade union ‘devices’ which they termed ‘restriction of numbers’ and ‘the common rule’: the first defending the market position of relatively advantaged groups of workers against encroachment by others less favourably placed; the second pursuing improvements from which all could benefit.

How far unions pursue narrow economic interests on the one hand, a broader social agenda on the other, changes over time and differs significantly between (as well as within) countries. To an important extent, such

differences connect to contrasting understandings of trade unions and their primary objectives and modes of action. Do they recruit only employees, or also the self-employed, the unemployed, pensioners? Do they represent only their members, or the interests of a broader constituency? Is the agenda they pursue exclusively employment related, or does it encompass broader social and political issues? Do they rely primarily on peaceful bargaining (whether with employers or with governments), with strike action the very last resort, or do they often resort to mobilization and militancy, understanding trade unionism as a social movement rather than simply an organization?

Trade unions have been described as 'intermediary organizations' (Müller-Jentsch 1985), since their main task as collective actors is to deploy workers' collective resources in interaction with those who exert power over them. This means that it is impossible to understand unions in isolation. They are embedded in four main types of relationship. First, with their own members and constituents, giving rise to issues of democracy and accountability. Second, with employers, raising issues of recognition, and of the distribution but also production of profit. Third, with governments, involving issues of the economic and juridical framework of industrial relations, the representative status of unions in policy-making—what Ewing (2005) terms their 'public administration function'—and the 'social wage' constituted by public welfare provision. Fourth, with 'civil society' (or 'public opinion'), which has become increasingly important as unions' intrinsic resources diminish and they seek external legitimacy and alliances with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). We may note that the first relationship generates a 'logic of membership', which implies responsiveness to members' expectations; the second and third, a 'logic of influence', whereby action is adapted to the expectations of unions' interlocutors in order to deliver results (Schmitter and Streeck 1981); the fourth, however, transcends this division.

In this book we explore these four patterns of relationship in ten countries. Some scholars question whether nations are (still) the appropriate unit of analysis when examining the actors and processes of industrial relations (Katz and Darbishire 2000); and we will certainly consider some of the key variations within each country. But it is also important to stress that individual countries (or groups of countries) possess distinctive configurations of institutions which establish the terrain of trade union organization and action. As Meardi insists (2011: 339), 'if nations are not the beginning and the end of culture, they are not dead or irrelevant either... Law, political traditions and language are particularly important factors that operate mostly at the national level.' For example, labour law in many countries precisely defines the legitimate actors in industrial relations, the status of collective agreements, the legality of strikes, the mechanisms for remedying disputes.

The functioning of works councils or committees, firmly established in most of the countries we examine, follows nationally specific rules which help define the degree to which they are complementary to trade unions. Some 'state traditions' (Crouch 1993) assign unions an accepted role in the formulation of public policy. In many cases, the processes of 'industrial relations' as understood in the anglophone world and of social policy are closely intertwined, giving unions a key role in the administration of the welfare state. The organization and preferences of employers differ significantly across countries, with major implications for the character and coverage of collective bargaining (Clegg 1976). The institutional shape of trade unionism itself reflects often long processes of historical evolution which are often path dependent and resistant to change; so, for example, ideological divisions which have lost much of their former resonance may still leave a powerful institutional heritage in conflicts between rival confederations which to the outsider possess little practical logic.

Certainly institutions can change, not least in the sphere of industrial relations: this is the theme of a large and growing literature (Crouch 2005; Streeck 2009; Thelen 2004). However much some of the discussion of 'globalization' may exaggerate, the intensification of cross-national competitive forces, the internationalization of financial capital, and the strategic priorities of MNCs have indeed stress-tested national industrial relations systems. The policies of the European Union (EU), themselves among the drivers of economic internationalization, have also had a direct influence on national labour law and labour market institutions. To acknowledge such trends, however, is not to accept that homogenization has proceeded so far that national distinctiveness has vanished. When we survey European trade unions, national specificity remains striking.

It has become common to distinguish between different 'varieties of capitalism' according to how far, and through what mechanisms, markets—including labour markets—are socially and politically regulated. Hall and Soskice (2001), in their pioneering exposition of the thesis, drew a dichotomy between 'liberal' and 'coordinated' market economies (LMEs and CMEs). Subsequent studies (Amable 2003; Hancké et al. 2007; Schmidt 2002) have criticized this binary schema and developed more elaborate classifications, taking into account in particular the role of the state in managing the economy and structuring the labour market. An analogous debate has followed the effort of Esping-Andersen (1990) to outline 'three worlds' of welfare provision: a privatized 'liberal' model, an egalitarian 'Social-democratic' model, and a state-led but unequalitarian 'social insurance' model. Here too, critics have argued the need to distinguish additional models. In both respects, attention to national socio-economic context is crucial for any comparative analysis of trade unionism. As Hoffmann and Hoffmann insist (2009: 389),



the impact on unions of similar external challenges is very different, ‘depending on their own organisational structures and political culture and on the particular variety of capitalism and welfare state model in which they are embedded’.

It has also long been argued that small countries, particularly when highly exposed to world markets, exhibit particularly strongly organized industrial relations (Katzenstein 1985), and that unions are likely to be tightly integrated into national policy-making institutions. Accordingly, our study includes larger and smaller countries and encompasses each of the four commonly identified varieties of capitalism in western Europe: Sweden and Denmark, with Social-democratic traditions, exceptionally high union density, and elaborate egalitarian welfare regimes; Germany, Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands, with institutionalized ‘social partnership’; France and Italy, with a history of strong Communist parties linked to adversarial and weakly institutionalized industrial relations; and the LMEs of Britain and Ireland. These four groupings are widely adopted as broad classifications of industrial relations regimes in western Europe (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999; Visser 2009). We outline some of the characteristics of each country, pointing to the complexities affecting any attempt at classification, and indicate ways in which traditional models have been changing. Some basic labour market indicators are presented in Table 1.1. We list the countries in the order of the summaries above.

We link these accounts to the literature on ‘varieties of unionism’, showing how traditional union identities have reflected national contexts but are also

**Table 1.1.** Labour market indicators, 2011

|    | Population<br>(million) | Employment<br>rate 20–64 (%) | Female rate<br>(%) | Fixed-term<br>contracts<br>(%) | Part-time<br>(%) | Unemployment<br>rate (%) |
|----|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| SE | 9.3                     | 80                           | 77                 | 16                             | 26               | 7.5                      |
| DK | 5.5                     | 76                           | 72                 | 9                              | 26               | 7.6                      |
| DE | 82.0                    | 76                           | 71                 | 15                             | 26               | 5.9                      |
| AT | 8.4                     | 75                           | 70                 | 10                             | 27               | 4.2                      |
| NL | 16.5                    | 77                           | 71                 | 18                             | 49*              | 4.4                      |
| BE | 10.8                    | 67                           | 62                 | 9                              | 25               | 7.2                      |
| FR | 62.5                    | 69                           | 65                 | 15                             | 18               | 9.6                      |
| IT | 60.0                    | 61                           | 50                 | 13                             | 16               | 8.4                      |
| UK | 61.6                    | 74                           | 68                 | 6                              | 27               | 8.0                      |
| IE | 4.5                     | 64                           | 60                 | 10                             | 24               | 14.4                     |

\* In NL, part-time status is defined as working under 35 hours a week; elsewhere, it is based on employees’ self-definition.

Source: Eurostat.

**Table 1.2.** Trade union density and collective bargaining coverage, 1980 and 2010

|    | Union density |      | Bargaining coverage |      |
|----|---------------|------|---------------------|------|
|    | 1980          | 2010 | 1980                | 2010 |
| SE | 78            | 69   | 85                  | 91   |
| DK | 79            | 68   | 72                  | 80   |
| DE | 35            | 19   | 78                  | 62   |
| AT | 57            | 28   | 95                  | 99   |
| NL | 35            | 19   | 79                  | 82   |
| BE | 54            | 52   | 97                  | 96   |
| FR | 18            | 8    | 85                  | 90   |
| IT | 48            | 33   | 85                  | 80   |
| UK | 51            | 27   | 70                  | 33   |
| IE | 64            | 37   | 64                  | 44   |

Source: ICTWSS database for 2008–9, based on national sources (Visser 2011).

subject to transformation. As an indicator of two key features of different national models, Table 1.2 presents data for membership density and collective bargaining coverage in each country, showing clear cross-national differences and also significant changes over time. Four points emerge clearly. First, density varies remarkably across countries, the differences even more striking if compared to the far more uniform proportion of voters supporting ‘left’ parties, usually regarded as partners within a broader labour movement. Second, density has declined universally in the past three decades, but far more severely in some countries than others. In general, unions where membership levels were initially high have proved more resilient, thus disparities have increased over time. Third, while there are clear differences in bargaining coverage, they are less dramatic; and some countries with very low union density have high coverage. Finally, coverage levels have fallen far less than union density, and indeed in some countries are today higher than thirty years ago. Overall, as Checchi and Visser (2005) argue, the relative positions of different countries tend to persist: collective regulation seems path dependent.

Below we present a brief initial outline of our ten countries, focusing on the social, economic, and political context and the characteristics of each movement in the period of its greatest strength and influence. As part of this discussion we first review some of the explanations for these distinctive national patterns. In the following chapter we survey the key challenges and changes which have threatened each of the national models, and present an initial overview of different attempts at ‘revitalization’.

### Models of Trade Unionism

In any cross-national comparison one can use the telescope or the microscope. The first reveals broad contours rather than fine details, and from a sufficient distance one mountain may resemble many others. On this basis, comparativists create classifications of country groups, proposing a parsimonious catalogue of types rather than insisting on the uniqueness of each national case (which would make comparative analysis virtually impossible). But there is always a trade-off between parsimony and accuracy. Through a microscope, the differences between seemingly similar cases become all too apparent. In the 19th century, Darwin distinguished ‘lumpers’ (who worked with broad, encompassing categories of phenomena) from ‘splitters’ (who emphasized the differences between cases). In the following discussion we lump our ten cases into the four groups outlined above, but in splitting mode outline key differences within each category.

Before turning to national cases, we address some key issues which recur in the scholarly analysis of comparative trade unionism. The *first* concerns union membership and density. Approaches tend to be either longitudinal (examining growth and decline) or cross-sectional (addressing cross-national or intra-national variation—for example between manual and white-collar occupations, public and private sectors, male and female employees). There is a fashion for econometric analysis of national membership data. However, such analysis does not always take adequate account of the limits of national statistics, since these typically derive from unions’ own declarations, which may be exaggerated, particularly in countries with rival union organizations seeking to assert their own representativeness. More elusively, the very meaning of union membership can vary cross-nationally. One reason why density in Sweden was until recently 80 per cent, as against only 8 per cent in France, is that to become a formal union member in France has traditionally implied a commitment to active participation and engagement, whereas in most other countries a far more passive affiliation is the norm. As Müller-Jentsch insists (1985: 22), ‘union density tells us nothing about the quality of the ties between the organization and its membership’.

Explanatory approaches are of several types. Traditionally, the most influential were economic in focus, treating changes in the levels of employment or unemployment, or movements in prices and wages, as key causes of fluctuations in union density. Such approaches address longitudinal changes rather than cross-sectional differences; and they fail to explain trends in the Nordic countries and Belgium, which are often counter-cyclical. This can be explained by the key union role in the administration of unemployment benefits (at least until recently), creating a particular incentive to membership in times of rising unemployment (Ebbinghaus et al. 2011; Van Rie et al.