

European Unions – Labor’s quest for a transnational democracy, by Roland Erne.

Ithaca: ILR Press, Cornell University Press, 2008, 268 pp. \$**** (hardback).

European Unions breaks new ground in the study of the project to create meaningful and effective forms of collectivism of organised labour in Europe. It combines both industrial relations and political economy concerns to present an illuminating study, and is predicated on a dual starting point. One is the age old search for collectivism across national borders within a globalising world but especially in Europe which dates back to Karl Marx’s involvement in the International Workingmen’s Association (or First International). Here the immediate goal is to stop ‘the race to the bottom’ and ‘social dumping’. The other is the particular political nature of European Union (EU), and in particular its democratic deficit (structurally and culturally). Erne uses these issues to open up the book by presenting a four-fold schema by which to investigate and understand union actions. This comprises strategies of Euro-technocratisation, Euro-democratisation, technocratic renationalisation and democratic renationalisation. Each quadrant varies with regard to the focus of decision making and action (EU, national) and the degree of popular control and influence (technocratic, democratic). From these, degrees of oppositionalism in ideology and methods can be deduced given that the EU is now dominated by an ascendant neo-liberalism.

The strategies are then discussed in terms of their consequent goals and activities with a chapter examining how the power resources (workplace, political and exchange) of unions relate to the four strategies. On this basis, Erne then turns his attention in subsequent chapters to wage policy, the European Monetary Union and social pactism to examine which, if any, of the strategies the national-based unionisms appear to be prosecuting. This task is aided by various detailed ‘case studies’ of countries, companies and union federations which highlight the importance of varying national features to explain the diversity of actions and outcomes across space and time. But the ‘case studies’ also highlight the dialectic between less path dependent choices and more path

dependent choices, and the roots to these. Chapters on different wage policies adopted by European union bodies and federations deepen this understanding.

When it comes to the crunch, for Erne clearly favours the Euro-democratisation strategy and its attendant outcomes, the evidence for its actuality and, thus, practicality and robustness is present but not of a critical weight (as of yet). Erne argues that the extant evidence demonstrates that 'necessity is the mother of invention'. He is on his strongest ground here when he shows transnational collective action is triggered by politicising supranational firm reorganisation through intra- (and not inter-) firm union action. One could foresee how this important insight could be used to create many parallel transnational solidarities, and from which the possibility of using this to open a platform from which to engage in political exchange is created.

My critique of *European Unions* highlights a number of weaknesses, though they do not by any means overwhelm the insight and usefulness of Erne's work here. The first is that the justification for examining transnational collectivism within Europe required a wider grounding for it is not evident that all national-based unionisms in Europe would necessarily gravitate towards Europe in their search for leverage. Unite in Britain has formed the Workers Uniting alliance with the United Steelworkers Union in the USA in 2008. It is billed as the world's first global union. This indicates that for some unions in Europe working with unions outside Europe is at least a pressing priority as working with those inside Europe. Where this is the case, the terrain for doing so is different and the nature of the collectivism is likely to be too. This is an aspect of analysis that needed integrating into *European Unions*. The second is that the underlying normative assumption that all or most of the national-based unionisms are so fervently pro-European Union - whatever their aspiration of a European Union is - that they focus upon issues of democratising it is a little lacking in credulity. The nature of some national labor unionisms are that it does not seem to aspire to any of the four strategies, with the target of some unionisms being both above and below the level of the EU. There

are also then those that seek to either destroy the EU – for it is, in common parlance, for them a ‘bosses’ club’ – by withdrawing from it or by destroying it through exposing its contradictions. Moreover, national union policies of support (critical, conditional) should not necessarily be taken imply popular or mandated membership endorsement such that even a Euro-democratisation strategy may lack the latter of its components (especially because Euro-union structures are at several extra steps removed from the workplace and enterprise unionism). Nonetheless, Erne makes a forceful case for his preferred option and skilfully marshals a wide array of information and knowledge around and through the four-fold schema to do so. This, a manifesto for social democratic unionism, is a refreshing one to read in an age of neo-liberalism.

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