Conclusion: an appraisal of the achievements and prospects of trade union policy

In conclusion we cannot offer the reader a summary of trade union history, with all its successes and setbacks, its crises, crushing defeats and lasting accomplishments. Instead – taking the questions posed in the introduction as our starting point – we shall attempt an appraisal of more than a hundred years of trade union policy in Germany and address the issue of the "end of the trade unions" or the "end of the labour movement" so often predicted in recent years.

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Trade unions are not an end in themselves. Therefore the following appraisal cannot and should not centre on their organizational achievements or policy statements. The question to ask is whether they have helped improve the economic and social conditions of working people and contributed to political equality.

An assessment of trade union policy is, of course, also an appraisal of social history ever since industrialization gathered momentum. Without a doubt, the trade unions have been a vital driving force behind the struggle of working people against exploitation and political oppression, though they have not been alone in this. Although it is not possible to calculate exactly what share the trade unions have had in the social development of the past 100–120 years in relation to the labour movement as a whole and the bourgeois social reformers, one may safely say that for much of its course German social history would have been bumpier without the trade unions.

Let us first consider the areas that comprise the core of trade union policy. Since the late nineteenth century, workers' incomes have increased many times over – sometimes slowly, sometimes faster – not merely their face value but in real terms (Table 3d). One of the major successes attributable to the unions is the reduction in working hours. Since the mid-nineteenth century the working week in industry has been virtually halved (Tables 4a,b). This, together with longer holidays and better pay, has contributed to an undeniable rise in living standards for broad sections of the population.

The improved "quality of life" of working people also stems from the

steady extension of financial safeguards against the social consequences of all the hazards that in earlier times – until the end of the nineteenth century, and again in the Depression of the 1930s – led to poverty and misery. Insurance against sickness and disablement are now as natural a part of welfare provision as unemployment benefit and old age pensions.

Conditions of life which are nowadays often taken for granted are in fact social rights that were fought for and won with much effort by the trade unions: freedom of association, the right to strike, collective agreements, industrial health and safety standards, industrial law, universal suffrage, co-determination and worker participation at workplace and company level, and representation on public bodies responsible for everything from social insurance to radio.

As a glance at their membership figures shows, the trade unions proved to be the largest organized force working not only for social reform but also for democracy. Alongside other associations and parties they fought and suffered – in part against substantial opposition – to tame the system of private capitalism and force it in the direction of the "social state", to secure and implement basic liberal rights, and to build up and extend parliamentary democracy. With their ideal of solidarity transcending the barriers of trade, class and geography, with structures providing for the internal development and expression of an informed opinion and the idea of the collective defence of interests within the framework of a pluralist society, the trade unions were (and are) the "schools" and at the same time guarantors of democracy. The trade unions have never sought to claim absolute power for themselves; though often accused of wanting a "trade union state", in fact this has never been their goal at any time.

The trade unions have always been (and this also applies to the majority of Christian unions during the Weimar Republic) the pioneers and champions of the free, democratic social state based on the rule of law, the foundations of which they helped to lay in 1918–19. Again, after the Federal Republic came into being, they gave vigorous assistance in building it up and monitoring its development with a critical eye – as the clash over emergency legislation demonstrated. In doing so, they proved immune to the temptations of totalitarianism, whose advocates, in turn, were (and are) unwilling to tolerate an independent trade union movement.

But the successes should not be allowed to eclipse the darker side of the trade union balance sheet. Let us begin with pay policy. The difference between men's and women's wages (Table 3e), the imbalance between the income of the self-employed and wage earners and the extremely inequitable distribution of the wealth produced by the economy indicate the limits of trade union objectives and their ability to achieve them. Even

cuts in working hours have their drawbacks: made possible by increases in productivity, they went hand in hand with the intensification of labour and an increase in shift and night work.

Even the most impressive provisions of social policy have their weak spots. Even today many who are sick, the long-term unemployed and the old, especially women, sink below the poverty line. The "two-thirds" society* is a bitter reality. The constant clashes over the cost of social insurance, leading to benefit cuts or freezes in times of recession, when they are most needed, clearly demonstrate that even the advances made in social policy hitherto are still liable to suffer attacks and setbacks. This also applies, incidentally, to the protection afforded by industrial law and co-determination and worker participation arrangements. Practically all legal provisions – from workplace co-determination to influence over corporate investment and production – have loopholes and weak spots, making them vulnerable to efforts to demolish positions which have already been taken. The confrontations over the right to strike and the union call for a lockout ban also confirm the impression that the problems surrounding the legal position of employees and their trade unions have by no means all been – permanently – resolved. It has not yet proved possible to detach social policy and industrial law from their dependence on economic development and economic and financial decisions, in which the unions have at best a conditional say and at worst little or no say, as demonstrated by the fate of their plans for securing and maintaining full employment.

Ultimately, any assessment of trade union policy cannot overlook the fact that the unions did not succeed in preventing the disasters of German history. The general strike debate together with the "policy of August 1914" and the helpless course between compliance and protest of spring 1933 show the trade unions' fatal tendency to underrate the ruthlessness and radicalism of their opponents and the enemies of a socially oriented, democratic society.

These defeats illustrate in heightened form the trade unions' painful experience that wage rises and advances in social policy can be clawed back. Thus many employers regularly try to take back the allegedly extravagant "benefits" of the social state in times of economic crisis by adopting a 'roll-back' strategy – as if working people had not already paid for them through wage restraint, contributions and taxes.

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* Translator's note: The sort of society in which "two-thirds" fare quite well, while the other third fare badly.

During slumps the structural weakness of the trade unions becomes evident: unemployment, the threat of job losses and a drop in incomes on the one hand, and membership losses and the "prevailing opinion" on the other sap the determination and stamina of the workers and their unions. To put it another way, these are the conditions in which trade union policy has to operate successfully. Some of the principal prerequisites of success are: a sound economy, giving scope for wage awards and for conducting industrial action; clear aims, related to the workers' needs and yet at the same time going beyond the narrow bounds of immediate demands and envisaging structural changes, too; sufficient organizational strength and a membership willing to be mobilized in the area of the dispute, rendering the militancy of the union a potential threat to be reckoned with; party political backing and broad popular support – for example, from statements in the media.

While these prerequisites of success depict an ideal situation, so to speak, this list details the initial position that is most desirable from the unions' point of view in the event of a dispute. Because economic development is only rarely or indirectly subject to trade union influence – in times of crisis the unions' influence on politics and public opinion is inclined to be rather small – the two other features of successful trade union policy are all the more important. It is in this area that internal union plans propose to strengthen the trade unions' credibility, efficiency and political competence, all aspects which suffered heavily during the crisis of the 1970s and 80s.

There are a number of organizational requirements – such as the expansion of the trade union press, the consolidation of internal democracy and revitalization of cultural activities – which, if achieved, might boost the cohesion and appeal of the unions. But for one thing their financial predicament evidently forces them to take decisions that have quite the opposite effect – for instance, their attitude to the weekly newspaper, "Welt der Arbeit" (World of Work) and the plans for structural reform of the DGB. For another, such measures would probably not be an adequate response to the present upheaval.

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However impressive the record of trade union policy may appear when looking back over the past 100 years of German social history (despite all its weak spots and less attractive aspects), the current outlook is anything but sunny. With the development of new production, office and communications systems, changes are taking place in working life and the con-

sciousness of working people, the implications of which can scarcely be guessed at as far as the formulation and defence of workers' interests are concerned. Traditional collective interpretations of conflicts collide with the new individualism of wage earners at work and at leisure. The trade unions are being caught up by a development which they themselves have helped to shape. Today's fiercely asserted demands for an individual life style are, in fact, largely a result of precisely the generally high quality of life and social security that the unions have helped to create.

A look at history teaches us, however, that the current crisis in the labour market, the anti-union crisis plans and the unions' loss of influence are not "new". What is "new" is the fact that blind economic growth, whose chief proponent is industry and on which trade union successes of the past were largely based, can and must no longer be desirable in view of the furious pace at which the environment is being devastated. And the other "new" factor is the contraction of the trade unions' social base (that is, male industrial workers) as post-industrial society emerges: in 1987, white-collar workers outnumbered manual workers for the first time (Table 6b). In important industries – coal, steel, ship building – the trade unions have slipped into the role of defending structures that have outlived their usefulness, while employees in other, up-and-coming industries and services remain aloof or reject them. The phrase "the end of the trade unions" is often heard.

None the less, the trade unions have every reason to address this problem in a purposeful way. There are three main aspects to it.

Firstly, they have shown in the past that they are perfectly capable of fusing together heterogeneous groups of workers. The most impressive example of this was the way in which they overcame the limitation to skilled workers; admittedly, they were not so successful in attracting female and white-collar workers, or, for that matter, in integrating foreign workers from the early 1960s on. The trade unions always made heavy weather of the social heterogeneity of wage earners whenever it was a matter of forming an association that extended beyond the industrial labour force. But despite any amount of justified scepticism, the growing numbers of white-collar and female workers as a proportion of the membership make it impossible simply to deny that the trade unions have any chance of organizing broad-based solidarity among wage earners. In any case, solidarity has never arisen naturally, as it were, even in the age of a relatively intact working class milieu; solidarity always had to be worked for and asserted and tempered in the face of opposition.

Secondly, throughout their history trade unions have proved to be thoroughly adaptable. They have adjusted to changes in overall circum-

stances and the conditions in which they have waged their struggle, without losing sight of their core objectives. The same goes for their organizational form. Local trade associations gave rise to national organizations, which later evolved into the industrial unions of today. The fact that the personal proximity of the local union leadership and members long ago gave way to the remoteness of the union "machinery" from the "grassroots", institutionalized by the principle of delegation, may be a consequence of large-scale organization; none the less, it needs correcting. But the process of change has, crucially, embraced the position and function of the trade unions, too. Today they enjoy widespread recognition in law, by employers and by public opinion, though this recognition extends primarily to the function which they have gradually assumed as a regulatory factor under the existing economic and social order. As the capitalist economic and social system has proved its viability and ability to develop into a "social state", the trade unions have acquired a lot of new duties and at the same time slotted into this system.

And yet the unions' dual role as a regulatory factor and a counterbalancing force, the protective and creative functions that pervade the 1981 "programme of principle", are more than merely declamatory in character. Although the unions see themselves as "service" organizations under existing conditions, they are still pressing for structural changes in line with the "social state" precept of the Basic Law. The fact that this has frequently given rise to conflict, and still does, is indicative of the trade unions' position as a counter-force, which it defends more militantly at certain times than at others. Despite the shift in their duties and function in the direction of "public" institutions, the trade unions' tradition as militant organizations lives on in a readiness to take autonomous action. This militant reformism must be preserved.

Thirdly and lastly, the conflicts that gave rise to the trade unions in the first place persist. For the end – or rather, the relative decline in importance – of industrial work will not mean the end of paid employment. It is important and right to define the concept and the importance of work in modern society; it is quite unrealistic, on the other hand, to adumbrate a social system able to manage without paid employment in the foreseeable future. But if paid employment continues, there remain certain key problem areas that belong to the trade unions' "traditional" set of duties.

It would be insufficient if the trade unions were to respond to the trend towards a post-industrial society and the shift in values associated with it simply by "improving" their solution, dismissing as "false consciousness" the wish for individualization shared by, say, women, young people, white-collar workers and the technical intelligentsia, as they did in their ear-

lier agitation among white-collar workers. The trade unions will have to affirm the development of new, individual needs and possibilities of freedom, which ought to come all the more easily to them as they helped create the social preconditions for this trend.

The desire for individualization is undoubtedly reinforced by the breakdown of those systems that, by labelling themselves "socialist", have tainted every demand for fundamental social reforms with notions such as lack of political liberty and a low standard of living. The knee-jerk identification of "actual existing socialism" with the trade union idea of the "social state", propagated through the liberal-conservative slogan of "freedom, not socialism", serves to discredit not only Social Democracy but also the unions, which must face this political and programmatic challenge.

So the trade unions need to reorientate themselves on new lines. For the industrial society in transition it is not enough to hark back to the 'bad old days' in order to effect the integration of broad strata of wage earners required to exert political influence. The employees of today have less cause than ever to identify with the fate of the exploited workers of the last century. From studying the early years of industrial capitalism they might learn how it feels for wage earners to be exposed to the employers' 'deregulation' and 'relaxation' strategies without the support of trade unions – though this can never replace first-hand experience of conflict, individual powerlessness and trade union solidarity. The trade unions thus need an image of the wage earner in which – in contrast to the past – it is not only the skilled worker's individual sense of his own worth that counts but that of all wage earners, including white-collar workers. Only then will the trade unions be appropriate partners with whom to discuss the solution of workplace disputes and welfare problems. Their policies must be founded on the perception that there is no such thing as *the* workers or *the* wage earners – nor has there ever been.

Recognizing the highly disparate life-styles and interests of working people does not mean that the trade unions must abandon a comprehensive vision of the society they want. But they must be more specific than before about their goal of a solidarity-based society, centred not on technology or economics but on human beings, and bring it into line with the multifarious needs and wishes of wage earners. There are signs of this: for instance, when IG Metall proposes the conclusion of collective agreements on working hours that include several alternatives, from which the works council and the employer are free to select jointly the best arrangement for the company and workforce concerned. Or when consideration is given to union ideas on organizing work to take account of opportunit-

ies of personal self-fulfilment through leisure as well as work. Or in attempts to break down the trade unions' remoteness from the company and the workplace, which is rooted in the German trade union tradition.

As so often in their long history, the trade unions must modify their theory and practice in step with the world which their policies have helped to change. Points of reference for this process of change are provided by the problem areas of trade union policy explored in more detail in the account given above of the current trade union programme debate. Dealing with these problem areas will also afford opportunities for working together with the new social movements. The trade unions certainly have no call to give up their basic principles in the process. Social justice, human solidarity, libertarian democracy and international co-operation are cornerstones of trade union policy which, given worldwide poverty, exploitation, political manipulation and oppression, the destruction of the environment and the danger of war, have lost none of their topicality. The trade unions face radical changes – probably more far-reaching than ever before in their history. But they have not come to the end of the line; new tasks lie ahead.