Neoliberalism, the world of work and the crisis of unionism in England

The recent British experience, particularly after Margaret Thatcher and the establishment of the neoliberal project, has had far-reaching consequences for the world of work in the UK, particularly in England. British society has been profoundly transformed. Changes were made to its productive base through the sale of state-enterprises, the shrinking of the industrial sector, the expansion of a private service-sector and, finally, the reconfiguration of the UK in the new international division of labour. There were also vast repercussions to the form of being of the working class, its union-movement, its parties, its social movements, ideals and values.

British trade-unionism experienced periods of growth, through the 1890s and 1970s for example, as well as periods of decline, particularly the 1930s and especially after the 1980s. Periods of rise and decline also occurred in other countries of western Europe, in different ways and with different implications according to the characteristics and specificities of each country. Different national realities created a heterogeneous union-movement with varying political, ideological, religious and occupational configurations.

1. Whilst these views often apply to the whole of the UK, they refer mainly to England.
Whereas unionism in France, Italy and Spain developed with strong competition between Catholics, Socialists and Communists, in northern Europe, especially England, Germany, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries, disputes over hegemony were mainly influenced by social democracy (and Labourism, in the case of England). In Sweden, for example, union-membership levels are high (the highest in the world, followed by the Netherlands), whereas the opposite is the case in France and Spain. At the same time, a greater politicisation of union-activities is evident in southern Europe when compared with the deeper institutionalisation and organisation in workplaces of northern Europe.3

This varied outline is enough to show the risks involved in trying to describe the trade-union movement in western-European countries in general terms. While it may be possible to capture some general tendencies in the European trade-union context, it is important also to present an analysis that takes into account the different historical realities of each individual country.

In its relationship with labour and the trade-union movement, British capitalism has, in this sense, some very particular traits: compared with Germany, which preserved its contractual system, its welfare-state and stable employment-conditions during the 1970s, in Britain Margaret Thatcher created a ‘free-market’ system that led the country on a course that differentiated it even further from countries of northern Europe. ‘For all these reasons the British trade-union movement calls for special treatment’ in order to understand its more general trends as well as the challenges it has faced in light of the current debate ‘between the “collectivism” of the European Social Charter and the free market, American “individualist” alternative’ that ‘may be crucial to the future of trade unionism in Britain and Europe’.4

Since the end of the Labour government and especially during 1978, a historic crisis has affected the British labour-movement. ‘[T]he visible symptom of this malaise (dramatically confirmed the following year) was the declining vote for the British Labour Party.’5 Important social changes had begun in Britain in the decades that followed World-War II, including a fall in the number of manual labourers, the feminisation of the labour-force and greater ethnic diversity. Throughout this period, strikes began to be met with increasing public opposition. In fact, a significant change in the constitutive