



Lifelong learning: a national trade union strategy in a global economy

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The paper considers the role of trade unions in lifelong learning, their strategic approach to lifelong learning, and the opportunities and limitations set by the current stage of globalized capitalist development. The paper has four sections, the first of which considers the relationship between 'modernization' as a trade union project and concepts such as reflexive modernity and risk society which have structured much debate in the social sciences in recent years. Secondly, there is a discussion of the exact nature of the role of trade unions in education and training. While it will be suggested that recent developments have greatly increased the scope of trade union involvement in education and training, the third section of the paper will argue that these developments do not represent a coherent strategy on the part of unions, but more a series of responses to the complexity of the contemporary workplace. Based on a theoretical interrogation of data from a number of empirical and policy document sources,¹ the paper will argue that there is a need for conceptual clarity in this field. In the final section, the context of globalization will move to the foreground, in the context of a discussion on the relationship between national trade union policies and global capitalist development.

Trade unions, modernity and modernization

It is, perhaps, ironical that 'modernization' is a term being widely used in relation to trade unions seeking new roles and methods of working, precisely at a time when the main academic debate is about modernity and post-modernity. The debate over trade union 'modernization' is a largely untheorized one. At one level, 'modernization' is used in a common sense way as challenging the trade unions to adapt to changing economic, social and political conditions. These conditions are summarized below. At another level, however, 'modernization' can be seen as yet further evidence of the continuing penetration, in the UK at least, of neo-liberal economic ideas, with the term 'modernization' being widely used by ministers in the Labour government (1997-).

Economic conditions: the pace of globalized capitalist transformation has far outstretched the capacity of trade unions to work together across national boundaries. National trade unions often find themselves making common cause with national governments and with national arms of transnational firms to influence decisions about investment and the shift of productive capacity from one country to another. Globalization involves a drive for increased productivity, which it has proved impossible for trade unions to resist. Finally, the growth of

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transnational corporations has been matched by a growth of small and medium sized enterprises at national level, relatively few of which have organized trade union bargaining structures.²

Social conditions: there has been a substantial shift from traditional societies, based on customary practice, to societies in which belief systems and cultural practices have become fragmented. This has led in turn to two contradictory tendencies: firstly a tendency to view moral and ethical systems as relativistic; secondly a contrary tendency for 'moral majorities' of a fundamentalist, religious nature to strive for hegemonic control over society at the social and political levels.

Political conditions: again there are contradictory tendencies. There is fragmentation taking place so that political power is devolved down to regional levels, but there is also an assertion of political control by supranational bodies such as the European Union. This includes bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation which claim to be primarily economic and trade organizations but effectively control aspects of political decision-making within national states.

I have argued previously (for example in Forrester *et al.* 1995, ch. 9) that lifelong learning is a characteristic way within reflexive modernity whereby both individuals and organizations can re-orientate themselves in the face of the frequent crises produced by the 'juggernaut of change' (Giddens 1990: 151–54 and 1991: 184). In similar vein, Hake proposes that 'late modernity is the period of social development in which lifelong learning becomes the necessary condition of survival' (Hake 1999: 1). This view accepts explicitly that the relative certainties of modernity have been lost. Trade unions belong emblematically to that world of relative certainty. They belong to that phase of modernity when industrialization was sweeping away traditional beliefs and traditional societies, but at a stage when capitalism was organized at the nation state level, its international aspect being a matter for competing empires. Thus at a national level, trade unions were able to achieve substantial gains for national working classes, which in turn gave rise to characteristic political models such as Scandinavian social democracy or the British welfare state.

Reflexive modernity impacts not just on institutions, but on self-identity too. For Giddens (1991: 32) the 'self becomes a reflexive project', and this is presented in relatively unproblematic terms:

The social conventions produced and reproduced in our day-to-day activities are reflexively monitored by the agent as part of 'going on' in the variegated settings of our lives. Reflexive awareness in this sense is characteristic of all human action, and is the specific condition of that massively developed institutional reflexivity (which is) an intrinsic component of modernity. All human beings continually monitor the circumstances of their activities as a feature of doing what they do, and such monitoring always has discursive features. In other words, agents are normally able, if asked, to provide discursive interpretations of the nature of, and the reasons for, the behaviour in which they engage. (Giddens 1991: 35)

Beck (1986/1992 and 1993/1996) has made his own distinctive contribution to this debate. He points out that risk is both in one sense all-pervasive, and in another important sense has differential impact on different groups in society:

The history of risk determination shows that, like wealth, risks adhere to the class pattern, only inversely: wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom. (Beck 1992: 35)

Giddens further reflects that ‘class divisions and other fundamental lines of inequality, such as those connected with gender or ethnicity, can be partly defined in terms of differential access to forms of self-actualisation and empowerment ... Modernity, one should not forget, produces difference, exclusion and marginalisation’ (Giddens 1991: 6). And as Hake points out, following Giddens (1991: 142–3), part of ‘risk society’ relates to access to lifelong learning resources:

Access to learning opportunities, social and cultural resources, and survival skills may be unevenly available in late modernity. This has important consequences for the determination of those who are ‘at risk’ and subject to the threat of social exclusion. (Hake 1999: 2)

Within the risk society, the collective resources available in the past, including trade unions, no longer have the same strength as before. Reflexive modernity leads to individualization, although as Edwards (1998: 381) argues, these processes are not inevitable:

The processes of differentiation [between core and peripheral labour force] are enhanced by policies to regulate and curtail the influence of trade unions, and management approaches which undermine collective bargaining and individualize the employment relationship. The extent to which these are sufficient to produce greater individualization or are symptomatic of the wider process of reflexive modernization is open to question.

There is little doubt that the failure of major strikes in the steel and coal industries in the 1980s, together with the impact of anti-trade union legislation by the 1979–1997 Conservative governments in the UK, have led to important changes in the way trade unions perceive their role and the working methods they now regard as relevant (Ackers *et al.* 1996). This process is referred to within the trade union movement as ‘modernization’. However, the process can also be understood as one of ‘reflexive traditionalisation’ (Lash 1994: 126) which ‘represent(s) new attempts to reconstitute the social and the communitarian in the late modern world’. (Payne 1997: 377) For trade unions, it is a matter of calling on traditional loyalties (including those generated and sustained precisely in the failures of the 1980s) in order to best represent their members’ interests in radically altered contexts. Those interests are now being taken forward in a number of ways. At the political level, modest claims are made for improvements in recognition and status of trade unions, rather than the wholesale repeal of Conservative anti-union laws. At the bargaining level, pay and conditions are only two of a raft of issues which may include education and training, health and safety, financial services, health insurance, and joint action with local management to influence decisions about capital investment. While these issues affect deeply the fate of individual members within the risk society, they can also be influenced by the

collective power of trade unions at both national and local level. At a social level, unions are attempting to rebuild bridges with other parts of civil society, in particular locally based community organizations.

A further argument which relates trade union 'modernization' to current debates in social theory is their positioning vis-à-vis 'expert' systems (Wynne 1996), in particular, in the present context, those constituted by education and training systems, including guidance. Alongside the traditional notion of generic trade union representatives, and specialist health and safety representatives, has arisen the concept of a specialist 'learning representative', a development which is considered further in the next section. In carrying out activities in relation to education and training, unions enter into partnership with these expert systems (especially in the government-funded Union Learning Fund projects) in order to benefit their members. Such expert systems are organized in a completely different way from trade union structures which appeal to a background of common interests, experiences and values (friendship and solidarity, in short). Yet even within the apparently more traditional pattern of representative training, unions find themselves embroiled with expert systems, with courses being organized through trade union study centres within colleges, and in recent years a complex system of accreditation imposed more by financial necessity than educational desirability. Health and safety necessarily involves an interface between common sense and expert systems. At the same time, the trust in such expert systems is provisional rather than absolute, as Wynne (1996) suggests in relation to scientific experts and environmental issues, and the new category of learning representative can be seen as spanning the traditional and modern worlds of the workplace. The task of reflexive modernization in the education and training context is shared between lay actors (i.e. trade union members and representatives) and experts (education, training and guidance professionals). As Giddens puts it in assessing processes of deskilling and reskilling in everyday life, 'technical expertise is continuously reappropriated by lay agents as part of their routine dealings with abstract systems'. (Giddens 1990: 144)

However, the reappropriation of technical expertise by lay agents in the field of education, training and career development is not unproblematic. For example, members of the Iron and Steel Trade Confederation (ISTC) on a learning representatives course provided by Sheffield Hallam University found themselves meeting resistance on contacting professional providers of guidance for information relevant to their members. They were seen as lacking both qualifications and experience in the field:

A particular issue arose about how the 'front-line' activities of these representatives fitted with more formal guidance agencies such as the local guidance service. The tutor pointed out that although guidance had become professionalised as an activity, guidance workers did not have the advantages of learning representatives who are in daily contact with members, and have the confidence and trust of those members. (Payne 1999a: 12)

A more positive experience comes from an interesting and significant trial in the Wessex region of the GPMU, using Individual Learning Accounts to set up weekend courses in digital printing as a response to technological change in an

industry where many work units are very small. Controversially, these courses included compulsory guidance: a group discussion followed by an individual interview. The response to guidance was more enthusiastic than expected by the organizers, and the example below reveals how the expert knowledge of guidance, informed by the constraints of social actors' lives, can begin to help social actors to plot a course through the doubts and uncertainties of life in a globalized economy:

Barry left school and went into farming but was made redundant when EU [European Union] milk quotas were cut. A spell in office-work, including responsibility for photocopying, led him into printing, via an offer from an uncle with a small firm to 'take him on'. Eventually he received training in a larger firm but is now facing the reality of technical change in the industry. Although he has been on the GPMU courses, he hasn't yet had a chance to use the skills at work, although eventually the whole firm is likely to 'go digital'. Guidance has confirmed for him that computerisation is the way forward, and the guidance officer suggested a general IT course (CLAIT) might complement the digital print courses. But there is still the barrier of shift work to overcome. He said: 'If I didn't have a mortgage, I'd give up my job like that and do a full-time course'. But he does have a mortgage, and the future looks full of uncertainty. (Payne 1999b: 20)

Faced with this level of upheaval in the lives of their members, it is scarcely surprising that trade unions have opted for a broadening of their traditional activities, while continuing to draw on the traditional, solidaristic strengths of the trade union movement.

In the next two sections of this paper I shall discuss some further specific examples of the types of innovatory initiatives that trade unions are involved with in the lifelong learning field. In general, the first of these two sections refers to specific examples of trade union work within lifelong learning, while the second questions whether these initiatives are complemented by an overall strategy.

Trade union initiatives in education and training: the UK experience

The globalized, informational workplace (Castells 1996) is fundamental to an understanding of lifelong learning. It creates skills demands in and beyond the workplace that can no longer be met by initial education and training. It causes upheavals in individuals' working lives, which may require substantial involvement in education and training during the working life. The pace of change means that people taking breaks from the workplace often need to pass through an intermediate retraining phase before re-entering work. Finally, the frequency of early retirement linked to a longer life cycle has created a large body of older people with the time and energy to commit to further education and training beyond the working life. Such learning may be related to leisure interests or to involvement in voluntary work.

The trade union role in this is not purely a reactive one, 'delivering' members for education and retraining within an increasingly disorganized capitalism. In recent

years, both government and enterprises have failed to pay adequate attention to the lifelong learning requirements of the employed workforce, which goes some way to explain the plethora of policy statements about lifelong learning in the first half of the 1990s (cf. Forrester *et al.* 1995, ch. 2). In the context of the change of government in the UK in 1997, trade unions have increasingly emerged as major partners in the development of lifelong learning, as well as such issues as change management (including productivity), communications and the personnel function (TUC 1999). In doing so, they both attempt to defend the interests of their members as well as contributing towards the profitability of individual enterprises and through that the general wealth of the nation.³

If the shortcomings of lifelong learning policy in the UK have received frequent attention, it is now also becoming recognized that this relates to the shortcomings of UK management. For example, regular quarterly reviews of workplace education and training (the Labour Force Survey) have shown that although training activity increased from 10.5% of the workforce to 15.9% between 1986 and 1999, only 1.1% of this growth took place during the 1990s (DfEE 2000: 20). A survey of firms in Dorset revealed that 42% of enterprises had done no training in the previous 12 months. Of those that reported training in the previous 12 months, only 10% had a training budget, 16% a training officer, 15% a training plan, and 24% a plan for evaluating training. The attitudes of management employees to training were more negative than those of any other group apart from unskilled labourers. (Prism Research 1998). The material in this section may be usefully summarized in three key points.

Trade unions are major providers of education and training programmes for their members, increasingly stressing general membership education as well as activist training

Broadly, the transition is one from an emphasis on lay officer training to what Forrester describes as 'working life education' (Forrester 1995, cf. Sutherland 1998, Sutherland and Rainbird 2000). In the manufacturing sector, this is perhaps best illustrated in the successful employee development scheme generated at the Ford Motor Company (Ford EDAP) by joint action between the trade unions and management (Beattie 1997). Another well known example is Unison's Open College which provides accredited learning pathways for Unison members ranging from short induction courses through to university degree opportunities at level four. It is of particular importance for women in general and part-time and less skilled women in particular (Kennedy 1995). It thus offers a service to a section of union membership who have gained little from the traditional emphasis on wage and conditions bargaining. As Jim Sutherland, Unison Director of Education and Training, stated:

Return to Learn is the open learning education project that Unison offers as a service to members. Its principal purpose is to provide members of the union with stimulating opportunities for personal development. A major benefit is the creation of opportunities for members to progress through other forms of adult and continuing education and to enhance their career prospects. It also helps individuals increase their skills and confidence enabling them to

play a greater role in their own communities, Unison, and the wider labour movement. (Payne and Thomson 1998: 25)

The provision of education and training within the workplace is now seen as a key bargaining issue, both to secure future jobs and to ensure that union members have those skills which are most in demand in the labour market

In the steel industry, a traditional, low skill, heavy industry, much higher levels of skill are required of the relatively small numbers of employees who remain in the industry. It is also the case that those leaving the industry have to learn new skills in order to seek alternative employment. The ISTC is involved in an attempt to change the culture of the industry from one based on physical strength and prowess to a culture of lifelong learning, in a situation where the employers are still showing reluctance to concede that education and training is a suitable subject for negotiations with the union. When they do take an interest in training, it is usually narrow training related to current needs rather than addressing the long-term skill needs of the industry or the fate of employees still facing possible redundancy. Lifelong learning has different meanings for employees and their employers. It is redundancy that the new ISTC learning representatives see as focusing members' attentions:

There is a clear perception that redundancy sharpens the mind about the realities of the labour market and the difficulty of finding alternative work without transferable skills. The more difficult task is to persuade members of the advantages of learning new skills before redundancy hits them. Age is a factor too, with the very young ('Under 25, no-one'd speak to me – they're invincible', said one representative) and older workers (people have the mindset 'I'll be finished soon', said another) the most resistant to lifelong learning. (Payne 1999a: 5)

In the print industry by contrast, with its long craft traditions, there seems to be broader acceptance on the part of both employers and employees of the need to upskill the workforce with future skill needs in mind. For GPMU, it is a matter of ensuring that their members are equipped with the skills that are going to be in demand from employers. The union has also had to grapple with the particular problems of SMEs: it is not that they do not see the need for training but rather that it is difficult to release employees during working time, while cost is also a constraining factor. This is the value to both employers and employees of the scheme referred to above which links state funding through individual learning accounts to contributions by employers and members and courses run in employees' own time, at the weekend.

While some policy initiatives are of very recent origin and represent new learning departures for the unions concerned, there are other examples which illustrate long standing concerns but which are now being located within a lifelong learning perspective rather than the more traditional bargaining framework. The TUC Bargaining for Skills project, for example, which was an important part of the strategic repositioning of the TUC in the early 1990s, has continued to feature prominently in a number of regions. The various Bargaining for Skills projects

around the country are used to support union action on NVQs and wider workplace learning developments. (Forrester and Payne 1999, TUC 1999)

Through the establishment of 'workplace learning representatives', trade unions are beginning to build motivation and commitment to lifelong learning among their members

The TUC moved quickly to respond to the new opportunities represented by the election of a Labour government in 1997 committed to a substantial development of the lifelong learning agenda, and by 1998 had published a well thought out syllabus for a training course for learning representatives (TUC 1998a). Meanwhile, individual unions were engaged in developing union-specific courses with local educational partners (for example ISTC with Sheffield Hallam University, cf. Payne 1999a). By 2001, over 2500 learning representatives had been trained (Monks 2001). The TUC Learning Services task group had argued that:

The task group has also pointed to a key role for unions in stimulating demand for learning and supporting individual learners. Helping people improve their employment security and career progression through learning is also an effective recruitment tool for trade unions. If this role is to be developed successfully, individuals will need to associate trade unions with learning, in the same way that they link unions with pay, working hours and health and safety. (TUC 1998b: 15)

The appeal here to the *traditional* role of unions, while at the same time advocating a *modernized* role for unions, is very clear, and is supported in practice. For example, an evaluation of pilot TUC learning representatives courses in the South-West found that:

Learning reps have direct links across all sectors to individuals and organisations who are least likely to adapt to change – the unskilled, semi-skilled and craft workers identified in the regional assessment. One course member... commented: 'You soon find those who have difficulty with reading and writing when you give them a union membership form'. Many have, themselves, found union activity and office a gateway into learning for the first time since leaving school. They are, therefore, credible advocates for change. (Vidler, 1999: 5)

The impact of trade union involvement in education and training is limited, however, as Sutherland and Rainbird (2000) point out, by the fact that trade unions are not represented in many workplaces. They argue that a move towards an entitlement to learning would benefit many more people. The 'establishment of a new relationship between unions and their membership base' through the provision of learning opportunities:

... creates scope for redefining the benefits of trade union membership and ... for raising significant questions about the entitlements to be established,

not just for members, but for the workforce as a whole, including those on non-standard contracts, potential employees and other members of the local community'. (Sutherland and Rainbird 2000: 205)

Towards a trade union strategy

Introduction

While trade union initiatives in the field of lifelong learning are significant, they remain contested terrain, within the trade union movement itself as well as within the workplace, where many managers continue to view training issues as a management prerogative. There are also ambiguities and inconsistencies in the willingness of employers, government agencies and educational institutions to enter into partnerships with trade unions. Within the trade union movement, some officials and lay officers view the lifelong learning agenda as a diversion from issues of worker rights, benefits and pay. The argument here is that in order to counter such views, there is a need for conceptual clarity in this field. Further, that a key element of this is a recognition that trade union involvement in lifelong learning must be premised on the best interests of their members, and that while these interests may overlap with those of individual enterprises and nation-states, they are not identical.

Social change and member empowerment

Discussions involving trade unions around lifelong learning agendas embody a view of social change in which the social actors are seen not as the passive 'victims' of global forces but as active agents capable of positioning themselves in relation to forces of change and, ultimately, influencing the direction of that change. As Beck puts it:

depending on its duration and contents, education makes possible a certain degree of self-discovery and reflection. The educated person incorporates reflexive knowledge of the conditions and prospects of modernity, and in this way becomes an agent of reflexive modernisation. (Beck 1992: 93)

This corresponds closely to a trade union point of view (about the UK University for Industry – Ufi or learndirect – but equally applicable to other contexts of lifelong learning) put by Pauline Ortiz, Education Officer of UNIFI (the finance union, BIFU at the time of interview):

'Ufi should not be just about narrow vocational training, which is going on at any rate. It's about understanding what is going on and allowing people and groups to position themselves so that they can continue to contribute rather than be damaged – allowing them to be active rather than passive'. (Payne and Thomson 1998: 34)

Others, focusing more on adult education, support a similar critical standpoint vis-à-vis adult learning, warning that 'fulfilling functions that are merely instrumental

to the dominant institutions and values of industrial society makes adult education rather a part of the problems that are characteristic of the risk society than a contribution to their solutions'. (Jansen and Van der Veen 1992: 281)

The 'trade union gateway' and the lifelong learning policy debate

Trade unions are increasingly influential at the lifelong learning policy level in the UK. In particular the TUC has established a Learning Services Task Group to co-ordinate policy-making. A difficulty however, when seeking to identify and analyse changes within British trade union education, is the lack of any published strategic and analytical overview, or discussion and debate which might anchor the evolving changes and develop a coherent perspective on future objectives. The 1998 report *Union gateways to learning*, produced by the TUC Learning Services Task Group, arguably represents the nearest equivalence to such an overview. Established in 1997 at a special meeting of the TUC General Council at which members 'considered key areas in which the TUC and unions could add value to the opportunities available to members' (TUC 1998b: 13), the Learning Services Task Group was charged with 'developing practical proposals for implementation which are designed to provide a high profile role for the TUC and trade unions as providers and/or facilitators of vocational and other learning opportunities for members and potential members' (TUC 1998b: 13).

Underpinning the examples of new learning initiatives developed by trade unions and the recommendations for future activities from the Learning Service Task Group are notions of 'the learning society', 'lifelong learning' and the agenda set out in the government's Green Paper *The learning age* (DfEE 1998). A 'new framework for workplace learning' is seen to emerge within 'the new lifelong learning culture' and in response to the perceived presence of 'a real political will to create a learning society'. Although such notions remain critically undeveloped, there is a strong thematic concern with the 'learning divide' between adults who do and do not participate in formal learning activities. Widening provision, guidance, childcare facilities and financial support towards tuition fees and study costs are seen as contributions towards developing entitlements to learning that address this learning divide. Echoing the sentiments expressed in the Fryer Report *Learning for the twenty first century* (Fryer 1997) the creation of a learning society, for the TUC, is seen as being characterized by 'shared commitments':

- a commitment by the employer to invest not just in job-specific requirements of the employee but also in his or her personal development needs
- a commitment by the employee to take more responsibility for and ownership of their own learning throughout his or her working life
- a commitment by the state to provide lifetime entitlements and support for employees
- a commitment by trade unions to promote and deliver quality lifelong learning opportunities to their members. (TUC 1998b: 3)

These 'shared commitments', the TUC argues, are about learning initiatives that enhance employability as well as 'developing active citizens with the skills to learn

and to participate in a democratic society within their workplace and local communities'. (TUC 1998b: 3)

If the justification and analytic rationale underpinning the contents and proposals recommended by the Learning Services Task Group remain either hidden or critically undeveloped, an analysis of current learning initiatives by the TUC and individual trade unions illustrates the beginnings of a process designed to reformulate what is to be understood as trade union education and secondly, illustrates a significant increase in the importance and role of learning initiatives for trade unions and their members.

Partnership

Partnership arrangements, between trade unions and training and education agencies, have developed new learning opportunities for members. This has involved developing partnerships with Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs— from April 2001 replaced by the local Learning and Skills Councils), education and training providers such as colleges and universities, and employers. A number of such partnership arrangements are described in some detail in Payne and Thomson (1998) and in Sutherland and Rainbird (2000). Some of these arrangements take advantage of new modes of learning. For example, the Manufacturing, Science & Finance Union (MSF) has developed a partnership with the University of Leeds which provides the option of university accredited learning for much of the union's educational provision. This includes an expanding number of modules than can be studied 'at a distance' and from 1999, modules that can be accessed 'on-line' through MSF's Virtual College site. As Sarah Howard, MSF National Education Officer, states: 'It is increasingly true that people are not going to have careers for life. What is required are transportable skills that are analytical and knowledge-based' (Payne and Thomson 1998: 27).

At the same time, there are important issues of curriculum control here which should not be ignored. In each partnership there will an element of compromise between what the trade union sees as its own organizational requirements, what the employers see as in their own interests, what government agencies perceive as being in the interests of public policy on education and training, and what an educational institution might conceive as 'good educational practice'. Furthermore, the interests of each individual union member will not be identical with those of any of the above agencies. It is clear, again, that lifelong learning, far from being a unified concept, can have different meanings to different social actors and different interests within the economic/political arena.

Trade unions, globalization and risk: a context and a problem

The globalization context presents a problem for current trade union activities, in lifelong learning and in other fields too. But as Giddens suggests, neither individuals nor collectivities can achieve anything by ignoring the context:

Processes of change engendered by modernity are intrinsically connected to globalising influences, and the sheer sense of being caught up in massive

waves of global transformation is perturbing. More important is the fact that such change is also intensive: increasingly it reaches through to the very grounds of individual activity and the constitution of the self. Contrary to the thrust of Lasch's analysis, however, no one can easily defend a secure 'local life' set off from larger social systems and organisations. Achieving control over change, in respect of lifestyle, demands an engagement with the outer social world rather than a retreat from it. (Giddens 1991: 183/4)

There is no doubt, for example, that trade union membership and power have diminished (Machin 2000). This is largely due to changes in the workplace (the decline of traditional manufacturing industry and the growth of service sector employment; the large number of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) without union representation; the growth of individual contracts and of self-employment; the existence of a large peripheral labour market (within which employment is low paid and insecure) exacerbated by the legislative and rhetorical attack on the British trade union movement ('the enemy within') under the Conservative governments of 1979–97. These changes reflect both a concerted and organized effort by international capital and multinational enterprises to install new working practices, but also contradictory moves towards an increasingly 'disorganized' capitalism, in which it is increasingly difficult to achieve common standards on issues such as employment rights, health and safety, and education and training. The scope for individual enterprises or production units of enterprises to negotiate innovative agreements with trade unions is therefore larger than might be expected, while national policies on such issues have become a major method of adapting global capital to local circumstances and ambitions.

Lash refers to the three paradigmatic classes of reflexive modernity:

1. The post-industrial middle-class working in information and communication structures
2. The upgraded working class
3. The excluded third who constitute an 'underclass' dependent on benefits or on low-paid, part-time and insecure jobs. (Lash 1994: 130)

He describes groups one and two as 'reflexive winners' and group three as 'reflexive losers.' However, this typology ignores the potential of both individual social actors and collectivities to reinforce their position in the labour market in a number of ways, of which lifelong learning is an obvious example. Access to lifelong learning structures, and through them to structures of information and communication,⁴ therefore becomes a key factor in repositioning in response to cultural and economic globalization.

However, it is also the case that social actors are themselves positioned and repositioned by education and training systems, including guidance. As Edwards and Payne have argued:

Selves are no longer bounded by traditions, but become subject to self-monitoring, innovation and change. The self and self-identity become a focus for change and development... The reflexivity of the project is radicalised by the amount of information available, the media through which it is constituted and disseminated, and the range of options over which certain choices can and indeed have to be made... However, the

very reflexivity upon which, it is suggested, late modernity is grounded means that the choices confronting people are themselves ambiguous and insecure. There is too much information and there are too many choices. The options available are many and puzzling, making life planning an integral component of existence. The situation necessitates taking risks, yet demands trust in others and ourselves. We require experts and expertise to help us mediate the choices. (Edwards and Payne 1997: 531/2)

Reflexivity can thus be seen to encompass the local and the global, the personal and the social. The risks inherent in individual, localized lives in reflexive modernity reflect the globalization of risk at the social level. This situation of generalized risk, in which social actors encounter expert systems in an attempt to reposition themselves vis-à-vis change, presents both problems and opportunities for trade unions. On the one hand, trade unions can seek to maximize advantage for 'reflexive winners' while ignoring the fate of the 'reflexive losers'. On the other hand they can adopt more socially inclusive policies, and indeed seek to use their political influence to attempt to alter the balance of risk in their members' favour. Their success in doing so will in turn be a powerful incentive (or disincentive) to the recruitment and retention of members. Within this context, issues of trade union rights are central to the development of trade union policy, with developments such as European Work Councils and improved UK arrangements for granting unions negotiating rights in the workplace crucial for a further development of their lifelong learning role.⁵ If the analysis in this paper is correct, that can only be to the benefit of unions, their members, the enterprises within which they operate, and the national economy as a whole.

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Notes

1. For example, the author's involvement in a joint DfEE/NIACE/TUC project which led to the publication of Payne, J. and Thomson, A. (1998) *Partnerships for learning: opportunities for trade unions and the University for Industry* (Leicester: NIACE), as well as policy statements from the government, TUC (including TUC Learning Services) and affiliated unions. Additional empirical evidence comes from my work as external evaluator of lifelong learning programmes at Dorset TEC, including trade union sponsored Individual Learning Accounts, and as evaluator for an ISTC Union Learning Fund project in South Yorkshire.

2. Such developments are not uniform across nation states. For example, the UK has a lower workplace productivity rate (GDP per hour worked) than European Union countries such as France, Italy and Germany, but a bargaining coverage rate at 47% far below that of Italy (82%), Germany (92%) or France (95%) (TUC 1999: 9).

3. Heyes and Stuart (1998), in a survey conducted with the MSF trade union, have shown a positive correlation between trade union involvement in enterprise decisions about training, and the amount of training taking place in the firm.

4. Indeed, the two sets of structures are closely related. Information and communications technology, its applications at work, and its communicative possibilities through e-mail and Internet recur frequently within the subject-matter of trade union sponsored lifelong learning.

5. Since this article was completed, a joint White Paper, from the two UK government departments responsible for economic affairs and education and training, has set out plans to give legal status to the role of the trade union learning representatives and to open the way for statutory joint employer/trade union agreements on 'collective skills funding arrangements' (DTI/DfEE 2001: 32).

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