



# Trade Unions in Western Europe: Hard Times, Hard Choices

*Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, Richard Hyman*

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Trade unions in most of Europe are on the defensive: in recent decades they have lost membership, sometimes drastically; their collective bargaining power has declined, as has their influence on government; and in many countries, their public respect is much diminished.

This book explores the challenges facing trade unions and their responses in ten west European countries: Britain, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Italy. Based on a substantial number of interviews with key union representatives and academic experts in each country, together with the collection of a large amount of union documentation and background material, the book gives an account of how trade unionism has evolved in each country, the main recent challenges that unions have faced, and their responses. The book engages with the debates of the past two decades on union modernization and revitalization, and more generally with theories of institutional change and the literature on varieties of capitalism.

Some observers ask whether unions remain relevant socio-economic actors, but challenging times can stimulate new thinking, and hence provide new opportunities. This book aims to show why trade unions are (still) important subjects for scientific analysis: first, as a means of collective 'voice' allowing employees to challenge management control and bringing a measure of balance to the employment relationship; second, as a form of 'countervailing power' to the socio-economic dominance of capital; and third, their potential as a 'sword of justice' to defend the weak, vulnerable and disadvantaged, express a set of values in opposition to the dominant political economy, and offer aspirations for a different—and better—form of society.

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