Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick and Richard Hyman*

International Trade Union Solidarity and the Impact of the Crisis

Abstract

In this paper we first explore the diverse meaning(s) of solidarity, particularly with regard to trade unions. In particular we focus on understandings which focus on a shared identity, on common interests and on mutuality despite difference. We relate these different conceptions to the problematic concept of class. We then discuss the forms which international trade union solidarity takes and the difficulties which it encounters, at global and European levels. There is always a tension between long-term idealism and short-term pragmatism, which means that the achievement of solidarity is always incomplete. Solidarity is never 'natural', it must always be constructed against the odds. We go on to examine the impact of the financial and economic crisis at European level, which has accentuated some of the tensions in achieving solidarity within and between countries. We end with a discussion of how solidarity might be reconstructed under particularly adverse circumstances.

1 Introduction: The complex meanings of solidarity

The principle of solidarity has a long history, and like most evaluatively charged concepts its meanings have changed over time and its interpretations remain varied. For example, both socialists and catholics commonly appeal to the ideal of solidarity, but what they understand by this is in many respects very different. It is not our intention here to explore the etymology and historical evolution of the concept, but it is important to highlight some of its contrasting implications.

One conception presupposes common *identity*, the possession of characteristics which mark individuals as members of a group - the nation, the tribe, the religious sect (or perhaps also devotion to a particular football club or pop group) - with a collective loyalty and a clear sense of difference from those outside its ranks. Sometimes the homogeneity of the group may be reinforced by rituals, uniforms, an arcane vocabulary.

A second type of solidarity, at times overlapping with the first, is based on awareness of common *interests* which are best pursued collectively. This is the classic rationale for trade unionism: workers as a whole are victims of oppression and exploitation, individually weak as employees, consumers or citizens; but unity is strength. The foundation of effective labour movements depended on what may be termed 'solidarity as a mobilising myth'. It was by emphasising the commonality of interests that union organisers sought to persuade workers that 'an injury to one is an injury to all'. And because interests are shaped by

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* Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick is Senior Lecturer in Management at Birkbeck, University of London.
Richard Hyman is Emeritus Professor of Industrial Relations at London School of Economics and Political Science.

subjective perception as well as objective situation, belief could create its own reality. 'Solidarity forever' became factual, to the extent that the heroic myths actually defined workers' understanding of their own circumstances.

A third understanding of solidarity involves mutuality despite *difference*. This may be based on a sense of interdependence, generating a second-order community of interest in sustaining a set of social relationships in which all are positively implicated. A different way of comprehending such mutuality is as an expression of the obligations of humanity. No man [or woman, we would add today] is an island, wrote John Donne. From this perspective, there is an obligation for the strong to support the weak – either on the pragmatic rationale that the roles might on some occasion be reversed, or through a more diffuse recognition of the human condition. This third approach may turn solidarity into a synonym for charity, implying pitying support for passive victims. This is far removed from the socialist view of solidarity as active and collective. As Habermas argues (2013: 9), 'showing solidarity is a political act and by no means a form of moral selflessness'.

Here we should note an important distinction, between what may be termed solidarity *with* and solidarity *against*. In the insurgent origins of most labour movements, workers' unity was the basis for resistance to the oppressor. By contrast, conceptions of solidarity-as-charity often avoid any reference to conflicting interests and collective mobilisation and struggle. This is also true, we may note, of the conventional usage of solidarity in the contemporary politics of the European Union: in this discourse, it is necessary to combat social exclusion, but the latter is regarded as the product of impersonal social forces rather than of deliberate human agency.

Class opposition was historically an important foundation of trade union conceptions of solidarity. Yet the understanding of class was always somewhat problematic, and has become increasingly so. Unions were traditionally organised on the basis of particular constituencies: distinct occupations, specific employers, individual sectors of the economy. In uniting one group of workers, unions could divide them from others. To some extent, the ideal of class solidarity can be seen as an effort to overcome such divisions. And typically, if class was able to unite it was not so much through common interests in the present as through a vision of the future: 'trade unionism often involved the articulation of an alternative

social order comprising a wider class solidarity' (Richards 2001: 26). This is consistent with Touraine's theory of class (1966): workers' collective consciousness involved a sense of common identity which was conditioned by perceptions of antagonism to an external threat (typically, the employer); but what was necessary to give this true class significance was a totalising understanding of the context of this opposition, and linked to this a perception of a different form of economy and society. But if the traditional class utopias have lost their credibility, is class solidarity still possible?

More prosaically, it was easiest to identify trade unionism with class solidarity when the boundaries of class seemed relatively clear-cut. The typical union members of the past were manual workers in factory, mine or mill, on the docks or the railways, confronting employers whose own impressive class solidarity underlined the need for an equally effective proletarian counterforce. Now that manual workers in the traditional sense are a minority of the labour force, and in some countries also of trade union members, collective identities have become far more diffuse, and employee interests far more differentiated. Concurrently, with the expansion of public employment, the idea of the employer as oppressor has lost some of its force. Of course sociologists may argue that class analysis, with modifications perhaps, can encompass the situations of white-collar workers or public employees; but subjectively the heterogeneity of contemporary employment means that the collective interests of particular employee groups are often likely to be viewed in opposition to those of other workers rather than in parallel. This has often been reflected in disputes between unions of workers in the public and private sectors, as Swenson (1989) showed in the case of Sweden. As we discuss later, the impact of austerity has in many countries intensified such conflicts.

Our third, more complex conception entails that solidarity does not arise automatically; rather it must be socially constructed. 'Solidarity is not natural, but is always contested' (Seeleib-Kaiser 2013: 26). Constructing solidarity both *with* and *against* other groups involves the 'framing' of interests and circumstances through a process of discursive debate which is in turn embedded in ideological conflict. Within labour movements, the dynamics of leadership can play a crucial role in shaping workers' perceptions of the boundaries of solidarity (Kelly 1998: 32-33, 53). Such dynamics are of particular importance in the context of international trade unionism.

As we will show, all the dilemmas discussed above have recurred in the current crisis.

2 International trade union solidarity: Incentives and obstacles

Trade unions face particular obstacles to solidarity at the international level. Unions are national organisations, and their membership is almost always confined within national boundaries. To varying degrees, production sites within any country may compete for work; and labour mobility from regions with low pay and high unemployment may be seen as a threat by workers in more favourable circumstances. However, unions have long experience of constructing norms of solidarity to moderate or overcome *intra*-national conflict. The challenges are far greater at *inter*-national level. The dominance of the discourse of national competitiveness means that foreign workers are widely perceived as 'the enemy', while cross-national labour migration is increasingly regarded as a threat. Hence the challenge for international trade union organisation is to moderate or overcome such sources of potential conflict. This task is rendered the more difficult by cross-national differences of language, of industrial relations institutions and of trade union structure and culture.

International trade union bodies are 'organisations of organisations' (Gumbrell-McCormick 2013) and so one level more removed from the membership than are national unions. They are often perceived as elite, bureaucratic institutions (Hyman 2004). Despite this, international solidarity has a long history, certainly antedating the 'First International' formed in 1864, which is customarily treated as the first institutionalised international workers' organisation. Cross-national interchange and action emerged when trade unionism at national level was often inchoate. By the end of the nineteenth century, when national trade unionism was relatively widely established, the first moves had been made to create international organisations that would prove enduring. These initiatives, however, were typically stimulated by immediate grassroots problems (strikes and lockouts, cross-national flows of labour) and rarely reflected any clear strategic vision. Often (like the First International itself) they reflected a complex interaction between socialist leaders inspired by an optimistic vision of the unity of the world's workers, and the more mundane and short-term preoccupations of those they represented. Today, the structures of international trade unionism are firmly consolidated, but optimism has been largely replaced by a grim defensive resistance to the threats of neoliberal 'globalisation,' while the relationship between international institutions, national trade unions and actual workers has been substantially reconfigured.

A tension between short-term pragmatism and long-term idealism persists, however. Union representatives are indeed most likely to articulate positive, idealistic reasons for internationalism. Sceptics argue that more parochial interests have typically inhibited purely idealistic projects of international solidarity, and that the real foundations of international trade unionism are more mundane. What divides most analysts, however, is whether these interests are primarily *economic* or *political.*

The *economic self-interest* approach has taken many forms. Fimmen (1924), writing in an early era of 'globalisation', believed that trade unions would organise internationally because the development of capitalism obliged them to do so. Logue (1980) saw trade unions as organisations representing the short-term economic interests of their members, while Ramsay and Haworth looked in detail at the changing patterns of ownership and control of individual companies and industrial sectors, exploring the varying interests of workers in different sectors at different times (Haworth and Ramsay 1986, 1988; Ramsay 1997, 1999). Anner et al. (2006) argue that contrasts in the form and extent of cross-national union solidarity in shipping, textiles and car manufacturing can be explained by differences in production organisation and product and labour market competition. Yet this does not explain why workers such as typographers, who were scarcely exposed to international competition, were among the pioneers of international trade unionism (van der Linden 2000: 526-7).

Political or *ideological* motives have been seen by many students of the labour movement as the primary basis for international trade union action. Studies of the international labour movement in the post-war period have either concentrated on the motivations of labour leaders themselves, growing out of their ideological convictions or war-time experience (Carew 1987; MacShane 1992), or on the motivations of governments, in explaining their support to international trade union activities (Logue 1980; Thomson and Larson 1978). Most of the debate on this issue has been between those who see labour as an unwitting tool of the great powers and those who see it as a willing participant, even an initiator of the Cold War. Wedin's study of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in the early 1960s stands out in its portrayal of the complex

interdependence between political and trade union leaders and interests (Wedin 1974). While the nature of this debate is ideological, empirical research has shown the subtle interpenetration of political and trade union elites in the post-war world, and the degree to which the values and hence the perception of self-interest of leaders have been intermingled. Here we may note Hyman's argument (2004) that political logic seems best to explain the development of international trade unionism at cross-sectoral level, while a more economic logic is reflected in the history of industrial organizations.

While all interest-based accounts of the purpose of action and organization at international level have explanatory value, they confront the problem of how interests are to be identified and solidarity expressed. Attempts to address this problem often run the risk of circularity (Devin 1990: 72-3). Whichever motivation is assigned priority, we must also note Visser's discussion (1998) of 'push' and 'pull' factors in transnational union organization: national unions may be 'pushed' towards supranational activity by the factors mentioned previously, but they may also be 'pulled' by the opportunities and resources (material assistance or status and legitimacy) available through a role on the international stage. For example, it is widely remarked that the European Commission is anxious to cultivate interlocutors at EU level and thus provides significant resources to the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) (Gobin 1997; Hyman 2005b). More recently, it may be added, parallel assistance has been given to a range of European NGOs.

Lorwin (1929), who wrote one of the first studies of international trade unionism, took a different approach from interest-based accounts by concentrating on the efforts of the international labour movement to *regulate labour at the international level*, through its role as a major component in an *international industrial relations system*. Reinalda (1997: 18-23) makes a similar point when he identifies participation in an international industrial relations system as a dimension beyond the simple accumulation of different individual and national interests.

The issue of legitimacy of action is closely related to that of solidarity. For unions, authority depends on the solidarity and the democratic accountability to the members – their 'internal authority' (Martin 1980); yet to be effective, unions must be regarded as representative by outside bodies, such as employers and governments. This external authority can be closely linked to internal authority: if members support the union, employers and governments will take it seriously. Yet if unions pay too much attention to the agenda set by external interlocutors, they may cease to represent their members' interests effectively and may thus lose internal authority – which in turn may erode their external representative capacity. This issue has been discussed by Dølvik (1997) as a tension between the 'logic of membership' and a 'logic of influence'.

3 Forms of international trade union solidarity

The structure of contemporary international trade unionism is complex, and has developed piecemeal over time. Hence it is difficult to summarise briefly and coherently. We may note two main axes of differentiation: geographical coverage and organisational scope. In combination, this gives rise to a diversity of organisational forms, each with a particular *membership base* and *ideology*, which make solidarity more or less difficult.

Geographically, international trade unionism operates both at a *global* level and *regionally*: most notably across Europe, as we discuss below; while other regions have somewhat similar structures, they are much less developed than at the European level. There are also many forms of cross-national cooperation and solidarity at a sub-regional level – notably the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (*Nordens Fackliga Samorganisation*, NFS) – as well as often ad hoc bilateral linkages (Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick 2012).

The most extensive organisational scope is *cross-sectoral*, covering unions in every industry on the basis of national confederations. The first global confederal body was founded in 1901 and reconstituted as the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in 1913. This organisation did not survive the second world war, at the end of which there was a brief attempt to create a single unitary confederation (grouping social-democratic and communist, but not Christian unions), the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). In 1949, most non-communist affiliates broke away to form the ICFTU. In 1968 the global Christian confederation 'deconfessionalized' and became the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) (Pasture 1994). Meanwhile WFTU, consisting mainly of national centres from communist and/or developing countries, lost membership rapidly with the rise of 'Eurocommunism' followed by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In 2006, a new unitary organization, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), brought together the ICFTU and WCL as well as a number of independent centres, some of which had formerly belonged to the communist-centred WFTU.

The earliest trade union internationals, however, were the industry-based International Trade Secretariats (ITSs), founded at the end of the 19th century, and recently re-named Global Union Federations (GUFs). Today there are 9 officially-recognised GUFs, with a complex but autonomous relationship with the ITUC. This difference in *membership base* led to the division of labour between the two that persists to the present day, with the ITSs/GUFs concentrating on practical organising and solidarity work within their sectors, and the confederations of national centres addressing broader political issues (Reinalda 1997; Van Goethem 2000). In general, solidary is more straightforward and more practical to organise at sectoral level.

Also important is organisation at the level of multinational companies (MNCs). Over four decades ago, Charles Levinson, secretary of the chemical workers' ITS, argued (1971, 1972) that the growth of MNCs posed a major challenge for nationally based trade unions, and that the response must be to build company-level solidarity cross-nationally. The goal should be to create the capacity for international strike action in order to achieve transnational collective bargaining. This strategy was then taken up by the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF, now the main component of IndstriALL), which in particular pursued the aim of 'world company councils' within the automotive sector. While initially resisted by most managements, in some cases MNCs have agreed to the creation of such bodies: notably the Volkswagen World Group Council (1999) and the DaimlerChrysler World Employee Committee (2002). A number of MNCs in the sector have signed 'global agreements' or 'international framework agreements' on workers' rights and similar issues, as we discuss further below. In a different sector, McCallum (2013: 17) argues on the basis of the international campaign within the G4S security MNC that 'workers of the world can in fact unite, if not around common demands then around common employers'.

4 The European dimension

The first nominally international organizations were almost exclusively European in coverage, and the weight of membership and financial resources has always ensured strong European influence in global unionism. After the Second World War, decolonisation gave a spur to the creation of regional union organizations in the rest of the world. The split in international trade unionism in 1949 reinforced this trend as three confederations competed for membership across the globe.

From the 1950s, the process of European integration led to the establishment of formal regional trade union structures in Europe. Today there is just one major player at the European level, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). Founded in 1973 by ICFTU affiliates, it soon admitted the main European members of the WCL, and subsequently all main (ex-) communist confederations were allowed in. It covers the large majority of unionized workers in EU countries, and in the 1990s it admitted members and associates from Eastern Europe.

The formation of the ETUC in 1973, as a body autonomous of existing global union structures, was widely viewed as a signal of a shift of interests and resources. According to Dan Gallin (2003), secretary of the International Union of Food Workers (IUF) from 1968 to 1997, it was an expression of 'European separatism'. This was a view widely held among trade unionists outside Europe: a closer focus on Eurocentric concerns would entail less commitment to global solidarity.

The ETUC was founded with 17 affiliates in 15 countries. Today it has 85 member organisations in 36 countries. Creating a coherent common programme with a growing diversity of interests, experiences and traditions is a daunting task. At the same time, the challenges facing trade unions have magnified radically, yet in a period of straitened union finances, income from affiliates has not kept pace in real terms with membership, particularly since the unions from Central-Eastern Europe pay pro rata only a quarter of the fees of those in the West. For much of its work, the ETUC depends on subsidies from the European Commission. Most notably, its research arm, the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) is largely funded by the Commission while considerable sums are also received for other projects. In addition, considerable support for workshops and conferences – meeting facilities, interpreters, travel costs – is derived from the same source.

Gläser (2009) has suggested that the ETUC faces two dilemmas which are a source of inescapable weakness. The first is between representativeness and capacity to act – a tension between the logics of membership and of influence, as Dølvik (1997) puts it, or between broad representativity and homogeneity (Braud 2000). The second is between political independence and financial dependence on the European institutions or in the words of Martin and Ross (2001), 'the dilemma of borrowed resources'.

As at global level, sectoral organisation is also of key importance. In contrast to the relative autonomy of the GUFs and the ITUC, the ten European Trade Union Federations (ETUFs, previously known as European Industry Federations) are formal components of the ETUC. At the same time, the ETUFs are the regional organisations of their respective GUFs, most of which have been anxious to limit their autonomy.

In Europe, the company level is of particular importance because of the formal institutional support for cross-national employee representation provided by the 1994 European Works Council (EWC) directive ('recast' in 2009). This provides for information and consultation mechanisms in larger companies with employment in at least two EEA countries. The complexity of the procedure for establishing an EWC (and the scope for hostile managements to obstruct the process) means that only just over a third of the companies that meet the size threshold actually possess an EWC – though coverage of larger MNCs is far greater; just under a thousand exist, the majority in the metal and chemicals sectors, and in companies with headquarters in Germany, the USA, the UK, France and Sweden (in numerical order).

What do EWCs mean in practice? Streeck (1997) argued that they were 'neither European nor works councils' but mere token mechanisms, lacking the powers of national representative institutions and typically ancillary to national procedures in the companies' home country. Subsequent research has revealed a slightly more nuanced picture. Lecher et al. (1999) distinguish four types: many are purely symbolic; others provide a servicing function, primarily through information exchange; some develop their own autonomous projects; a few exert a significant influence on company policy. It seems that problems of language and of different national industrial relations backgrounds inhibit cross-national unity among employee representatives, and in times of restructuring and redundancy these are often preoccupied with protecting their own 'national interests'. Nevertheless, in a minority of cases, EWCs have developed into genuine transnational actors with a quasi-bargaining role.

There are important organisational issues for unions: for example, do they assign responsibility to a European or international department, or to officials responsible for negotiating with the company at national level? This can be a major source of intra-union friction, which led *IG Metall* for example to create a special cross-departmental EWC Team in 1995 (Rüb 2009: 253). Given the extensive literature that now exists on EWCs, we will not discuss their operation in detail, but rather focus on trade union policies. First, it must be stressed that EWCs – indeed like most national works councils – are not formally trade union bodies, and in many cases at least some of their elected members are non-unionists. Hence an EWC may be a 'central ally' for trade unions but also a potential rival (Müller et al. 2011: 221). Most were established in the 1990s, and the ETUFs took an active role in identifying target MNCs and coordinating negotiations for creating the new structures. For example, the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF, now IndustriALL – European Trade Union) created a special Task Force in 1996 which prescribed a privileged role for unions in the process. There are significant differences between (and also within) countries in the extent to which unions are involved in EWC activities, and indeed the degree to which these are regarded as a key issue for union policy. But most ETUFs were 'initially overwhelmed by the scale of EWC activities' (Waddington 2011: 52).

Telljohann concluded (2005: 34-42) that there was a positive and fairly close relationship with trade unions in most cases. Some unions delegated support to the international department, others to sectoral specialists. In some EWCs, full-time officials were full members, in others they acted external experts. There was a tendency for unions to focus on home-country companies – where, Telljohann comments, the value added is least; and indeed, the EMF policy from 2000 was to assign each EWC a national representative, usually from the home country (Rüb 2009). In general, an EWC appeared to be 'a structure disconnected from the shop-floor and reserved to an elite of pioneers'. How it functions then depends on the existence of 'political entrepreneurs' at company level, and the strategic choices which they make (Greer and Hauptmeier 2008).

The enlargement of the EU to include countries from Central Eastern Europe (CEE) in 2004 and 2007 has posed distinctive issues for cross-national solidarity, since workers and their unions in the West often perceived labour migration from CEE as a threat of 'social dumping', while many MNCs used lower labour costs in CEE locations as an argument for concessions in western plants. Conversely, workers and their unions in CEE at times regarded their own 'inferior' conditions as a source of competitive advantage.

Bernaciak (2010) proposes an interest-based analysis of German-Polish labour transnationalism in the motor

manufacturing industry, comparing experience at Volkswagen and General Motors (GM). She argues that German trade unionists, who dominated the EWC, were not interested in developing a common European programme if issues could be resolved effectively at national level; conversely, Polish representatives were not interested if they believed that better results for their plants could be achieved through local concessions. Hence it required a contingent lack of self-confidence on both sides for a real effort to develop transnational solidarity.

According to Greer and Hauptmeier (2008), in a study of a number of motor industry MNCs, EWCs can provide a framework for different forms of transnationalism. In DaimlerChrysler and Volkswagen, as noted above, company-level union cooperation extends beyond Europe; but this mainly involves information-sharing and norm-setting rather than common action. In the Volkswagen case they refer to 'paternalistic solidarity': because of the numerical dominance of the union at the German headquarters, its representatives provided support for overseas unions almost as a form of charity, and largely on their own terms. By contrast, at Ford and GM – both American-owned companies – there was a common European interest in developing mutual coordination and bargaining. This links to the argument of Fetzer (2008), on the basis of a study of GM, that the unusually cohesive and effective EWC was possible because of a perception of a common threat from the American management, uniting different national plants in a 'risk community', linked to absence of a single dominant national union.

In addition to these structural influences, effective cross-national solidarity at company level also requires more subjective forms of intervention. Greer and Hauptmeier (2012: 281) refer to the efforts of key union representatives at plant and national level (what they term 'identity work') to foster a sense of common interests cross-nationally. At GM, the EWC 'has attempted to create a shared perception and understanding of problems, interests, and strategies'. In their view, such efforts were crucial for sustaining transnational collective action. Along similar lines, Gajewska (2008, 2009) analyses cases of transnational solidarity as instances of effective coalitions. Such coalitions require trust, interpersonal or institutionalised. Pernicka et al. (2014) develop this analysis further: because conceptions of interests are socially embedded, union representatives who perceive the need for cross-national solidarity, even if bound to defend local interests, will strive to persuade their constituents

that these form part of a larger constellation and can best be protected and advanced through collaborative rather than competitive relations with fellow workers in other countries. They thus attempt to establish norms of reciprocity which can persist despite pressures to engage in competitive concession bargaining.

4.1 Competitive corporatism and bargaining coordination

Trade union priorities in the 1980s and 1990s, in most of Western Europe, involved responses to twin crises: the erosion of national competitiveness, and the effort to reduce public deficits in line with the restrictive convergence criteria for EU economic and monetary union (EMU). In many countries, unions participated in tripartite social pacts: accepting wage restraint and in return seeking job creation strategies (or much more modestly, limitations on job loss). Under difficult economic conditions, and with trade union power resources diminished, political exchange became a process of 'competitive corporatism' (Rhodes 2001). Even more than at company level, concession bargaining at the level of the state created tensions and dilemmas for trade unions; for 'competitive corporatism' has involved sustained wage moderation, which in turn has been one of the causes of the declining wage share in national income. This has stimulated a range of union attempts to limit such downwards competitive pressures.

At its congress in 1999, the ETUC adopted the principle of a 'European solidaristic pay policy' which would 'guarantee workers a fair share of income; counter the danger of social dumping; counter the growing income inequality in some countries; contribute to a reduction in disparities in living conditions; and contribute to an effective implementation of the principle of equal treatment of the sexes'. This was followed in 2000 by the formulation of a 'European guideline' for national bargaining: 'nominal wage increases should at least exceed inflation, whilst maximising the proportion of productivity allocated to the rise in gross wages in order to secure a better balance between profits and wages; any remaining part of productivity increases should be used for other elements in the collective bargaining agenda, such as qualitative aspects of work where these are quantifiable and calculable in terms of cost'. Affiliates were asked to report annually on the application of this guideline. However, there were limitations in the extent of such reporting (Mermet 2002), and all the evidence shows that affiliates failed to achieve the targets – which themselves were an attempt to stabilise the existing

wage share rather than recover the losses of previous decades (Erne 2008). This lack of success was perhaps unsurprising, given that many of the parameters of the guideline were virtually impossible to measure, that the decentralisation of collective bargaining reduces the authority of national unions, and that bargaining outcomes depend more on employers and governments than on the unions themselves.

In any event, the ETUC delegated the main responsibility for coordination to the ETUFs. Indeed the policy of bargaining coordination stemmed from the 1997 initiative of the 'Doorn group' of metalworking unions from Germany and the Benelux countries. The EMF adopted a 'European coordination rule' in 1998, prescribing a pay target of inflation plus productivity, and established an information network, Eucob@n.

A key problem with all such initiatives is their voluntaristic nature: ETUFs possess few sanctions over their affiliates, and enthusiasm for coordination differs considerably across countries (Pusch 2011; Scherrer 2011: 51; Schulten 2004: 307). Busemeyer et al. (2008: 443) note that 'trade union leaders in the Scandinavian countries fear that collective wage bargaining on the EU level undermines their ability and power in national level wage bargaining' while 'union leaders in Mediterranean countries supported stronger coordination of wage agreements. Some unions who have sceptical views on coordination were at least in favour of stronger consultation and exchange of information.' Erne (2008: 88) reports that interviewees in Germany, Italy, France and Belgium all 'accepted that national wage bargaining is losing much of its autonomy in the eurozone': but acceptance of cross-national coordination was greatest in Belgium and least in Italy.

Yet in the absence of hierarchy, networks can achieve some effects. For Erne (2008: 103) it is important 'that national union leaders feel a moral obligation to explain their policies within a European framework'. The introduction of the euro reinforced such pressures. Traxler et al. (2008) find evidence of the development of de facto 'cross-border pattern bargaining' in the metal industries in Germany and Austria; while Traxler and Brandl (2009: 186) argue that even Nordic unions (and despite non-membership of the eurozone) participate in coordination: 'the northern network, bringing together IGM district *Küste*, the Danish *CO-Industri* and Sweden's *Svenska Metall*, holds regular meetings to exchange information and discuss strategies for the coming bargaining rounds....

Longer-established cooperation exists among the Nordic metal unions.... Compared with other macro regions, this cooperation by the Nordic unions is the most advanced in Europe, together with the most developed IGM networks.' Hence Pernicka and Glassner (2014) conclude that there is indeed an emerging institutional field of European wage policy, offering scope for Europeanising strategies should union actors so will. To some degree, solidaristic policies maycounteract the pressures of competitive corporatism.

4.2 Transnational company agreements
We have previously given historical examples of transnational trade union initiatives at company level. A notable development in the past decade has been the spread of transnational company agreements, in which EWCs often play a key role despite their lack of formal collective bargaining capacity. 'By early 2012, 224 such agreements were known in 144 companies employing over 10 million people' (European Commission 2012: 4). These are typically 'framework' agreements, less binding or detailed than international collective bargaining agreements but more formal than any agreements that preceded them. The first was between the IUF and the French multinational BSN-Danone in 1988, but most have been agreed since 2000.

It is common to distinguish between international and European framework agreements (IFAs and EFAs): the former with global scope, the latter covering only Europe (Telljohann et al. 2009). On this basis, it is estimated that roughly equal numbers of each type exist. However, the distinction is far from clear-cut. All but a small minority of companies signing IFAs have European headquarters, primarily in France or Germany, and the extent to which they can be regarded as more global than European in scope is a matter of degree. Perhaps the most important difference concerns the content of agreements. IFAs 'typically focus on fundamental rights or address the different aspects of corporate social responsibility' whereas EFAs 'tend to have as their core aim the establishment of partnerships to deal with restructuring' and also 'address specific subjects such as health and safety at work, equality in employment, training and mobility, planning of employment and skills needs' (European Commission 2012: 4).

Early IFAs stemmed from efforts by the ICFTU and the GUFs to regulate the overseas practices of MNCs based in industrialised countries, with the aim of establishing more mandatory norms than purely voluntary exercises in 'corporate social responsibility'. They almost always

include references to ILO core labour standards, and often provide for independent monitoring by NGOs or by the trade unions themselves. Hence in their origins, IFAs were top-down initiatives. But 'second-generation' IFAs, and almost all EFAs, can be seen as bottom-up initiatives by well-established EWCs. Both processes can result in tensions. Top-down agreements can cause 'resentment among... workers' representatives at lower levels about... perceived interference with national systems of industrial relations and norms, resulting from the absence of mandating procedures and mechanisms to link the levels' (European Commission 2012: 6). Conversely, the GUFs (and some ETUFs) became increasingly alarmed that EWCs – not formally trade union bodies – were encroaching on their own sphere of competence without any representative mandate. As a result, clearer rules have been developed prescribing closer consultation between EWCs, ETUFs and GUFs, and often requiring that one of the latter should be at least co-signatory of any agreement (Schömann et al. 2012: 198-201).

Despite some of the inherent risks, transnational company agreements can be seen as an important expression of trade union solidarity. Globally, they represent efforts by more strongly organised unions (primarily in Europe and North American) to deploy their leverage to win rights and improved conditions where unions are weaker. As McCallum puts it (2013: 154), 'they offer an avenue for labor to move beyond the facile constraints of monitoring corporate power, as previous struggles sought to do, to challenging it'. Within the narrower European context, EFAs are often a vehicle for 'pain-sharing' at times of corporate restructuring, setting limits to competitive undercutting of conditions by national and sub-national union actors.

5 The impact of crisis

Efforts to achieve solidaristic relations between unions cross-nationally have been severely tested by the crisis which erupted in 2007-08. However, to speak of 'the crisis' in the singular is misleading. First, we may better identify an evolving succession of crises: the initial crisis of the global financial system, the resulting economic crisis and recession, the employment crisis, the sovereign debt crisis and the austerity crisis. All these have had very different implications for trade union solidarity. Second, any assessment must take account of the marked unevenness of the effects. To take just one simple but important indicator, unemployment rates: as Table 1 demonstrates, the severity of the impact on national labour markets and the persistence of a labour market crisis have differed markedly across countries.

Table 1 Harmonised Unemployment Rates, Selected Countries (Q4, %)							
	2008	*2009*	*2010*	*2011*	*2012*	*2013*	*2014 (Q3)*
AT	4.0	4.7	4.1	4.3	4.4	5.0	5.0
BE	6.6	8.0	7.9	7.1	8.3	8.5	8.5
CZ	4.4	7.3	6.9	6.4	7.2	6.8	5.9
DE	6.9	7.2	6.4	5.3	5.1	5.1	5.0
DK	3.7	6.7	7.4	7.5	7.1	6.9	6.5
EE	7.8	15.8	14.1	11.2	9.2	8.6	7.6
ES	13.8	18.7	20.2	22.5	25.8	25.8	24.2
FI	6.0	8.2	7.5	6.9	7.0	8.3	8.7
FR	8.0	9.9	9.6	9.7	10.5	10.2	10.5
GR	8.1	10.5	14.5	20.1	26.3	27.8	
HU	8.1	10.6	10.9	10.8	10.8	9.2	7.5
IE	7.7	12.6	14.4	14.6	13.8	12.2	11.2
IT	7.0	8.6	8.7	9.6	11.6	12.5	12.8
NL	2.9	4.1	4.2	4.8	5.6	7.0	6.6
PL	6.6	8.4	9.4	9.7	10.1	10.0	8.6
PT	9.2	11.4	12.3	14.1	17.2	15.4	13.6
SE	6.1	8.2	7.6	7.2	7.6	8.0	7.9
UK	6.1	7.6	7.7	8.3	7.7	7.1	

Source: OECD.Stat

In some respects, the crisis has reinforced the situation of unions across Europe as participants in a common 'risk community', but it has also sharpened conflicts of interest, between East and West and between North and South. The timing and severity of the different phases of crisis varied markedly across countries. Broadly it can be concluded that the countries of Southern Europe have been most severely affected, those in the North far less so, with the important exception of Ireland; and apart from the Baltic states, the impact in most of CEE has been limited (Clasen et al. 2012). Ireland – with its own US-style housing bubble and deregulated financial sector – was the first victim; the cost of rescuing failed banks more than doubled government debt between 2008 and 2010. In consequence, the government obtained a bail-out in 2010 from the European Central Bank (ECB), followed by a 'Memorandum of Understanding' (MoU) with the 'Troika' (the European Commission, ECB and International Monetary Fund), involving a drastic austerity package which has prolonged the recession and caused increasingly high levels of unemployment. Similar measures were imposed as the price of financial support on Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, Spain and Romania, while Italy has been pressured by the Commission to follow suit. The screw was further tightened with the 'Euro Plus Pact' of March 2011, the 'six pack' at the end of 2011 and the 'two pack' in 2013. As part of the 'new economic governance' process (Bieler and Erne 2014; Degryse 2012; Jolivet et al. 2013), national budgets have become subject to increasing surveillance and prescription. The new policy regime involved pressures to decentralise collective bargaining, weaken minimum wage legislation, end legal extension of collective agreements and attack public sector employment, pay and pensions. Yet drastic austerity programmes, whether imposed by the Troika or by the ideological decisions of national governments (as in the UK), have as yet been far from universal. Since austerity is self-defeating, cross-national differences between winners and losers have been intensified (Myant and Piasna 2014).

5.1 National trade union responses

With often depleted resources, unions at national level have not been well placed to respond to the crisis: 'generally they have been in disarray when confronted by a historical process in which they no longer feel involved' (Dufresne and Pernot 2013: 14). There is evidence both of radical or conflictual responses, and of a reinforcement of cooperation and partnership; and often the two types of response have been paradoxically interconnected, as we indicate below. Radical actions, whether national general strikes – most notably in Greece and Spain – or company-level conflicts, have often been defensive in objectives. Conversely, efforts to seek consensual solutions through social dialogue have confronted an intensified opposition of class interests (who will pay for the crisis?) and diminished space for positive-sum outcomes.

'There can be no return to business as usual' was an almost unanimous trade union reaction. Yet the aim seemed to be to negotiate with those wielding political and economic power for a tighter regulatory architecture for financialised capitalism, rather than leading an oppositional movement for an alternative socio-economic order. Two familiar and intersecting contradictions of union action were evident. One was the dilemma of short-term imperatives versus long-term objectives. One Belgian union leader commented: 'it is easy to say: we need to change the balance of forces. But that does not tell us how to proceed …. Our members expect us to look after their immediate interests.' An Italian leader made a rather similar point. 'Right now it is difficult to discuss strategy, insofar as we are bound to react to situations of crisis.... As the first priority we have demanded an end to dismissals, then the application of every means of income maintenance, after which we can develop general analyses of industrial reconversion' (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013: 124-5).

The onset of the crisis provoked a variety of conflictual responses at workplace level, including a spate of sit-ins against job cuts and plant closures, reminiscent of the struggles of the 1970s. France in 2009 saw a number of episodes of 'boss-napping', when senior managers were held hostage by workers; in three cases, workers threatened to blow up their factories with gas cylinders. The most publicised British dispute against job losses began in 2009 at the Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire, owned by the French multinational *Total*. The company subcontracted a construction project to an Italian firm employing only foreign labour – displacing existing workers – on terms inferior to those specified in the British collective agreement for the sector. An unofficial strike quickly escalated, with sympathy action across the country. Yet radical forms of action do not imply similar radicalism of objectives. In most cases, such workplace struggles seemed gestures of defiance and despair, with little belief that they would prevent announced closures or job losses. Rather, the aim was commonly to limit the number of dismissals or to achieve improved redundancy packages. For this reason, such disputes were usually relatively easy to resolve.

In a survey of responses to the crisis, Glassner and Galgóczi (2009) found widespread agreements on 'partial unemployment' or short-time working, often buttressed by partial pay compensation from public funds as well as by company negotiations to enhance compensation above statutory levels. In Germany, though more systematic job-saving measures were pursued, in many companies (often with at least tacit union approval) the protection of the core workforce was at the expense of temporary workers; the same occurred in Austria. In Denmark, badly affected by the crisis, numerous company agreements provided for work-sharing. The Dutch government subsidised short-time working and temporary lay-offs for firms in difficulties; while in Belgium, a substantial recovery package included funding for 'technical unemployment' and special provisions for short-time working and temporary lay-offs. In France too, the government funded a programme of 'partial unemployment' (*chômage partiel*); nevertheless temporary workers bore the brunt of the crisis. In Italy, a long established system of lay-off pay (*cassa integrazione guadagni*) was widely used to cushion job losses. Another demand pursued successfully in some countries, primarily at company level, was for temporary periods of slack demand to be used for vocational (re)training rather than resorting to lay-offs. Again, this was facilitated in some countries by state subsidies. However, where such damage limitation could be agreed, transnational responses to crisis were subordinated to purely national strategies (Bernaciak 2013).

One outcome of the crisis has been a widespread reinforcement of wage moderation, with employers in some cases pressing for downwards renegotiation of existing pay agreements. Negotiations over restructuring and job reductions, with the aim of agreeing some form of 'social plan', were common across most countries. Even in parallel with symbolic protest action, unions in most countries endeavoured to manage the crisis through peak-level social dialogue: what Urban (2012) has called 'crisis corporatism'. Most unions have accepted, tacitly or explicitly, the dictates of national 'competitiveness' (Marginson and Welz 2014), becoming 'responsible co-designers of austerity' (Bohle 2011: 100). The dominant readiness to defend and enhance competitiveness, meaning a struggle of country against country, workplace against workplace, has intensified the downwards pressure on wages and conditions.

Crisis corporatism is inevitably antipathetic to cross-national solidarity. It may also erode *within-country*

solidarity: the most forceful resistance has typically involved public sector unions, whose members have borne the brunt of austerity but have often been deprived of private sector support. In Ireland, for example, there was barely concealed antagonism between public and private sector unions. In Italy, there were major divisions between the main confederations. In the Netherlands, the main confederation FNV was almost torn apart by conflicts over the raising of the pension age. Italy has seen a number of coordinated national strikes and protest actions, but in most cases these have not involved cooperation between all three main confederations.

5.2 Transnational responses to the crisis

It is at the transnational level that the conflict between national conceptions of economic self-interest and a politically informed rhetoric of cross-border solidarity has been very apparent. Despite official awareness at national level that (at least in the medium term) 'European policy is national policy' (Foglar 2011: 8), short-term preoccupation with challenges at national level have assumed priority. Beyond largely ineffectual protests, there has been little coordinated cross-national response. 'Since 2008-2009, increasingly massive mobilisations have essentially been organised at national level without taking account of the timetable proposed by the ETUC... and most often lack a transnational dimension' (Dufresne and Pernot 2013: 21). Hence resistance to austerity has tended to involve a 'patchwork of often uncoordinated action' with 'no thought-through strategic plan for getting mass support to bring down the plans of the Commission', in the words of the secretary of the EMF (Scherrer 2011: 36).There has been an evident contradiction between a global economic crisis on the one hand, and trade union action that is essentially national or indeed sub-national in character.

Lemb and Urban (2014: 50-1) conclude that while unions attempt, 'in especially crisis-torn countries to brace themselves against the economically, politically, and socially disastrous crisis policy... there is little sign of a broad Europe-wide trade union resistance.' In Germany, 'the European crisis and the far-reaching economic, social, and political dislocations that neoliberal austerity policy has unleashed appears from those employed here as problems occurring far away [and] a solidary management of the crisis in Europe is less important or unimportant'. This is despite the efforts of most Northern trade union movements, including those in Germany, to express their support for their counterparts in the South: a solidaristic response articulated, for example, in the powerful

resolution adopted by the German DGB in May 2010 and the ETUC declaration of March 2012. In a Europe dominated by the hegemony of neoliberalism, however, unions have been largely unable to win over public opinion by highlighting the common 'risk community' and pointing to progressive, solidaristic solutions.

Both the ITUC and the ETUC were largely consigned by the unexpected crisis to the role of spectators, with little impact on the evolving policy responses at national and supranational levels. Both produced sound analyses of the economic roots of the crisis and proposals for expansionary policy responses. In the case of the ETUC, this involved a frontal challenge to the 'new economic governance' introduced by the EU. In a statement entitled *Solidarity in the Crisis*, the ETUC (2011) denounced the EU policies as 'totally unacceptable to the trade unions of Europe' and called for a radical reversal. This was followed by an analytically impressive call for a 'social compact for Europe', adopted in 2012. However, as a Belgian union leader commented at a meeting of the ETUC Steering Committee in April 2012, 'our alternatives would not be applied if there was no "rapport de force"'. On the contrary, the crisis and its aftermath have brought a radical shift in the balance of forces, gravely weakening trade unions.

The international trade union organisations have produced powerful analyses and progressive demands in response to the crisis, but their impact on day-to-day trade union practice has been almost non-existent beyond occasional calls to protest actions. National unions, in most cases struggling with reduced finances, remain reluctant to fund effective international organisations. Indeed there have been some instances of positive internationalism; but these have mainly been limited to declaratory statements. Urban (2014: 40) does note one practical initiative of the German unions, an emergency appeal on behalf of Bangladeshi textile workers; but this might be considered an act of charity rather than solidarity.

6 Rebuilding solidarity?

At the beginning of this paper we outlined three different understandings of solidarity, based on shared identity, on common interests and on mutuality despite difference. We also noted the complex dialectic between solidarity *with* and solidarity *against*. Trade unions are primarily national organisations, traditionally acting primarily as interlocutors of national employer organisations and national governments. Even more, the perspectives of most of their constituents are nationally bounded. Collective identities are predominantly national or sub-national in scope; subjective conceptions of common interests are similarly bounded. To be effective, trade union solidarity must be framed in terms of mutuality despite difference. Yet the crisis has demonstrated that mutuality is made more difficult by adverse circumstances. The 'other' can easily become the 'enemy' in the struggle for survival.

Neoliberalism privileges competitiveness and market opportunism. Though both lie at the roots of the crisis, as Crouch argues (2012), a market logic has provided the dominant frame for understanding the crisis. Within this perspective, economic problems derive from lazy workers, inflated welfare states, excessive labour market regulation and corrupt governments in the South. Within this discursive framework, the anti-social dynamic of EU policy encourages nationalism and xenophobia as the main oppositional responses. Trade unions have difficulty in developing an effective response. Indeed, as Hancké (2013) has shown clearly, the willingness of unions in the North (and in particular in Germany) to accept wage moderation, and hence a decline in the wage share in national income, has been a major reason for the imbalances in the eurozone and the imposition of 'internal devaluation' on workers in the South. Ironically, a return to aggressive wage bargaining in the North would be an important foundation for North-South solidarity in Europe.

To foster solidarity, it is necessary to challenge the dominant paradigm, not just to negotiate within it; unions have to create an alternative narrative and discourse. Solidarity always has to be fashioned against the odds. In this process, dialogue among national trade union officials is obviously necessary. As a leading Czech trade unionist put it (Zavadil 2011: 14), 'particularly important is regular contact with colleagues in other countries, and the possibility of consultations and cooperation on all current issues (pension reforms, impact of the crisis on unemployment, the future of the European trade union movement and so on). Discussions held within the ETUC help to reconcile its affiliates' views.' Certainly, some of the difficulties of the Laval conflict might have been moderated had the leaders of *Byggnads* made more sustained efforts to engage with their Latvian counterparts.

However, international solidarity is not just a matter for 'international experts': without membership understanding and commitment, there is little capacity to act collectively. Precisely because international organisations of trade unionism are so many levels

removed from the workplace, they can do little more than adopt pious resolutions and draft blueprints which may be fine on paper but have little practical effect. Accordingly, internationalism must be 'mainstreamed' within trade union education and action, treated not as an optional extra but as the precondition of trade union effectiveness at national, sectoral and local levels. This in turn requires adequate articulation between the local, the national and the supranational. As Brookes (2013) puts it, trade union solidarity must be 'multi-scalar'.

The crisis has shown that when solidarity is urgently necessary, it is often too late to build it. In adversity, self-preservation can easily be the default option, with defence of one's own job and one's own workplace the overriding priority. For this reason, unions must foster what might be termed everyday solidarity: small acts of mutual support, information exchange and mutual learning can generate reserves of trust on which those in different national contexts can draw in hard times. As an example, the collaboration of unions from West and East in the Baltic Organising Academy has helped repair some of the distrust resulting from the Laval case, reflecting the recognition that strengthening unionisation across the region is 'in the best interest of the whole Baltic Sea trade union movement' (Häkkinen 2013: 3). In short, real solidarity means cultivating mutual understanding and mutual respect from the bottom up.

To repeat our earlier argument: solidarity is multi-faceted and involves both objective and subjective elements. Interests are not given, but are socially constructed, often against the odds. A key task for trade unions has always been to shape workers' perceptions towards a solidaristic understanding of their own situation in relation to the position of others, and to provide a basis for cooperative relations and common action. If trade union action as a whole has always been, as Rosa Luxemburg put it, a 'labour of Sisyphus', this is even more the case with international trade union action. The crisis has demonstrated that in hard times, solidarity is particularly difficult, but not that it is impossible.

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