**Moving Out of the Comfort Zone? Trade Union Revitalisation and Corporate Social Responsibility**

**Abstract**

In recent decades trade unions have employed a range of revitalisation strategies aimed at regaining lost power. A relatively neglected area within the literature on revitalisation concerns union engagement with corporate social responsibility (CSR). Locating trade unions within a classification of civil society organisations from the political science literature, this article presents a typology of the multiple ways in which trade unions can engage with CSR. Data from a pan-European study across 11 countries are used to illustrate the various ways in which unions are attempting to move out of their traditional ‘comfort zone’ with respect to CSR, each of which presents them with both new opportunities and challenges. We show how trade unions are working on different ‘pressure points’, and act as purposeful agents within certain organisational parameters and particular national frameworks. In sum, the article considers the potential that CSR provides for trade unions, and reflects on the likely direction of revitalisation debates.

**Keywords**

Civil society organisations, corporate social responsibility, insider versus outsider organisations, pressure points, revitalisation, trade unions

**Introduction**

Trade unions across Europe have faced a series of challenges in recent years, including declining wage levels and job security due to global competition, a shift in employment from manufacturing to services, and a growth in part-time and casual working. The result has been declining membership, which in turn reduces union income and undermines support for core activities, such as negotiating collective agreements and influencing government policies (Ebbinghaus et al., 2011). Unions have accordingly sought to revitalise their prospects by acting on a wider range of ‘pressure points’ at which to retain authority with both employers and governments.

The revitalisation literature often draws a distinction between pluralists, arguing for formal partnership and ‘mutual gains’ arrangements between unions and employers, and radicals, arguing for worker mobilisation and the rebuilding of grassroots power resources (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). Partnership has been explicitly concerned with a ‘modernisation’ of union/management relations and the recognition of enhanced business performance as an explicit union goal (Johnstone et al., 2009). Kochan et al. (2009) and Ackers (2015) see partnership as the more fruitful strategy for unions, since mobilisation against employers and governments are not sustainable in the long run and will not help unions achieve an institutionalised role in governing employment relations. More nuanced arguments are that partnership may work better in certain national business systems, such as ‘coordinated market economies’ like Germany and Sweden, but is more problematic in ‘liberal market economies’ like the UK or USA (Simms, 2015). In the latter, as Johnstone (2015) notes, financialisation and short-term profit maximisation render long-term stable, co-operative relationships between management and labour difficult to maintain. Indeed, Kelly (2015) and Hyman (2016) argue that neoliberalism and financialisation have permanently eroded the ‘institutional securities’ that unions previously enjoyed, such that they can only revitalise by rebuilding power resources through organising, mobilising and regaining influence over injustices at work.

The choice between different revitalisation strategies depends on various mediating factors, such as union structures, the institutional context for industrial relations, and the support or opposition unions face from governments and employers (Frege and Kelly, 2003). However, even within these structural constraints, unions retain a degree of strategic choice to ‘choose strategies in accordance with union identities and by inventing new repertoires of action’ (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017: 179). As these authors note, attention has more recently shifted to how unions can reinvent their ‘repertoires of contention’ through political action and external coalitions with other social movements, to compensate for the loss of power resources that were tied to national-level collective bargaining and policy-making. Union revitalisation can therefore encompass a wide range of strategies and actors beyond employers and national governments. The choice of appropriate strategies clearly matters, and research reveals that unions have a wide variety of approaches at their disposal, including organising, political action, labour-management partnership, internal reform, international solidarity and coalition building (Turner, 2005).

In this article, we focus on just one such strategy, union coalition building. Commentators have already analysed a range of union motives for seeking coalitions with civil society organisations (CSOs), the types of coalition they form, the methods used by coalitions and the factors that promote them (Frege et al., 2004), as well as the involvement of CSOs with government, employers and unions in industrial relations (Heery et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2017). Building on this literature, we consider the potential of trade unions to reinvent their ‘repertoires of contention’ through greater engagement with organisations and agencies that promote various forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR), an area relatively under-researched in the revitalisation literature, as it is in the wider industrial relations literature. In addressing this gap, we argue that if unions are themselves categorised as CSOs then their engagement with CSR can be usefully classified along two dimensions, as constituency/public interest CSOs and as insider/outsider CSOs, leading to a four-fold typology of union positions, which we explain below.

Our core research question asks whether or not union understanding of CSR does indeed fall into these four categories and what implications the various scenarios have for union revitalisation. We illustrate the usefulness of our typology with findings from a pan-European study of union attitudes and policies towards CSR. We find that across Europe unions are employing a range of strategies while at the same time trying to defend their traditional strongholds of collective bargaining and corporatist policy-making. CSR may thus have positive impacts on employees, and complement traditional institutions of worker voice. At the same time, it may also take unions in new directions and give rise to new challenges and tensions. As we expand below, while unions may in some respects remain within a ‘comfort zone’ with CSR, other strategies involve ‘reaching out’ (linking CSR with wider public interests to broaden the appeal of unions) or ‘collaborating’ (allowing unions to share areas of responsibility with non-governmental organisations). We also incorporate here the concept of ‘pressure points’ (Baggott, 1995) to elucidate the varying dynamics behind these different positions. As our data show, when trade unions move out of the comfort zone various tensions arise: between the different aspects of CSR they are engaging with, between union members in different sectors, between short versus long-term interests, and between the objectives of the union and those of other key actors.

The article is structured in five sections. First, we review the emerging literature on trade unions and CSR. Second, we discuss civil society organisations (CSOs) and build upon classifications established in the political science literature – in particular, the distinction by Etzioni (1985) between constituency-representing and public interest organisations and that by Grant (2004) between outsider and insider groups – to develop a typology of possible trade union strategies towards CSR, which informs our research question. Third, the research methods section outlines the details of our cross-European study, which involved 77 interviews in 11 European countries. Fourth, we present our findings, and finally we discuss the implications of our approach for trade union engagement with CSR and reflect on the findings in the context of union revitalisation debates.

**Trade unions and corporate social responsibility**

CSR can be defined as ‘the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society’ (European Commission, 2011: 6). The concept of CSR has become increasingly popular with societal actors in business, public policy and CSOs (Visser, 2016). This is illustrated by the emergence of CSR-related institutions at the transnational level – such as the United Nations Global Compact, CSR guidance document ISO 26000 from the International Standards Organisation, and the sustainability reporting framework from the Global Reporting Initiative (Leipziger, 2016). However, the term ‘CSR’ is notoriously difficult to operationalise. For example, Carroll (1991) proposes a ‘pyramid of CSR’ which starts with a company’s economic responsibilities, followed by its legal and ethical responsibilities, and ends with its philanthropic activities, while ISO 26000 proposes seven core subjects and issues pertaining to social responsibility: organisational governance, human rights, labour practices, the environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues and community involvement and development (ISO, 2010). Unsurprisingly, CSR is perceived in varying, and at times overlapping, ways: as a call on companies to provide a welfare service where governments are unable to do so themselves; as a regulatory framework imposing novel demands on business; or as a management trend proffered by a multitude of actors, such as consultants, business schools, standards organisations and rating agencies (Sahlin-Andersson, 2006).

Noting the wide cross-national variations in definitions and practices of CSR, Brammer et al. (2012: 8) further suggest that ‘an understanding of the social responsibilities of business in different regions and countries is contingent on the institutional framework of business’. Thus notions of CSR are embedded in the historical, economic, political and social trajectories of national business systems meaning that ‘a universally valid definition of CSR is not only unlikely, but in some ways not even desirable’ (Brammer et al., 2012: 21). So while the rise of CSR may be broadly understood in the context of the development of neoliberal capitalism and a corresponding re-casting of the boundaries between state and other forms of regulation, where in particular the private sector has taken on responsibilities from the state (Scherer et al., 2014), the precise forms it takes – the way it is understood and mediated – depends very much on the nature of the individual national business systems in which it is embedded.

CSR is often framed as a strategic choice by managers, which is voluntary and shaped by instrumental motivations or in some cases also their personal characteristics. The so‐called ‘business case’ for CSR stresses the potential positive sum relationship between CSR and financial returns, and this idea has now become conventional wisdom within public debates around CSR (Shabana and Carroll, 2010). Beyond this instrumentality, making CSR initiatives effective requires an active civil society, which increasingly directs its efforts not only at government but also at business itself (Newell, 2000). This development has been studied with a particular emphasis on campaigning non-governmental organisations (Den Hond and De Bakker, 2007; Yaziji and Doh, 2009). Their relationship with business has traditionally been one of mistrust and conflict, but over time this has changed and today non-governmental organisations (NGOs) pursue a range of both outsider and insider strategies with respect to CSR (Ählström and Sjöström, 2005). By contrast, other civil society organisations, such as trade unions, have received rather less attention in the literature. Just as trade unions themselves have been ‘reluctant stakeholders’ in the CSR debate (Preuss, 2008), employment relations scholars have been slow to engage with CSR scholarship. Similarly, it is striking that trade unions play a limited role in the literature on CSR. While workers are often the addressees of CSR activities, their influence on shaping CSR and how CSR affects their well‐being are rarely studied (Jackson et al., 2018).

Despite this relative neglect, Jackson et al. (2018) summarise an emerging strand of literature investigating what trade unions make of CSR (Preuss, 2008), how they participate in deliberations over the content of CSR initiatives (Harvey et al., 2017) and how they can safeguard employment conditions in global supply chains (Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2006). Further studies have analysed regimes of global labour governance in terms of the relationship between consumer and labour power (Donaghey et al., 2014) and in terms of contrasting initiatives based on industrial democracy on the one hand and CSR on the other (Donaghey and Reinecke, 2018). This literature shows that unions initially are often sceptical as to whether CSR can deliver what it promises. Unions have argued that CSR instruments unilaterally drawn up by management, such as codes of conduct, may be able to contribute to raising minimum labour standards, in particular in overseas supply chains of European and North American multinationals, yet are frequently weak in terms of implementation (Bartley, 2018). Unions are particularly critical of the voluntary nature of CSR and have thus emphasised the importance of tools that allow the verification of CSR claims, such as CSR labels, mandatory information and auditing (Preuss et al., 2006).

Though many trade unions are sceptical of CSR, some have embraced it by supporting issues that reach out beyond the immediate interests of their members (Obach, 2004; Preuss et al., 2009). Other unions have become even more active in their engagement with CSR. For example, unions have called for more education and training for their staff and members, the promotion of socially responsible investment through union representatives in the administration of pension funds and collaboration with other stakeholders (Preuss et al., 2006). Harvey et al. (2017) link such engagement to the concept of political CSR, the notion that as the nation state is no longer the only actor making and enforcing the ‘rules of the game’ for business companies themselves have become important co-regulators (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Thus the role of a trade union in CSR depends on (a) its legitimacy as a partner of a firm in deliberative processes around CSR and (b) its ability to mobilise stakeholders both within and beyond the firm.

Despite this emerging literature, however, we still know rather little about the variety of ways in which trade unions engage with the concept and practice of CSR, and we lack a systematic analysis of union motivations and strategies. This concerns in particular the potential link between CSR and union revitalisation. We seek to contribute to such an analysis through the development of a four-way typology of union positions.

**Trade unions as civil society organisations: Developing a typology of union engagement with CSR**

Civil society organisations can be defined as ‘any group attempting to bring about political change, whether through government activity or not, and which is not a political party in the sense of being represented, at that particular time, in the legislative body’ (Castles, 1967: 1). It is a key feature of CSOs that they occupy an intermediate position between individuals in the wider society and decision-makers in government and business. They have no ability to affect change themselves; rather their ‘objective is to create the public force (be it investor, consumer, or voter power) to push the policy maker toward instantiating the ideals of the NGO into the current or proposed policy’ (Schepers, 2006: 283). CSOs have thus redefined the relationship between government and business ‘by transforming it from a two-way exchange into a trilateral system of relationships and entanglements’ (Doh and Teegen, 2002: 667). CSOs can play a variety of roles in the political process, from influencing an emerging political agenda, through providing input into policy formation and implementation, to involvement in monitoring the operation of the policy (Aguilera et al., 2007).

Civil society is populated by a bewildering array of entities – from professional associations, through environmental groups, to non-profit organisations – which collectively have financial resources at their disposal matching the GDP of all but the largest nations (Yaziji and Doh, 2009). To aid classification of this vast range of organisations, Etzioni (1985) distinguishes between constituency-representing organisations and public interest organisations[[1]](#endnote-1) on the basis of three criteria:

* the scope of their social base, which can be narrow or wide;
* the scope of the interests the group represents, which can be monetary only or combine monetary rewards with a range of more symbolic or status issues; and
* the range of beneficiaries, where the crucial distinction is between benefits that accrue only to members and those that accrue also to non-members.

*Constituency-representing organisations* have a social base in their respective constituency (which can be narrow or wide), seek to generate monetary rewards for their members (perhaps combined with non-monetary ones) and primarily represent the interests of their members (which need not preclude a measure of concern for the wider community). They also tend to be highly organised, well equipped and staffed, as well as rather durable. Examples include trade unions and professional associations. By contrast, *public interest organisations* aim to address issues that affect the community at large, i.e. primarily non-members. The rewards they seek are typically non-monetary, while their social basis can again vary but is often rather wide. They also tend to be relatively less well resourced, have less access to professional staff and are more fluid in organisational terms. Examples include environmental conservation and human rights groups.

Building on this work, Grant (1995; 2004) distinguishes between insider and outsider groups, again on the basis of three key characteristics:

* whether they are recognised by government and business as a legitimate spokesperson for a particular issue or cause;
* whether they are included in formal consultation processes on that issue or cause; and
* as a result, whether they at least implicitly agree to abide by certain ‘rules of the game’.

An *insider group* is one that has been granted legitimate status and is hence involved in meaningful consultation on a regular basis. In turn, this status imposes certain limitations on the group, not least to abide by the rules of the game or risk political exclusion. Given that insiders have the ear of decision-makers, there is an assumption that insider status is linked to greater effectiveness, although this is difficult to prove empirically (Baggott, 1995). An *outsider group* is one that does not hold such a privileged position and is hence not involved in consultation processes, but is therefore less constrained in its choice of tactics. Such groups can be further divided into outsiders by necessity and outsiders by choice, i.e. groups that are not yet insiders but aspire to this status and groups that are ideologically opposed to working closely with government and business (Maloney et al., 1994).

A related but slightly different perspective in classifying CSOs builds on a process perspective of politics. As decisions can be affected at various stages during the decision-making process, Baggott (1995) proposes to examine ‘pressure points’, the points in the political system that form potential targets for pressure groups. When CSOs fail to gain insider status, they often seek alternative pressure points at which to exert influence, such as the media or the courts (Richardson, 2000). Depending on the nature of the political system, these pressure points may – in addition to national level institutions – also comprise local or supranational institutions.

We propose to apply the two classifications – constituency-representing vs public interest organisation and insider vs outsider group – conjointly. Our approach is based on perceiving trade unions as agents that actively interpret CSR and do so in line with national influences and priorities (Brammer et al., 2012; Matten and Moon, 2008). Seen from this perspective, trade unions may (a) represent the interests of their individual constituencies or broaden their remit as public-interest organisations as well as (b) act as insider or outsider groups. This leads us to outline four possible scenarios that help explain the ways in which unions understand and utilise the concept of CSR:

1. unions may use the emerging debate around CSR to defend the interests of their members in relation to established union agendas, that is, to *reinforce* their traditional repertoires of contention;
2. unions may sometimes move away from defending their members’ interests and link CSR to wider public interests, that is, to *extend* their repertoires of contention;
3. unions may sometimes work with other societal actors, such as campaigning NGOs, *collaborating* in order to *expand* repertoires of contention; and
4. unions may sometimes oppose working with business or government on CSR issues on grounds of principle or ideology, and in so doing *ignore or reject* the opportunity to extend their repertoires of contention.

Figure 1 illustrates the four possible types of CSO, along two axes: insider/outsider (vertical axis) and constituency/public interest (horizontal). Corresponding to the four scenarios above, quadrant one represents the trade union default position in relation to CSR, which we therefore describe as a state (the ‘comfort zone’), whilst the other three quadrants require the active elaboration of union policy and engagement, so we describe these as activities (‘reaching out’, ‘collaborating’ and ‘non-conforming’, respectively).

Our research question, then, asks to what extent trade union understandings of CSR really fall into these categories and what implications the various scenarios have for union revitalisation. We argue that constituency/public interest and insider/outsider positions are significant parameters that can help to structure the debates about whether and how unions engage with CSR, particularly with respect to revitalisation strategies. Specific decisions about which forms of CSR to adopt are then made *within* these parameters, as we demonstrate below.

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Figure 1: about here

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**Research methods**

Since the involvement of trade unions in CSR remains relatively under-researched, we used a case study methodology. Case research allows a comprehensive understanding of the nature and complexity of phenomena and lends itself to exploratory investigations when phenomena are still insufficiently understood (Bansal and Corley, 2012; Eisenhardt, 1989). When theorising the range of responses adopted by trade unions towards CSR, our initial assumption was that there would be some kind of relationship between union attitudes towards CSR and the ‘national business system’ (Whitley, 1999) or ‘variety of capitalism’ (Hall and Soskice, 2001) in which the unions are embedded. Existing models that attempt to link the national business system (NBS) or variety of capitalism (VoC) with organisational approaches to CSR have, for example, argued that CSR commitments could either be a ‘substitute’ for lacking government commitments, or could ‘mirror’ high government standards (Brown and Knudsen, 2015; Jackson and Apostolakou, 2010). Thus we assumed that union strategies might also reflect the institutional and legal frameworks within which they develop. We therefore selected 11 European countries to reflect the range of NBSs/VoCs across the continent: Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom (Preuss et al., 2015).

For each country, we approached teams of academic scholars working at the intersection of industrial relations and CSR. All the teams were native speakers of the local languages and had full cultural insight into the topic before commencing their research. We then identified national trade union confederations and sector-level unions as potential respondents for semi-structured interviews. We maintained frequent communication between researchers, and brought all researchers together for a two-day workshop to discuss initial results and to increase the reliability of the data collection process (Daniels and Cannice, 2004).

The schedule of interview questions utilised a funnel model (Voss et al., 2002). It started with open-ended questions, for instance on recent developments around CSR in the individual country, and proceeded to more detailed ones, such as how a union’s engagement with the concept has come about. We drafted the schedule, which was amended following discussions with the country teams, who translated it into their local languages. Importantly, in light of the fact that CSR is operationalised in many different ways (as we discussed above), we were careful not to impose any particular understanding of the term. Instead, by keeping its meaning relatively open, we hoped to tap into the specific interpretation(s) that our respondents ascribed to CSR.

Where possible, interviews were conducted face-to-face, but in a minority of cases telephone interviews had to be used. Collectively, the researchers carried out 77 interviews with 76 respondents, lasting a total of 97 hours and 45 minutes, between autumn 2011 and spring 2013. Respondents were located in 66 unions or union confederations at different levels of organisation. Interviews were recorded and transcribed shortly afterwards. We established a case data bank for each country, which includes interview transcripts, analysis and, where appropriate, additional documentation such as union reports, policy documents and other official records (Daniels and Cannice, 2004).

To analyse our data, we designed a coding scheme to allocate CSR activities, policies and/or strategies to each quadrant (or scenario). An activity, policy or strategy that fell within the core ‘repertoire of contention’ of a union as an insider in defending its members’ interests – usually relating to their pay or working conditions – was allocated to scenario one, for instance a domestic fair wages campaign. An activity, policy or strategy that still linked the union to a company or sector as an insider, but which moved its sphere of influence into the wider public domain, and so extended its repertoire of contention, was allocated to scenario two. Scenario three covered those cases where unions had developed campaigns alongside ‘outsider’ NGOs in global civil society. Finally, scenario four focused on instances where a union chose to defend its members’ interests by adopting an outsider position entailing a refusal to engage with CSR instruments with respect to their company or sector. We argue, therefore, that Figure 1 highlights significant parameters – even if they cannot always be defined exactly – that *structure* the ways in which unions engage with a range of CSR instruments in order to advance their varying revitalisation strategies.

**Findings**

We have suggested that constituency/public interest and insider/outsider positions are significant parameters that help us understand union engagement with CSR. In this section, we apply this framework as a lens to interpret the data from our cross-European research project.

***Scenario 1: Comfort zone***

Scenario 1 focuses on the conditions under which unions use CSR to defend the interests of their members in relation to established union agendas in order to reinforce their traditional repertoires of contention (their ‘comfort zone’). Our findings reveal that this was a common understanding of CSR. The German DGB summarised the position of many unions across Europe when it emphasised that companies must not use CSR to redefine their responsibilities: CSR may give ‘additional protection’ (DGB, 2009: 1) to workers, but only when based on binding laws and agreements to protect core labour standards. In the vast majority of the interviews, union officials, in their discussions about CSR, referred in particular to employment and working conditions, as well as the need to safeguard collective bargaining in their own companies and sectors. IF Metall in Sweden commented, for example, that CSR offers ‘new ways of preaching the same message’, while Lithuanian union MPF stated: ‘We understand CSR in the sense that industry and the economy should serve the people, should improve working conditions, so that people would respect the enterprise’. Other unions, such as GMB in the UK and Metalliliitto in Finland, used CSR to embarrass companies when they uncovered examples of non-compliance with their own codes, while Spanish union UGT had set up its own internal section to monitor such abuses systematically and to open up new bargaining agendas in areas like work-life balance and gender equality. Unions such as NSZZ *Solidarność* (Poland) and KNG (Slovenia) were involved in granting ‘employee-friendly’ certification to employers who respected good labour standards.

Nevertheless, the picture was complex and union positions often did not reflect standard national business system typologies. While our research confirmed, for example, that unions in Germany did express a strong preference for the ‘internal way’, for example for works councils to engage in CSR projects and for CSR strategies to be laid down in binding agreements with companies, respondents across all countries emphasised the ability of unions – in contrast to NGOs – to act inside the company. In Belgium, ACV Leuven expressed a strong interest in working with a newly appointed CSR manager in Danone Belgium, which was apparently well received by company management.

What is striking in these examples is that unions are identifying CSR issues with their traditional role in defending labour standards, or extending collective bargaining into new areas. Indeed, in several countries the Conventions and Recommendations of the International Labour Organization (ILO) were referred to as an important framework for CSR, even though they are far less often seen as a CSR tool by companies. In all these cases, then, CSR is regarded by unions as a means to reinforce their appeal to workers.

***Scenario 2: Reaching out***

Scenario 2 focuses on the conditions under which unions link CSR to wider public interests. Unions did indeed sometimes move into this scenario by linking CSR to wider public interests, such as environmental protection and sustainable development. For example, UK union Prospect were discussing the suitability of protective clothing with management and stated that ‘while we’re looking at this, we’d like to look at environmental footprint and the social, the human rights associated with these products’.

Our findings identified several sets of motive for ‘reaching out’ in this way. Such moves might develop simply because the union saw them as the ‘right thing to do’. For example, strong support for environmental protection came from Swedish union TCO, which declared: ‘We need to care for the environment, because without it there may be no jobs to protect’. On other occasions, however, such moves could be explicitly or implicitly linked to extending traditional repertoires of contention. Numerous unions gave training in CSR explicitly to raise awareness among their members of the need to improve labour standards in company supply chains, while CCOO in Spain regarded CSR as a means to extend their presence within small and middle-sized enterprises when part of the supply chains of larger companies. Or pressure from the membership might prove a factor – for example, in the UK, Prospect responded to its members in energy companies who wanted the skills to engage with their employers’ CSR policies with its own negotiator’s guide to the subject, while in Finland unions mentioned younger members as being particularly interested in CSR. Elsewhere, links with revitalisation were rather more implicit. Sometimes trade union ‘champions’ played a role in ‘reaching out’, with examples emerging in several countries (e.g. Belgium, Slovenia, Spain and the UK). In Belgium, for example, the personal initiative of one union official in the ACV branch in Leuven led the branch to develop a generally proactive insider attitude towards CSR.

In further instances, government initiative was the trigger: union inclusion in governmental consultation processes was evident in France where the consultation exercise known as ‘Grenelle de l'environnement’ of 2007 brought together representatives from national and regional governments, business and unions as well as NGOs to define the country’s future policy on sustainable development. French unions commented on how regular consultation by the government encouraged them to develop their own strategies on sustainability and in some cases even to appoint their own experts. CFTC, for example, developed its own initiative, which it called ‘social traceability’, as a means to monitor supply chains and thereby illustrate the environmental and social impact of products to consumers, among whom it was trying to improve its visibility. In other countries – such as Finland, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden – unions traced their interest in CSR back to international discussions initiated by intergovernmental organisations such as the EU or the United Nations Development Programme.

Even in those cases where unions remained sceptical about CSR, they often found themselves ‘sucked into’ engagement with company initiatives. Belgian union ACLVB-CGSLB stated: ‘CSR is, of course, about human resources and employability, it is our core business. But as a trade union we are also worried about the environmental consequences of what companies do, especially linked to health and safety’. In these examples, unions were reacting pragmatically to developments – pressure from a union ‘champion’, a government initiative concerning the consequences of company activity – and engaging with CSR as a means to extend their repertoires of contention into

new areas of activity, thereby at least implicitly appealing to both existing members and potential new ones.

***Scenario 3: Collaborating***

Scenario 3 focuses on the conditions under which unions sometimes collaborate with NGOs. The nearest unions came to approaching this scenario – public interest activity from an outsider stance – consisted in their occasional collaboration with other societal actors, not least with campaigning NGOs and occasionally, as in the case of Unionen in Sweden, with churches. In Finland, for instance, a union had financed an NGO to investigate working conditions in supply chains, while others considered campaigns like Finnwatch or Fair Trade as crucial for their engagement with CSR. Many unions also participated in multi-stakeholder initiatives. For example, in Sweden, IF Metall participated in the Clean Clothes Campaign Sweden, together with other sector-level unions and NGOs, while in a proactive strategy towards sustainable development, CFDT in France created a partnership with FNE, an environmental NGO. Such collaboration was often presented in terms of a division of labour between the NGO, which exerted external pressure on the company, and the union, which then complemented this with internal pressure.

Indeed, such a division of labour allowed the unions to combine their traditional (insider) role of pursuing a partnership approach to revitalisation with a rather more radical (outsider) approach through collaboration with NGOs. Unions in Finland, Germany and the UK explicitly commented on the potential for a symbiotic relationship between themselves and NGOs, as NGOs are able to pursue agendas that unions may find more difficult. For example, an NGO may be able to criticise a company strongly in public, while a union – with its members’ interests there in mind – may prefer to be more reticent, and consult management directly behind closed doors.

Other unions adopted a more formal approach towards collaboration. French unions CFDT, CFE-CGC and CGT, for example, together with several major companies, created a joint think tank on CSR, the *Observatoire sur la Responsabilité Sociétale des Entreprises*. CFDT and CGT also joined forces with several NGOs and academics in creating the Citizens’ Forum on CSR, which aims to develop common positions on CSR in discussion with companies and policy makers. Comparable developments were reported in Spain, where CCOO set up a CSR research centre through which NGOs, academic experts and unions exchange ideas and promote best practice. These examples demonstrate that the choice between ‘comfort zone’ and more collaborative approaches to revitalisation may present a case of both/and rather than either/or. Collaboration with NGO campaigns may provide access to more radical agendas for unions, but at arm’s length. Indeed, the unions in our sample generally reported good experiences with NGOs; where there was a lack of collaboration – as in Lithuania – it resulted from lack of opportunity rather than ideological opposition.

***Scenario 4: Non-conforming***

Scenario 4 focuses on the conditions under which unions reject extending their repertoires of contention through CSR on grounds of principle or ideology. Unions may develop a variety of *outsider* positions with respect to business and government, which can be regarded as ‘non-conforming’. These include the development of ‘niche’ positions, reluctance to use CSR discourse, scepticism or indifference and, very occasionally, confrontation. In these cases unions are generally acting as outsiders by choice rather than necessity – that is, they are opposed to working closely with business or government on CSR issues on grounds of principle or ideology.

While we might expect a preference among trade unions for direct access to decision-makers, as we have seen, not all unions are insiders, and some move from insider to outsider status, or from outsider to insider. Unions in the same sector may also adopt different positions on the insider-outsider continuum and develop their own ‘niche positions’ in relation to CSR. In France, for example, there was a contrast in union positions on the natural environment between those (e.g. CFDT and CGT) which believe economic and environmental aims can be achieved simultaneously and those (e.g. CGT-FO) which believe this to be impossible. CGT-FO’s position may be related to its identity as a business union; business unions and class-based unions are generally less likely to seek coalitions than integrationist unions that regard themselves as pluralist and reformist (Frege et al., 2004: 148). Meanwhile our respondent within CFE-CGC explained that their members’ perceptions about environmental issues vary according to sector: while members in oil and gas opposed stricter environmental norms in order to safeguard jobs, those in metalworking hoped that environmental innovation will create jobs in their companies.

Sometimes unions attempted to use CSR as leverage over poor company practices. In Hungary, for example, LIGA publishes blacklists of companies with poor employment relations, while in Slovenia, SKEI, does the same when companies do not respond to the union’s notifications about allegations of unlawful or harmful activity. Elsewhere, failure to engage with CSR resulted more from lack of interest or perceived low priority, rather than from scepticism or hostility. Our respondent in OPZZ in Poland stated: ‘There has not been much interest in CSR in recent years in our union, and what was happening took place in the headquarters, while sectoral structures seem rather indifferent’.

One other interesting finding concerns the use of CSR terminology. Although talking the language of decision-makers is an important resource for insider groups, it was only in Lithuania where unions perceived a need to translate their usual talk of employee representation and social dialogue into a business discourse of enhancing employee commitment and productivity to achieve both company and employee goals (a partnership approach). This suggests that trade unions, while sometimes appreciating the value of seeking insider status on CSR issues, generally prefer to maintain outsider status with respect to its discourse (a radical approach). This may reflect the general scepticism towards CSR that we noted when discussing scenario one above.

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Table 1: about here

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**Discussion and conclusions**

Trade union power and influence across Europe have been on a downward trajectory in recent decades. Structural economic changes, growing political hostility from many governments, as well as membership losses, have increased pressures on unions to reconsider their strategies. As union power continues to decline, scholars studying trade unions – both pluralists and radicals – have become increasingly pessimistic about the potential for union revitalisation. However, our findings reveal that unions are now making greater use of alternative ‘pressure points’ provided by the CSR agenda to extend their influence in all four dimensions of revitalisation identified by Behrens et al. (2004): *membership*, such as attracting young workers in Finland; *economic*, such as seeking new areas for company agreement in Germany and the UK; *political*, such as the establishment of joint think tanks in France and Spain, and taking advantage of government and EU initiatives in a variety of countries; and *institutional* (by which the authors mean internal union adjustment to new contexts), such as the appointment of officers responsible for CSR in Swedish unions, LO, TCO and Unionen, and the creation by UGT in Spain of a new internal section to monitor CSR.

Development by trade unions of a range of ways to engage with CSR underlines their status as active agents. As our data show, unions are encouraged by a variety of drivers – e.g. membership pressure, an internal ‘champion’, government initiative, or the chance of a strategic alliance with an NGO – to engage in some way or other with CSR. Figure 1, in illustrating our four scenarios, delineates the various strategies which unions may choose to pursue in interpreting and operationalising CSR. So unions might use the CSR agenda to defend labour standards of their members in line with their traditional areas of interest (comfort zone), or to develop new areas of activity in the wider social interest, such as environmental protection and sustainable development (reaching out). They may also seek alliances with campaigning NGOs (collaborating). Such engagement was very diverse, as NGOs campaign in numerous areas, not just labour standards and environmental issues, but also human rights, anti-corruption practices and community partnerships, among many others. Alternatively, we also found that unions might choose to disengage from CSR in one form or another (non-conforming). In each case, however, unions are engaging with new ‘repertoires of contention’, either reinforcing their traditional repertoires, extending them into new areas of activity, combining them with more radical activity through NGOs, or maybe ignoring or rejecting possible opportunities.

Our findings demonstrate that, when considering the field of CSR, the ability of unions to represent their members’ interests and to appeal to new ones is not so straightforward once they reach out into the area of public interest. The potentially unsettling issue for unions in relation to CSR is that the immediate ‘right thing’ for their members in the company might at the same time undermine the security of their members’ employment in the longer term through the imposition of additional costs. Or, indeed, CSR might reflect the views of the union's wider membership, but adversely affect the short-term interests of its members in particular companies. Hence there may be a tension between immediate member interests and the longer-term interests of the wider society (of which union members are also, of course, a part). There is evidence as well that many unions, even when engaging with the concept of CSR, will push for *alternatives* to it. Respondents often stated that international framework agreements (IFAs) between unions and multinational enterprises were preferable to voluntary corporate CSR commitments (Schömann et al., 2008). Pioneered by French MNEs, such as Danone and Rhodia, in the late 1980s, such agreements were a key theme in our interviews in Finland, France, Germany and Sweden. Through IFAs, unions extend their traditional role of collective bargaining into the international arena, yet still remain broadly in their ‘comfort zone’ without straying into engagement with CSR.

It is clear, then, that unions face different choices when considering the role of CSR in their revitalisation strategies, and these differences call for an appreciation of contingencies and historical legacies (Heery, 2015; Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). Existing models that attempt to link the NBS/VoC with organisational approaches to CSR have argued that CSR commitments could either be a ‘substitute’ for lacking government commitments, or could ‘mirror’ high government standards (Brown and Knudsen, 2015; Jackson and Apostolakou, 2010). Our data reveal a more complex and nuanced picture than one of straightforward path dependency resulting from type of national business system. Whilst labels such as LME and CME are useful as ideal-typical constructs for specifying these settings, they mask considerable variance within national patterns. Such schemas can tend towards ‘comparative statics’, focussing on path dependencies at the national system level and thereby downplaying conflict between societal actors as well as variation within nations (Hall and Thelen, 2009). As we have explained, unions have a significant degree of agency and choice, and different unions within the same country, and indeed within the same sector, were found to pursue alternative strategies, not least in relation to their varying self-identities. Hence our data support the conclusion that the role played by CSR in a union’s revitalisation strategy will vary according to a range of factors, including the power of industrial relations actors, the nature of state intervention, the role of NGOs, and the political priorities of individual unions and union officers.

Our findings map well on to work conducted by Donaghey et al. (2014) who outline an analytical framework that conceptualises the interface between employment relations and consumer relations within global supply chains. They hypothesise four different interfaces: low labour and low consumer power (‘gaps in global governance’); high labour and low consumer power (‘collective bargaining’); low labour and high consumer power (‘standards markets’); and high labour and high consumer power (‘complementary regimes’). Our own Figure 1 would suggest that unions confronted by the collective bargaining interface would remain in their ‘comfort zone’, while those in standards markets might attempt to ‘collaborate’ with the powerful consumer organisations already active. Unions in complementary regimes are likely already to be ‘collaborating’. Those confronted by gaps, though weak themselves, might strive to ‘reach out’ or ‘collaborate’ with other (weak) consumer organisations in an attempt jointly to strengthen their positions.

Our data have revealed that not only is the nature of union engagement with CSR complex and multi-faceted, but it is also characterised by various pitfalls and tensions, as unions grapple with competing interests and objectives. We may therefore ask how far CSR provides a fruitful pathway to union revitalisation and renewal. One of the core problems for unions is the voluntary nature of CSR and the degree of corporate ownership of the concept, meaning it may often be no more than a symbolic management tool or even an active form of corporate ‘greenwashing’ which aims to distract stakeholders’ attention from unsustainable or unethical activities (Marquis et al., 2015). Indeed, the pervasive discourse of CSR advances a predominantly voluntary concept of business responsibility, often claiming that CSR can be simply ‘integrated’ into business decision making. However, particularly in liberal market economies, this proposition ignores the inherent tensions between the pressures faced by managers under shareholder primacy and the social pressures to address wider concerns, which may not – and indeed are unlikely to – be embraced by the vast majority of shareholders (Johnston, 2017). This failure to acknowledge the continuous tension in firms between economic and social value-creation is a characteristic of much of the ‘shared value’ and CSR debates (Crane et al., 2014).

However, despite the limitations and dangers inherent in the discourse of CSR, trade unions are likely to continue to seek to engage in a variety of new repertoires of action. Faced with a decline in their traditional sources of power, campaigns focusing on corporate reputation, in particular of global brands, are likely to be particularly effective (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2015). As Jackson et al. (2018: 7) conclude: ‘CSR is an important platform for union engagement with civil society actors and new social movements, and hence likely to be important for union revitalisation’. Debates around revitalisation have so far tended to polarise between those advocating partnership with employers on the one hand, and grassroots worker mobilisation on the other. In terms of the terrain of CSR, our data suggest a need to refine and expand these terms, as union strategies can encompass working positively with employers to support genuine CSR commitments whilst at the same time mobilising support from a wider range of actors within the field. Clearly there are limits to voluntary self-regulation, and unions cannot rely on the private activities of firms to realise responsible and sustainable business practices. Rather unions will need to be pro-active across a number of fronts – engaged in efforts to promote transnational labour standards, working with MNEs in the development of international framework agreements, building effective coalitions with NGOs and other civil society organisations, and lobbying at the European level for improvements in the regulation of corporate governance. Whilst the conditions for ensuring that firms are held accountable for their actions are still far from being fully met, trade unions across Europe are continuing to work across a variety of fronts and expanding their expertise in the broad field of CSR.

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**Endnotes**

1 Etzioni also sets constituency-representing organisations and public interest groups apart from much more narrowly focussed special interest groups. However, this third category is of less analytical use for our purposes.

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Table 2: about here

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**Figure 1: Typology of trade unions as civil society organisations**

Insider

Constituency

Public interest

Outsider

1. **Table 1: Summary of union strategies towards CSR**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Scenario 1 (comfort zone)** | **Examples of unions** |
| CSR as an addition to existing union agendas | Akava (Finland), DGB (Germany), IF Metall (Sweden), MPF (Lithuania), UGT (Spain) |
| CSR as means to embarrassing companies into compliance with own codes | GMB (UK), Metalliliitto (Finland) |
| CSR used by unions to certify good employment practices | KNG (Slovenia), NSZZSolidarność (Poland) |
| Unions and works councils as fitting partners in CSR projects | ACV Leuven ( Belgium), DGB (Germany) |
| ILO Conventions and Recommendations proffered as an important framework for CSR | Unions in Finland |
| **Scenario 2 (reaching out)** |
| Linking CSR to environmental protection and sustainable development | TCO (Sweden) |
| Using training in CSR to raise members’ awareness of need to raise labour standards in supply chains | Akava (Finland), CFDT, CFTC and CGT (France), ZSSS (Slovenia) |
| Spinning CSR off from a focus on health and safety at work | Prospect (UK) |
| Participating in government consultation exercises, e.g. on sustainable development | Unions in France and Spain |
| Improving visibility with consumers and employers | CFTC (France) |
| Improving presence in SMEs through CSR | CCOO (Spain) |
| Participating in discussions on CSR initiated by intergovernmental organisations, e.g. EU or United Nations Development Programme | Unions in Finland, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden |
| **Scenario 3 (collaborating)** |
| Joining NGO campaigns | IF Metall (Sweden) |
| Financing an NGO to investigate working conditions in supply chains | Finland |
| Creating joint think tanks on CSR with major companies or research centres with NGOs | CFDT, CFE-CGC and CGT (France), CCOO (Spain) |
| Creating a Citizens’ Forum on CSR with NGOs and academics | CFDT and CGT (France) |
| **Scenario 4 (non-conforming)** |
| Developing ‘niche’ positions | CGT-FO (France) |
| Avoiding use of CSR discourse | OPZZ (Poland) |
| Publishing ‘blacklists’ of companies with poor employment practices | LIGA (Hungary), SKEI (Slovenia) |

**Table 2: List of unions cited in text**

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| --- | --- |
| **Union and country** | **Name in English** |
| ACLVB-CGSLB (Belgium) | General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium |
| ACV-Leuven (Belgium) | Confederation of Christian Trade Unions – Leuven |
| Akava (Finland) | Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff |
| CCOO (Spain) | Workers’ Commissions |
| CFDT (France) | French Democratic Confederation of Labour |
| CFE-CGC (France) | French Confederation of Managers – General Confederation of Executives |
| CFTC (France) | French Confederation of Christian Workers |
| CGT (France) | General Confederation of Labour |
| CGT-FO (France) | General Confederation of Labour – Workers’ Force |
| DGB (Germany) | German Trade Union Confederation |
| GMB (UK) | A large general union |
| IF Metall (Sweden) | Industrial and Metalworkers’ Union |
| KNG (Slovenia) | Chemical, Non-metal and Rubber Industries Trade Union of Slovenia |
| LIGA (Hungary) | Democratic Confederation of Free Trade Unions |
| LO (Sweden) | Swedish Trade Union Confederation |
| Metalliliitto (Finland) | Metalworkers’ Union |
| MPF (Lithuania) | Lithuanian Federation of Forest and Forest Industry Workers’ Trade Unions |
| NSZZ Solidarność (Poland) | Independent Self-governing Trade Union ‘Solidarity’ |
| OPZZ (Poland) | All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions |
| Prospect (UK) | Union representing mainly engineering and management staff |
| SKEI (Slovenia) | Trade Union of the Metal and Electrical Industry of Slovenia |
| TCO (Sweden) | Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees |
| UGT (Spain) | General Union of Workers |
| Unionen (Sweden) | Union affiliated to TCO representing professionals in the private sector |
| ZSSS (Slovenia) | Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia |

 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)