3 Unions under Pressure

The growth of unionism

Why do workers combine together to form unions? A wide diversity of answers have been offered in response to this question. The pluralists generally offer lists of factors such as employer recognition or dissatisfaction with income levels to explain union membership, while the social action and Marxist approaches generally interpret union membership as expressions of interests formed primarily outside the workplace. Both approaches provide some important insights into the reasons for union growth yet fail to bridge that vital gap between collective action and the subjective meaning of individual action (as was argued in Chapter 1). In this context Crouch’s concept of ‘usefulness’ is an important bridging concept.\(^1\)

In terms of rational self-interest there would seem to be little incentive for individual workers to join the union or participate in collective action. Individuals can remain passively outside the union yet still receive any benefits arising from collective organisation and action within their workplace. Membership of and participation in a union costs time and money yet the efforts of one individual are unlikely to have much impact on the outcome of pay bargaining: individuals can enjoy the benefits of union organisation without incurring the costs of membership.

One means of giving individuals a good reason to join a union is to provide selective benefits that are dependent on membership and so exclude ‘free riders’ from enjoying the benefits of membership.\(^2\) Indeed unions do typically provide benefits such as insurance, shopping discounts and, more importantly, legal support and representation for members threatened with disciplinary action or sacking. But the provision of such selective benefits does not adequately explain union membership. Such benefits only constitute a minor incentive for membership as they represent a small return on the individual’s investment of time and money. Moreover it would be difficult to explain the much
greater union density in the public compared with the private sector as a function just of varying levels of selective benefits. Thus the provision of selective benefits falls short of being a full explanation of the spread of union membership and particularly individual involvement in industrial action.

Explanations, then, of the growth of unionism simply in terms of narrow self-interest have limited plausibility. Crouch proposes an explanation in terms of the perceived ‘usefulness’ of union membership, a broader conception of rational self-interest. According to Crouch the growth of union membership depends on the extent to which workers perceive the ‘usefulness’ to themselves of union organisation. He argues that the prime advantage of union organisation is that it offers employees the ability to resist the power of the employer. This advantage has to be achieved collectively as only collective efforts are likely to bring employers to the negotiating table or to affect significantly the outcomes of such negotiations. Consequently union membership can be seen as varying according to workers’ perceptions of the usefulness of that membership. This notion of ‘usefulness’ has two aspects. Firstly workers have to see themselves as dependent on unionism, seeing it as having major advantages over other forms of individual or collective action. Secondly workers have to experience a reasonable ease of union membership and organisation if they are to combine in unions.

Firstly employees are dependent on unionism insofar as there are no alternative means of improving pay and conditions either on an individual or a collective level. Those workers who enjoy good prospects for individual advancement or promotion are less likely to perceive union membership as advantageous than those lacking such prospects. Similarly those who have alternative means of collective advancement, usually in the form of professionalism, find few advantages in unionism. Thus white collar workers, who typically enjoy good career prospects and are often organised into professional associations, have traditionally had low rates of union membership. This favourable situation has now begun to change. As their employing organisations have grown in scale, many white collar workers are finding that their opportunities for individual advancement have become more limited and their relationships with their employer less personal and more rule-bound. As white collar work has become bureau-