

Trade unions and service work

This second chapter on the regulation of service work focuses on trade unions. It may be tempting to see trade unions as a dying historical legacy of the era of manufacturing and industrial economies, and to link the decline they have suffered in many countries to the rise of the service economy. Trade union membership in the UK, for instance, has slipped from a high point of 56 per cent of the labour force in 1979 to around 30 per cent at the end of the twentieth century. In the USA, union membership levels stand at around 14 per cent. Whole regional economies, such as the Glasgow conurbation, and the North-East of England which used to be synonymous with heavily unionised, heavy industries such as shipbuilding, steel-making, and coal extraction now seem to be dominated by call centres, and large retail malls. 'Once we made ships, now we take calls' reads a newspaper headline (*Guardian*, 9 November 1998). The accompanying article describes call centre workers as 'docile', with an implicit contrast drawn with militant male workers in heavy industries.

Such a view *necessarily* linking the rise of service work with the decline of trade unions is a misleading one, however. The decline of trade unions has occurred for a number of reasons, only some of which pertain directly to the rise of service employment. Important factors in the UK which have fuelled decline have been high unemployment, low inflation, employer policies of union marginalisation and anti-trade union legislation. These are not causally linked to the rise of the service economy. Other factors fuelling decline, which do have specific relevance to service work, are the declining average size of the workplace, the changing composition of the workforce, and sectoral shifts in the economy. In addition, turnover levels must be considered as affecting relative unionisation levels in service occupations. Each of these is briefly examined in turn.

Research has consistently shown that union membership tends to be higher the larger the size of the workplace (Bain and Price, 1983). Manufacturing

production can be centralised in larger workplaces because there is a buffer between production and consumption. In front-line service work production and consumption are simultaneous. Thus service production tends to be decentralised and located around multiple nodes of consumption, and front-line service workplaces tend to be smaller. Wial (1993) calculates that in the USA the average service workplace has 13 workers, while the average manufacturing workplace has 51 workers. Millward *et al.*'s (2000, p. 27) analysis of the four comprehensive UK workplace surveys concludes that 'workplaces in private sector service industries tend to be the smallest, although their typical size has increased gradually [since 1980]'. The changing composition of the workforce has been seen as affecting union membership levels because traditionally male, full-time workers have been more likely to be union members than female part-time workers. The rise in service employment has brought with it a shift in workforce composition that makes union membership less likely. As noted earlier in this chapter, many front-line occupations are made up predominantly of women. Further, the pressures for flexibility to match unpredictable customer demand, as noted in Chapter 4, have meant that many front-line workers are employed part-time, especially in the UK (Walsh, 1990), and also in the USA where Tilly (1992) has noted 86 per cent of part-time workers are located in service industries, with a rising trend. The sectoral shifts in the economy have been alluded to in the introduction to this section. Research has suggested that this may be a significant factor in union decline (Waddington, 1992). Research suggests that more service industries than manufacturing industries have what researchers term a 'residual industry effect' which disposes them towards low union membership. This residual industry effect is meant to refer to something affecting union membership in an industry even when other important factors such as workplace size and workforce composition have been taken into account. In effect the label is an admission of failure by researchers to understand social processes that appear to be specific to certain industries.² Finally, the high turnover levels that occur in certain front-line occupations are also likely to contribute to low levels of unionisation. Unions find it harder to recruit and keep up membership when workers have a propensity to leave employment within a short period. Indeed, as Bain and Price (1983, p. 25) note, 'a high degree of labour turnover may indicate that workers are leaving unsatisfactory work as an *alternative* strategy to improving it through unionisation' (emphasis added).

Overall, then, there are important barriers to sustained union organisation in service work, especially front-line work. However, they do not necessarily determine union failure. Consider the case of flight attendants, for instance. This is a front-line service workforce mainly composed of, often young, women. These staff work in small clusters, with often little continuity in work group composition between one day and the next (Wouters, 1989). This gives little opportunity for the sorts of deep, non-utilitarian 'associational solidarity' (Heckscher, 1988) that can inform union organisation. Such factors

are likely to be the sort of things that might underlie unidentified industrial residual effects noted above. Further, within a stereotypical image, flight attendants may appear 'docile'. Such an imagery may be informed by the presence of the customer in the labour process. Images of militancy seem to be better in the simple management-workforce dyad of manufacturing work. The unspoken assumption is that conflict may exist for flight attendants, but that such conflict is more likely to pertain to relations with customers. Even then, conflict will only rarely become open: attendants tend to take a deep breath and smile back at the irate customer. Such images of docility, however stand badly beside the high levels of unionisation of flight attendants in many countries (Nielsen, 1982; Hochschild, 1983; Williams, 1989). Behind the public image and aesthetic labour of flight attendants lies a history of union-management confrontations. As Hochschild notes, these unions 'have challenged company regulations affecting whole territories of the body and its adornment regulations on facial make-up, hairstyles, undergarments, jewellery and hairstyles' (1983, p. 126). One of the largest and most highly publicised disputes in the late 1990s in the UK concerned unions challenging management policies for changing working conditions at British Airways. As Linstead (1995) notes, the 'perfumed picket line' is part of the landscape of the service economy.

Indeed, against the factors that make unionisation harder in front-line work the analysis of this book points to factors which can work systematically in unions' favour. First, unionising front-line service work may be easier because employers are unable to use the threat of the geographical relocation of production as a tactic against unions. These employer tactics are widespread in other work settings, especially in the USA (Bronfenbrenner, 2000) and have been theorised by Burawoy (1985) as a central part of a 'hegemonic despotism phase of capitalism in which unions are quiescent. The collocation of production with consumption that marks a key aspect of front-line work (except where technologically mediated) takes this important tactic away from employers. Second, unions are likely to confront management whose position or a range of work organisation elements is unlikely to be definitively fixed. This book has stressed that management faces a series of dilemmas in trying to establish a (fragile) social order that can generate profit. While management may espouse a rhetoric that is substantively systematic, practices and policies are likely to be informed consistently by ambiguous compromises between the dual logics. Within this setting unions are likely to systematically discover that management finds room to accommodate a range of their demands. Third, unions can look on the informal, but often dense and crucial, communities of coping that appear widespread in service workplaces (see Chapter 8 as an important form of collective solidarity deriving from the nature of the labour process from which unionism can grow, and has grown historically (for example, see Price, 1980).

Trade unions can have a role in the front-line workplace. In Canada, for instance, there has been a growth of service sector unions (Murray, 1998)

Further, while research into the *history* of union growth and decline suggests some important obstacles in certain service industries, trade unions can re-define themselves and change *in the present and in the future*, adapting to the new environment (Cobble, 1996). But what sort of approach should trade unions take to extend their membership in front-line service work? Given the considerable size of front-line employment, and given the predictions of its continued growth, this is a pivotal question for the future of the unions. The question drives this chapter. First, there is an overview of union strategies in relation to recruiting and organising front-line workers. Then the chapter turns to examine strategies concerning the questions of who unions should organise, and what interests they should prioritise. This is followed by an examination of strategies in relation to the questions of how unions should organise, and what forms of sustaining ideology they can put forward.

Analysing union strategies

Mirroring debates in other countries, the debate on union strategies within the UK centres on examining the merits and demerits of the (social) *partnership* approach and the *organising* (or social movement) approach respectively (Heery, 2001).³ Differences in these approaches can be best examined by extending Hyman (1997b) in breaking down the concept of union strategy into four key questions: Who should unions organise? What interests of their members should they prioritise in their actions? How should they organise and represent their members? and What is the ideology underlying their actions? Table 10.1 summarises the answer to these questions offered by the advocates of the partnership and organising approaches.⁴ The final column lays out an approach informed by the concept of the customer-oriented bureaucracy (COB).

As Heery points out, how far one is persuaded by the case for either the partnership or the organising model is centrally determined by one's view of the nature of contemporary work. If contemporary service work is seen as offering a greater potential for interests shared between management and workforce then a partnership approach makes sense. It makes sense to build on existing cooperative relations with *employers* by extending recruitment where good relations exist with employers and by concentrating activity on areas offering clear potential for mutual gains. Here, unions must still be democratic, but in a representative rather than participative sense, and the sustaining ideology of trade unionism is one of placing trade unions as a legitimate actor within a stakeholder organisation and society. However, if service work is seen as increasingly steeped in conflict between management and the workforce, then an organising model is the more appropriate one.

Table 10.1 Three union approaches to organising front-line service workers

	<i>Partnership approach</i>	<i>Organising approach</i>	<i>Approach informed by COB analysis</i>
Who to organise?	Focus recruitment efforts on core workers in organisations in which union presence is already established.	Bring in members from occupations and workplaces with little union presence, covering both core and contingent workers.	Recognise limited union presence in many service workplaces; hence main focus on non-union workplaces and occupations.
What interests to prioritise?	Interests should be prioritised where areas of common interest are forged with management, e.g. 'pay to hire and keep the best people', training and development.	Engender membership growth by focusing on issues of conflict with management, e.g. countering low pay, and resisting intensification of work.	A range of pay and conditions, directly relevant to front-line workers – see text; enforce cooperation through conflict; and use management rhetoric of customer service.
How to organise and represent interests?	Representative democracy; relatively passive membership, with union officials engaged in centralised and 'back-stage' discussions with management.	Participative democracy; active role for membership at workplace level in mobilising to force concessions from management.	Recognise barriers and limits to participative democracy; potentially build union organisation around centralised nodes of consumption; organise with gender composition of workforce in mind; periodic mobilisation for customer support.
The ideology of unionism	Union as legitimate actor in stakeholder organisation, and stakeholder society.	Union linked with ideology of class conflict.	Unionism as civilising production and consumption simultaneously.

Here unions seek to break into the non-unionised areas where the workforce is likely to be subject to greater exploitation, and to focus their action on issues of conflict with management. By forcing concessions from management a union can appear attractive to new members, whom it will seek to actively involve in the union. Participative democracy is important because the mobilisation of the

membership may be necessary to keep forcing the employer's hand, and the sustaining ideology is that of class conflict. Heery suggests the utility of breaking out of conceptualising union approaches in terms of an apparent strict dichotomy between the two approaches. An implication is that if a central characteristic of contemporary work is its *contradictory* nature, then union strategies must reflect this, implying an interplay and dynamic between elements of the two approaches. The analysis of service work centred around the concept of the customer-oriented bureaucracy suggests that the experience of front-line service work is centrally informed by the contradictory nature of that work. The final column in Table 10.1 lays out the implications for union strategy of this view, and is elaborated in much of the discussion below.

Who to organise; which interests to prioritise?

The first issue of who to organise has in part already been addressed. As indicated above, the key task for trade unions in the UK is to break through into establishing a presence in non-union workplaces and occupations, particularly in the private services sector. Indeed, while the partnership approach focus on core workers in workplaces with an already-established union presence may make some limited sense for certain manufacturing industries, its relevance for service work, outside the public sector, is likely to be limited.⁵ Similarly, a focus on core full-time workers would exclude a large slice of the potential membership in many service industries. As Walsh (1990) notes, such is the level of the use of part-time workers in the retail and hospitality industries that it makes little sense to characterise them as 'peripheral' workers. Just as they are not 'peripheral' to employers, so they should not be to trade unions.

The answer to the question of what unions should do for their members must be informed not only by an understanding of the contradictory nature of front-line work, but also by research into the key factors that promote workers to join trade unions. Waddington and Whitston (1995, p. 191) conclude that two key factors inform workers' decisions to join trade unions: (1) the union role in 'improving pay and conditions', and (2) the union role offering 'support if I had problems at work'. With this in mind, a union priority must remain to challenge low pay. It is difficult to challenge low pay through collective bargaining, however, when the workforce has little bargaining power – as discussed in the preceding chapter. However, with the achievement of the national minimum wage, trade unions in the UK can legitimately present themselves as bodies which have secured better pay for the lowest paid service workers.⁶ As John Edmunds (1986), head of the large UK general union the GMB, noted, the campaign for the national minimum wage

put [us] on the side of the oppressed and disadvantaged, which is a side of the argument we haven't actually been on for some time. It also puts us on the side of women... and it puts us on the side of short service and mobile workers in the service sector.

Further, unions can seek better pay levels through neither the straightforward cooperation approach of the partnership model nor the straightforward conflict approach of the organising model, but by engendering cooperation through conflict, and conflict through cooperation (Cobble, 1996). Avoiding conflict where it is likely to be fruitless, that is, where workers have little bargaining power, unions can adopt a cooperative rhetoric of the importance of customer service in order to push for an upgrade in the skill levels of front-line workers – particularly the sort of product-related and problem-solving skills discussed in the preceding chapter. Here, there is also a potential to form coalitions with consumer groups. Recall Jarvis and Prais's (1989) damning indictment: 'the reason British shop assistants so often know hardly anything about what they are selling is that no one has ever taught them'. Trade unions can join with consumer groups to make the case for better-trained front-line staff.

In addition to pay issues, unions can focus on a range of issues that have specific relevance for front-line workers. The false nature of the dichotomy between partnership model and organising model becomes apparent here. An important part of the organising approach is that it seeks to create a union organisation which is close to the workplace and which reflects workers' everyday concerns. It is an attempt to break down the frustrating 'residual industry effect' that seems to block union progress in some service industries. Such a form of union activity has thrown up and will continue to throw up a range of issues stemming from the contradictory nature of front-line service work. However, it is the partnership approach which is the more likely to broaden the formal bargaining agenda of union-management discussions (Heery, 2001). This means that while it is the organising model which is the more likely to unearth these workplace specific issues it is the partnership approach which is the more likely to institutionalise the union role in regulating them. One seems hardly useful without the other. Some important workplace issues that unions may usefully regulate are examined below.

Regulating against negative aspects of emotional labour

Chapter 8 highlighted that the demands for emotional labour are likely to have systematically negative effects for front-line workers. Two key factors were identified as crucial here – the degree to which front-line workers have to follow strict management-imposed feeling rules, and the degree to which they are placed in a position of inequality vis-à-vis the customer. Unions can

have a role in both areas. They can argue for greater discretion for workers in the delivery of emotional labour. This is not necessarily an issue of simple conflict with management; nor is it an argument against emotional labour *per se*, but rather is one against emotional labour in the context of a strict managerial imposition of feeling rules. This issue may sound abstract and potentially nebulous, but there is evidence that it can be an important aspect of union activity that can serve to mobilise membership growth. In the union organisation among clerical, often student-facing staff at Harvard University a key spur to membership activity was a training session on 'customer service' which sought to impose management-defined demeaning feeling rules (Eaton, 1996). Eaton states that

a trainer told workers who were upset by angry students' rebukes to 'think of yourself as a trash can. Take everyone's little bits of anger all day, put it inside you, and at the end of the day, just pour it in the dumpster on your way out of the door.' Not surprisingly, workers found this advice offensive and not helpful. (p. 296)

Cobble (1996) notes that feeling rules have also been a key issue in union-management relations regarding flight attendants. An example she gives is almost a duplicate of the Harvard one: 'a mandatory "Commitment to Courtesy" class in which instructors divided flight attendants into small groups and assigned them to draw pictures on flip charts showing "attendants being nice" particularly galled the women, one activist explained. "People got *hild*"' (p. 347). Unions contesting strict management imposition of feeling rules may not only speak directly to everyday work concerns of front-line workers, but may also feed into the second important reason for joining a union: 'support if I had a problem at work'. A strict management imposition of feeling rules is likely to result in a number of disciplinary cases brought against front-line workers who have been found to contravene these rules. A key union role is to represent individual workers in disciplinary cases. When these cases centre on feeling rules, unions effectively act to create greater space for the voice of the workforce in defining feeling rules. Importantly, the Employment Relations Act 1999 in the UK has guaranteed the right of union representatives to be present with individual members in disciplinary cases, regardless of whether the union is recognised by the employer for collective bargaining purposes.

Trade unions can also seek to regulate the relationship of the front-line worker with the customer. Unions must walk a fine line here, given that there are systematic reasons that the customer appears to many front-line workers as 'our friend, the enemy' (Benson, 1986). A strategy congruent with this way in which customers are experienced by front-line workers would involve structuring the service encounter to minimise the likelihood of the dark side of the customer surfacing, and to minimise its effect when it does surface. The

dark side of the customer potentially emerges when he or she moves from enchantment to disillusionment. If unions can help decrease both enchantment and disillusionment then they will improve the experience of front-line work. The creation of enchantment is a systemic part of consumer capitalism but this does not mean that it cannot be regulated and altered. Consumers are enchanted primarily through the work of the marketing and advertising part of the service organisation. The images produced serve to enchant customers in specific ways. For instance, advertising images may promote sexualised enchantment: 'I'm Cheryl, Fly Me', ran an advertisement for National Airlines in the USA in the 1970s (Nielsen, 1982). The degree and form of enchantment engendered through advertising will necessarily feed into how often and how deeply the dark side of the customer emerges. Unions can seek to institutionalise a role for the collective voice of the front-line workforce in the creation of advertising images. After all, it is the front-line workforce who 'cop the flak (Frenkel *et al.*, 1999) from the heightened and sexualised forms of enchantment created by marketing staff.

In addition, unions can seek to minimise the likelihood of customer disillusionment by making the case for the training of front-line staff in deeper technical and problem-solving skills. Equipped with such skills, front-line workers are more likely to prevent customers becoming so disillusioned as to become irate and abusive. Indeed, training in these sorts of skills appears to be a vital plank in a union strategy in a number of ways. Not only does it minimise customer disillusionment and abuse, but it also creates a way out of a front-line ghetto in organisations. Further, it informs a longer-term approach to tackle low pay, and it helps to erect what some writers have called a 'status shield' (Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1993) for front-line workers against the dark side of the customer. The customer-worker relationship is a socially embedded one, with a greater likelihood of customer disillusionment turning to abuse when the worker is in a position of low status. Hochschild, for instance, argues that women flight attendants are more likely to face customer abuse because of their weaker 'status shield' (p. 163). The higher the skill level of front-line workers, the more they have a status shield to militate against manifestations of customer abuse. Wider union strategies focusing on the importance of training are therefore well suited to focusing on front-line workers. Again the approach of the GMB in the UK is notable. As Heer notes, (1993, p. 290), the general secretary of the GMB 'has stated that promotion [of union officials] will increasingly depend on success in recruitment among "the new servant class" and negotiation claims are monitored to ensure they incorporate demands for training and gender equality'. Training certainly tends to be a central aspect of partnership agreements (Knell, 1999). The promotion of training to foster common interests with customer was a part of a campaign of the TUC, which proposed a 'Quality Work Assurance Servicemark' for the public services. This would be awarded when independent monitoring showed standards of training and staff involvement, equi-

opportunities, attention to health and safety, and levels of pay to be sufficient to ensure the delivery of high-quality service. The benefit of promoting training is that it makes customers more likely to be the friend and less likely to be the enemy.

However, a union strategy must also be aware that there remain systematic reasons for the emergence of the dark side of the customer to the surface. Therefore, unions should seek to minimise the harmful effects of this on front-line workers. Thus a number of unions have focused on the issue of violence from customers, seeking to ensure that work is organised to minimise the possibilities of this (Heery, 1993). Further, unions in seeking to regulate the feeling rules for service encounters can aim, and have aimed, to ensure that front-line workers are not expected to put up with abusive and disrespectful behaviour from customers (see Simms *et al.*, 2000).

Regulating for the opportunity to deliver meaningful service

An almost constant refrain in research into the experience of front-line work is the desire of front-line workers to give meaningful service to customers, and the frustrations that come from being unable to do so. Trade union activity needs to be informed by this. Most obviously, unions can argue for training and staffing levels that will afford the possibilities for meaningful service. Although management demands to increase the efficiency of service delivery are often presented by writers in terms of the 'intensification of work' (Boyd and Bain, 1999), or a 'speed-up' (Hochschild, 1983), it is not clear that this is the most useful way to conceptualise the issue for union activity. A union strategy and language simply against a work 'speed-up' implicitly contains 'anti-boss' imagery (Cobble, 1996) that rests poorly with many front-line workers' experiences. A language and strategy that speaks to front-line workers' likely deep-rooted 'pro-customer' values and experiences may have more appeal to such workers. Importantly, what others describe as an 'intensification of work' in front-line settings may also be described as a 'rationalisation' of work. It is not necessarily that workers are working harder, but that they are forced to work differently, emphasising the throughput of customers, rather than the quality of individual service encounters. Their work becomes more bureaucratized and less customer-oriented. Unions can seek to ensure that staffing levels are maintained to allow work in which there is the possibility to deliver meaningful service (for example, see Peters and Merrill, 1998) – in fact, the Royal College of Nursing, the major professional body/union for nurses in the UK, was reported as close to its first industrial action ever primarily because its members felt that the medical service being provided to patients at a particular hospital was not acceptable (Carvel, 2001).

Crucially, the way in which a social order is established in the service workplace is a political process. Management seeking somehow to balance quality and quantity concerns can rarely have a definitive vision of what constitutes such a balance. It must walk its own fine lines, erring on one side and then the other over time, aware that its standards are double. I am ambiguous understanding of what constitutes a balance can be decisively affected by the collective voice of workers expressed through a union. In this, the union can use as a tool the management rhetoric of HRM tied to service quality. This is captured well in a statement from a union seeking to organise customer service representatives at the internet retailers, Amazon.com:

Quality customer service requires professional well-trained individuals that have job security, compensation that reflects our skills and commitment to the company, respect, career development opportunities, continued education and a voice. Amazon.com cannot sustain the standard of excellence that it has attained without anything less than a true commitment to these core values. (CNN website, 1 November 2000)

Another important way in which unions can pursue this aim of delivering meaningful service is to contest the strict use of sales targets in those jobs involving service and sales elements. A major British union, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, did exactly this by contesting the sales targets imposed by a major insurance sales employer (*Daily Express*, 20 December 1995). Again union activity can be presented not merely as an anti-management stance, but as a pro-customer stance that fits well with the daily experience of front-line workers. Further, this approach can lay the ground for alliances with consumer groups:

Barclays Bank has been forced to back down from the introduction of heavy-handed 'sell or be fired' techniques after a backlash from employees and their union. Management had called for sales staff to win 60 sales a week of Barclaycard graduate loans and insurance policies – or face disciplinary action... The ban was attacked by *consumer groups*, saying such pressure could lead to customer being sold products they did not need. (*Guardian*, 2 August 2000) (emphasis added)

In addition, this approach may be closely related to the second key reason people give for joining a union: 'support if I had a problem at work'. In the case above, according to the report, failure by workers to achieve sales targets would have been 'met with a written warning followed by a final written warning and then dismissal'. The union role in contesting disciplinary cases arising from the use of sales targets may prove an important catalyst for union growth (see Bain and Taylor, 2000, regarding call centres).

The means and ideology of organising

Having looked at which workers should be represented, and what interests should be prioritised, the discussion now turns to the question of *how* unions should represent interests and of what sort of sustaining ideology could be developed. Cobble's (1996) call for a form of union structure to match the realities of the service economy emphasises the need for union structures to match their female-dominated service worker constituency. This means that unions must continue to reform the way that they organise themselves along the lines advocated or implied in feminist criticism (Campbell, 1982; Coote and Campbell, 1987; Grint, 1998). Increasingly, the realities of the service economy mean that union structures based on an assumption of a male, full-time, large-workplace-based membership represents organisational suicide. Thus, many unions have increased their representation of women, particularly in laypositions, in addition to providing a proliferation of specific structures, such as conferences, aimed solely at women members. Progress remains slow regarding the appointment up of more women as full-time officials, however (Heery and Kelly, 1988). On the other hand, Heery and Kelly (1989) suggest that female officials are more likely to exist in unions where there is a high proportion of women in membership, and where there is a build-up of pressure from members and activists for female officials. Clearly, this could increasingly be the scenario if unions succeed in recruiting more (predominantly female) service workers.

Many unions have sought to involve and represent members through workplace-based structures, but this approach is based on an assumption of large workplaces. One solution Cobble (1996) offers to this problem is for a rebirth, at least in the USA, of occupational unionism in which unions do not seek to recruit workers by firm, but rather by specific occupation, setting up representational structures in locales rather than around workplaces. She offers the example of the historical unionisation of waitresses in the USA. Unions pursued an occupational strategy and managed to recruit nearly one-quarter of waitresses by the end of the 1940s. Such a strategy, however, does little to match the reality of the increasing demands by employers, in the UK at least, to move away from dealing with multiple unions representing different types of staff (though see Heery *et al.*, 2000, for a discussion of a similar approach adopted by unions for contingent workers). Just as front-line work involves consumption and production simultaneously, unions too must somehow set up representational structures to match the realities of both production and consumption simultaneously.

While service production is decentralised, there is a corresponding trend towards the *centralisation* of certain forms of consumption. Ritzer (1999a) has argued that there has been a revolution in the means of consumption towards the development of large arenas, or 'cathedrals', of consumption. Taking a

leading place among these are the new giant shopping malls, chain stores franchises and fast food restaurants, cruise ships, entertainment complexes athletic facilities, educational settings and hospitals. One way for unions to cope with decentralised production but centralised consumption is to set up parallel structures around both the employer (decentralised production) and also large, centralised nodes of consumption, for instance, setting up branches for shopping malls. Non-workplace branches, however, can often seem remote to the majority of union members. The challenge for unions is to set up more meaningful structures based around centralised nodes of consumption such as shopping malls and entertainment complexes and districts. Such a level of organisation may become more relevant as unions increasingly come to form coalitions with consumers and consumer groups (Heery, 1993). Such a phenomenon of coalition-forming at a local level has been a characteristic of a number of innovative unionising campaigns for service workers in the USA (Cobble, 1996; Bronfenbrenner *et al.*, 1998; Wever, 1998). Most notably, the coalition formed with clients (and their representatives) was a key element in the successful campaign in 1999 to bring under the union umbrella 74 000 home-care workers in Los Angeles county (Cleveland, 1999) - the largest single union election victory in the USA since the unionisation of Ford in 1941 (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Coalitions with service recipients have also been a key element in the unionisation of service workers on American college campuses in the late 1990s (Bronfenbrenner *et al.*, 1998; Klein, 2000).

These issues suggest the need for an interplay between representative and participative forms of democracy within unions. The context of small, decentralised service workplaces suggests the need for a representative system within the service organisation, potentially allied to a more participative system constructed around large, centralised nodes of consumption. Further, while participative democracy remains a vital aim in terms of a wider goal of increasing the say people have over their work lives, limitations to it must be recognised. For instance, the organising model's stress on active mobilisation and participation of union members is difficult to marry with a need to unionise part-time service workers, whose ability to spend time participating in union activities is likely to be extremely limited. In addition, lay activists tend to be less concerned with active recruitment than do full-time officials (Kelly and Heery, 1989). It also remains the case that many of the key challenges to male dominance in union structures have come through top-down initiatives (Grint, 1998).

Finally, the sustaining ideology of union activity in front-line-service work needs to be considered. The potential power of ideas in generating union membership and activity should not be underestimated - as Waddington and Whitston (1995) note, from their survey research, white-collar staff ranked a 'belief in trade unionism' as the third most important reason for joining a union. But what set of ideas can create such a 'belief in trade unionism' among service workers? In so far as the organising approach presents an ideology of

opposition to employers, of dyadic class conflict, then this approach is likely to speak little to the everyday contradictions and fine lines that front-line workers contend with.⁸ Cobble (1996, p. 342), describing the union recruitment of clerical, student-facing staff at Harvard, noted that the union adopted the slogan

'You don't have to be anti-Harvard to be pro-union' [and] eschewed an anti-union, anti-employer campaign. They assumed that clerical workers cared about the enterprise in which they worked and about the quality of the service they delivered.

Such a set of assumptions are well supported by the range of research reported on many types of front-line occupations in this book. Further, Heery (1993, p. 292) argues that an anti-employer, radical form of ideology is rooted in the misconception that it is within production that primary identities are formed. As discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 7, identities within front-line production can revolve as much around consumption as around production. After all, many front-line workers are recruited on the basis of their identification with, and implicitly their identity as, customers.⁹

The sustaining ideology for the partnership approach revolves around the pluralist notion of the stakeholder organisation (Hutton 1995).¹⁰ This vision positions trade unions as a legitimate representative voice for the workforce, who constitute one of many stakeholders – along with customers and other parties such as shareholders – whose voices should be heard in the decision-making process within organisations. One merit in such an ideology is that it points to the importance of trade unions as a collective representative body for the workforce, seeking to create coalitions with consumer groups as *collective* representative bodies for customers. Heery (1993) argues forcibly that the opportunity for coalition-forming to accommodate both worker and consumer interests requires a more active role for the collective, rather than individual, market expression of consumer interests.

However, the vision of the stakeholder organisation must be deemed worthy but rather cold and unaffectionate as a sustaining ideology. It is not a vision to win the hearts and minds of union activists and members who work on the front line. The call to *civilise and humanise production and consumption simultaneously*, however, may speak more readily to the experiences and identities of front-line workers. Such a call recognises the interplay between production and consumption that exists in front-line work. It implicitly suggests that the processes of capitalism can create a dehumanised, uncivil production and consumption, but suggests also the potential to civilise these areas together, through active agency. It suggests a defensive agenda, for instance minimising the effects of the dark side of the customer, but also a proactive agenda, for instance regulating to allow the delivery of meaningful service. Such a call for the sustaining ideology of civilising production and

consumption simultaneously in part echoes MacDonald and Sirinani's (1996) call for unionism to engender a less servile and more civil society, and a more civic culture. It also fits well with a number of strategies adopted by unions. For instance, the TUC campaign for quality standards, noted above, is one such example. In the USA, Kerchner and Mitchell (1988) argue that teacher unions are moving towards a 'third stage of unionism' in which union activity is based as much around a concern with the welfare of the overall educational system and with giving meaningful education to their clients as it is around the protection of worker interests. It also connects well with the union's key role in the partnership agreement at Tesco, the large UK supermarket, which involves 'the notion that the union should act as the company's conscience, informing Tesco if it fails to live up to its values and commitments' (Marchington, 2001, p. 12). Such a sustaining ideology brings to the fore the crucial 'sword of justice' that has been part of much union activity historically (Flanders, 1970). Crucially, the way it emphasises the connections between production and consumption speaks directly to the new politics of protest so ably articulated by Klein (2000). Klein shows how branded consumption in advanced economies is systematically connected to dehumanising production in impoverished economies. She shows how protests against this element of global capitalism involve making people see *the connection between production and consumption*. Green politics is also based exactly on making people see this connection. All this suggests that unions acting to civilise production and consumption simultaneously can potentially kindle the belief in trade unionism that may be crucial to break through the barriers constraining union growth in many front-line occupations.

Conclusion

Trade unions need not necessarily fade away in the service economy. But if they are to have meaning for front-line workers their strategies must be informed by the daily work experiences of these workers. As much of the rest of this book has stressed, front-line staff experience work in contradictory ways, with tensions and spaces intermingling, and with fine lines constantly to be negotiated. This means that appropriate union strategies are unlikely to fit neatly either the partnership or the organising model of union strategy, but are more likely to be based on an interplay between both approaches. This may appear to create contradictory union strategies. But contradictions are what front-line staff experience every day.

This chapter has examined a number of ways in which unions can organise and have organised themselves in order to better represent front-line staff. In the UK, while there are a few front-line occupations, such as nursing and

public welfare work, in which unionisation is high, there are a large number of front-line workplaces in which there is hardly any union presence at all. This means that unions need to seek to recruit outside established areas. They must seek to break down the frustrating 'residual industry effect' that seems to block their progress in a number of key industries. To do this they must prioritise interests that have meaning for workers in their specific contexts. This chapter has argued that a union priority must be to challenge low pay, but that traditional collective bargaining may not necessarily be the best way to accomplish this in some cases. Unions can have a meaningful role for front-line workers in challenging management imposition of feeling rules and in seeking to force management to allow front-line workers the opportunity to deliver meaningful service. Although decentralised service production sets up a daunting barrier to union organisation, there is potential for unions to use the increasing centralisation of some forms of consumption to their advantage. Unions may need to set up parallel organisational structures to deal with this simultaneous decentralisation and centralisation. Such structures may better allow the creation of periodic coalitions with consumer groups. A meaningful sustaining ideology of unionism may emerge from an overall imagery of trade unions as seeking to civilise production and consumption simultaneously. Such imagery speaks to front-line workers' roles as producers but also recognises the degree to which they have a consuming commitment.

This discussion has centred on how far unions can appeal to front-line workers. But it is also the case that unions must reach an accommodation with employers. Employers who are cooperative with trade unions may be vital in the many cases where there are decentralised workplaces and relatively high turnover levels. Apparently minor things like an employer being readily willing to include union information in the recruitment pack for newly hired staff, to give union officials easy access to workplaces and to set up an automatic 'check-off' of union membership fees may be crucial in establishing a union presence. The strategy suggested within this chapter has already within it a wide basis for accommodation with management. For instance, the aim of regulating to allow front-line workers to deliver meaningful service is one that immediately speaks to one of the key managerial discourses within the customer-oriented bureaucracy.

It is unlikely that unions will be able to push the employer's hand in all of the areas outlined within this chapter. Accommodations with employers necessarily involve trade-offs. But the overall strategy outlined here allows the possibility of trade-offs between elements in which both unions and management speak the same language.

Notes

- 1 In both the USA and the UK the main locus of overtly anti-union employment policies has been heavy industries, such as the oil and chemical industries (Kochan *et al.* 1986; Korczynski and Ritson, 2000). This is not to say, of course, that anti-union employers do not exist in service industries (for example, see Royle, 2000, on McDonald's). Further, it should be noted that many service industries are made up of small firms, and it is the case that small employers tend to be anti-union employers (Bain and Price, 1983). The point is that there are few data make the case that service employers are more anti-union than other employers simply because they are service employers.
- 2 There have been a number of attempts to unravel the unidentified industry effect in hotel and catering, for instance. As Wood (1992, p. 103) notes, 'it remains outsiders one of the great enigmas of the hotel and catering industry that workforce unionisation is low'. This enigma has been explored by Wood and Ped (1978), Johnson and Mignot (1982), MacFarlane (1982), Johnson (1983), Mars and Nicod (1984), Riley (1985), Cobble (1991) and Wood (1992).
- 3 The link between the respective organising approaches in the UK, in Australia and in the USA is clear from the explicit organisational learning that has occurred between the major union federations in the three countries (Heery, 2001).
- 4 The approaches summarised should be seen as ideal types. In practice, it is clear that no one *definitive* pattern of social relations adheres to either approach (Heery, 2000).
- 5 It makes sense where unions have established relations with large service employers, such as at Tesco (a supermarket – the largest private employer in the UK) and at Legal & General (an insurance firm), where partnership agreements appear to have helped to increase union membership density levels (Haynes and All 2001). However, such cases are the minority in most service industries.
- 6 Of course, there is the real problem of the free rider for trade unions. The national minimum wage is a public good, the consumption of which cannot be withheld from people who are not members of a trade union. However, it should be noted that the free-rider problem has always existed for trade unions regarding negotiated pay rises.
- 7 Sennett and Cobb (1973) and Rothman (1998) note that people tend to rank service occupations as having low status compared with other kinds of jobs. This situation may be altered if unions can systematically upgrade the levels of skills used in these occupations.
- 8 See Heery (2001) and Hyman (1997a) on 'wildcat cooperation' for arguments about the wider problems of trade unions using an ideology of class conflict.
- 9 Thus in the service workplaces, workers may not have so much a 'dual commitment' to union and employer (Cuevel, 1995; Murphy and Olthuis, 1995) as a tripartite commitment to customer, union and employer.
- 10 Although see Ackers and Payne (1998) for a discussion of the multiple meanings of partnership in the context of UK employment relations.