

CHAPTER ONE:  
THE DECLINE OF ORGANIZED LABOR IN THE 1980s

Statement of the Problem

Beginning in the 1980s, an apparent convergence of the industrial relations systems of capitalist democracies in North America and Western Europe was in evidence. In particular, organized labor movements in many Western nations experienced a decline in power throughout the decade. This descent was manifested in varying ways both within and across countries, but was typically indicated by decreases in union membership and density levels, an increase in the number of collective bargaining outcomes unfavorable to worker interests, and a diminished legitimacy of organized labor in the political and public arenas. Given the widespread nature of these problems, many observers posited, either explicitly or implicitly, that this "crisis" of unions was indicative of more fundamental transformations in capitalist political economies and that perhaps the continuing decline of organized labor was an inevitable trend.

A wide array of theoretical explanations have been put forth to account for the ubiquitous decline of organized labor in Western capitalist democracies that began in the 1980s. Variables or factors commonly pointed to for explaining the crisis of unions include: structural and cyclical economic forces that undermine organized labor, increased employer opposition to unions, the out-dated and/or ineffective practices of unions themselves, and cultural and attitudinal changes antithetical to the collective organization of workers. Whether examined in isolation or taken together, however, none of these factors can adequately account for union decline within or across countries. In effect, these variables have often been found to be uneven and inconsistent in their impact and/or they only offer partial insight into the whole story of union decline.

One area of promise for developing a better account of union decline concerns the role of institutional, specifically political, factors. Unfortunately, this line of inquiry has not been fully developed or systematically pursued. One reason for this failure stems from uneven theoretical development, only relatively recently addressed by sociologists and other social scientists, regarding the complex relationships between politics, industrial relations and society in general. Another reason, more methodological in nature, stems from the fact that

the role of politics in union decline has for the most part not been systematically examined in a comparative context. Overall, I feel that more rigorous and detailed comparative analysis, by highlighting points of convergence and divergence, can lend greater insight into specific relationships between politics and union decline both within and across countries.

With this research, I hope to help partially fill this lacuna regarding the sociological analysis of union decline. At the broadest level, my goal is to examine the role played by political factors in the crises of labor unions during the 1980s. My specific research objective entails investigating the impact that collective labor law policies had on union strike effectiveness in Great Britain and the United States during the 1980s. The logic by which I move from the general problem of politics and union decline to the specific objective of looking at labor law and strikes in Great Britain and the United States is briefly summarized below.

While collective labor law admittedly captures only one facet of the articulation of politics and industrial relations, and strike effectiveness is but one dimension of union power, I believe that the concrete relationship between these two variables can be uniquely indicative of the broader relationship between politics and union

decline. Specifically, since the strike is in many respects organized labor's ultimate weapon, political efforts at constraining the power of unions are likely to be directed at situations of industrial conflict. The selection of Great Britain and the United States as cases for comparison stems from a variety of considerations. The two most important are that during the 1980s both countries evidenced: 1) significant changes in the political administration of collective labor law, and 2) an undeniable decline or crisis of organized labor. Overall, I feel that this research strategy will allow for a better understanding of the role of politics in union crises during the 1980s, not only in terms of each national case, but also in terms of broader arguments concerning the universal nature of union decline in Western capitalist democracies.

### The Rise and Fall of Labor Unions

The diverse histories of organized labor movements in the capitalist democracies of Western Europe and North America are marked by one broad commonality. Specifically, in nearly all of these industrialized nation-states, trade unions and other worker organizations occupied positions of marginal legitimacy throughout the period

spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e. g. Gourevitch et al., 1984; Lange et al., 1984). Indeed, prior to the early twentieth century, for example, collective action by working people in Great Britain and the United States had been treated by dominant classes as criminal and conspiratorial, and ultimately viewed as in need of political, legal, and even violent repression (Hattam, 1993: 180-203; Woodiwiss, 1990a: 21-32). Even where labor unions had been somewhat formally accepted from relatively early on, such as in the Scandinavian countries of Sweden (e. g. Kjellberg, 1992: 88-92) and Denmark (e. g. Scheuer, 1992: 171-172), the degree to which concerted activity by workers was actually tolerated by those in power was usually contingent on the precarious fortunes of national economic markets. Typically, as domestic economic conditions deteriorated, so too did the patience that political and economic elites had for accommodating the collective demands of the working class.

In marked contrast to this earlier era, the decades immediately preceding and following World War II signaled a watershed period for many Western labor movements. Working classes in the capitalist democracies had doggedly pursued their collective struggles throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and such efforts eventually bore fruit. By mid-century, trade unions throughout Western Europe and North America

experienced remarkable increases in membership rolls, levels of popular acceptance, and bargaining and political strength. The end result of such successes was the establishment of more accommodative and more routinized relationships between the collective representatives of labor, capital, and government. In effect, these "postwar settlements" marked the institutionalization of organized labor and signaled an extended period of industrial stability for many Western capitalist democracies (Krieger, 1986: 22-38; Lange et al., 1982: 1-11).<sup>1</sup>

Despite broad similarities in terms of effect, the postwar accommodations reached between labor, capital and the state varied significantly in form across national boundaries (e. g. Goldthorpe, 1984; Hyman, 1989: 205-210). Regini (1986: 61), for example, delineates "three basic models of government-union relations and economic policy formulation" that usefully capture some of the primary differences exhibited by the postwar capitalist democracies of North America and Western Europe. The "concertation model" is a fundamentally corporatist arrangement marked by both highly centralized political and

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<sup>1</sup> These national accommodations of the postwar era have received a variety of labels. While "settlement" is a more frequently used term (e. g. Hyman, 1989; Krieger, 1986), other terms include "labor accord" (e. g. Edwards and Podgursky, 1986); "social contract" (Gourevitch et al., 1984), "class compromise" (e. g. Crouch, 1977), and "labor regime" (Edwards, 1994). I use the terms interchangeably in this study.

wage bargaining, and was characteristic of such nations as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> The model of "political isolation", found in postwar France and Italy, lacked formalized political bargaining but was nonetheless characterized by relatively centralized industrial bargaining structures. A third model, that of "pluralistic fragmentation", was manifested most clearly in Great Britain and the United States. In these two nations, organized labor had no privileged status vis-à-vis other special interest groups; rather, any union influence on government economic policy came indirectly from market power and lobbying efforts (Regini, 1986: 61-62).

Regardless of these structural differences, the labor accords of the 1950s and 1960s were virtually all predicated on Keynesian principles of political economic management (Krieger, 1986: 22-26; Lange et al., 1982: 2).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, some view the Keynesian welfare state and postwar

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<sup>2</sup> While the exact meaning of "corporatism" is frequently contested (e.g. Panitch, 1980), I feel the definition put forth by Hyman (1986: 80) sufficiently delineates the essence of the concept: "the notion of corporatism is used to denote an institutional framework within which organised economic interests are directly represented in the formulation and application of state policy."

<sup>3</sup> Not all would agree with this characterization. Jessop et al. (1986: 2-6), for example, argue that few nations were explicitly "Keynesian" and that Fordist accumulation strategies are a more common denominator for the postwar period. Krieger (1986: 22-23), in contrast, conceptualizes Keynesianism not as a narrow economic doctrine but as a "vision of society" utilizing diverse social and economic policies for purposes of interest mediation, political stabilization, and economic growth. While the argument of Jessop et al. makes a key point, I follow Krieger's usage here.

settlements as essentially indistinguishable phenomena (e. g. Altvater et al., 1986). Krieger (1986: 23) characterizes the situation as follows:

[E]verywhere these "postwar settlements" included at their core a central premise: "full" employment through governmental demand management and increased social welfare expenditure in return for relative social harmony and labor peace.

Under this arrangement, economic interventions of the state were restricted primarily to the realm of labor market management, with government job creation, the provision of social welfare services, and the setting of minimum wage standards being typical activities. More fundamental prerogatives of private capital, namely investment decision-making and managerial control of the production process were, in contrast, left relatively free from direct state regulation. In exchange for this limited and selective interference, employers and workers agreed to keep industrial and workplace conflict within institutionalized and bureaucratized boundaries.

Given the widespread economic growth of the postwar decades, mitigating and regulating industrial strife was clearly less onerous than it had been earlier in the century. In effect, the existing economic climate was readily conducive to win-win bargaining scenarios, allowing both labor and management to substantially realize many of their interests through regularized contract negotiations. In turn, the state's

interests in 'relative social harmony and labor peace' were also simultaneously met. Thus, the accommodative framework of the "Keynesian consensus" and the robust economic expansion of the postwar decades meshed together well (e. g. Altvater et al. 1986: 19-21).

Overall, then, it was in a specific historical and institutional context of class compromise, political exchange, and economic prosperity that the organized labor movements of Western capitalism initially flourished. At that particular time, many observers felt that "a virtually permanent status would attach to the postwar 'settlements'" (Goldthorpe, 1984: 317), with labor unions expected to remain integral and powerful forces within the political economies of North American and Western European nation-states. Such expectations, however, proved to be falsely optimistic. The advent of recurring global economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s served to sharply reduce the space for economic and political compromise. The end result was that as the foundations buttressing the Keynesian consensus crumbled, not surprisingly so too did the standing and power of organized labor.

## Dimensions of Union Decline

Starting in the late 1970s and accelerating markedly during the 1980s, organized labor movements in nearly all of the advanced industrialized nations began to experience a fall from grace.<sup>4</sup> This ubiquitous descent was evidenced along a variety of dimensions. For example, in terms of union membership levels, trade unions in most countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) experienced reduced rates of growth, and in many instances absolute decreases, throughout the decade of the 1980s (OECD, 1991: 100; see also OECD, 1997: 70).<sup>5</sup> This reversal of fortune is even more marked when looking at union density figures, with OECD countries as a whole exhibiting a drop from 35% in 1980 to 28% in 1988 (OECD, 1991: 102). Additional indicators of organized labor's weakening during this period include: an increasing prevalence of successful union

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<sup>4</sup> Galenson (1994), Gourevitch et al. (1984), Lange et al. (1982), Smith (1987), Troy (1990), Western (1997) and the edited volumes by Edwards et al. (1986), Jacobi et al. (1986) and Lipset (1986a) are just a few examples that reveal the range of countries in which unions experienced declining fortunes in the 1980s.

<sup>5</sup> Union membership is an often used, yet relatively crude, indicator of organized labor's power in a particular country. Union density, or the percentage of the total labor force belonging to unions, is a more robust measure. Even here, however, the precise meaning of density levels for union strength varies from country to country. Such numerical indicators do, nevertheless, provide an initial basis for uncovering cross-national trends and thus I will rely on them here (see OECD, 1991: 97).

decertification elections and/or derecognition by employers; significant collective bargaining concessions by local and national unions; reductions in the overall number of strikes as well as in the number of strikes with favorable outcomes for unions; and a substantial undermining of organized labor's national political clout, in terms of both electoral influence and policy formulation (e. g. R. Edwards, 1986; Jacobi et al., 1986; Schappi, 1984).

Though widespread, these symptoms of decline manifested themselves quite unevenly. This variability is evident across, as well as within, national boundaries. When looking separately at the six largest Western OECD countries, for example, a great deal of variation is found with regard to changes in both union membership and density levels.<sup>6</sup> Between 1980 and 1989, French unions were decimated, suffering a 41.6% decrease in membership (OECD, 1991: 101-102). Also experiencing heavy losses, though not nearly as severe as the French case, were organized labor movements in the United States, Italy and the United Kingdom, which saw declines in membership of 15.6%, 18.6% and 20.9%, respectively (OECD, 1991: 101-103). Unions in West Germany (now

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<sup>6</sup> While the seven largest OECD countries are frequently singled out for analysis, Japan is excluded from the present discussion. This is primarily because postwar Japanese industrial relations have long been characterized by an "enterprise unionism" that differs markedly from the independent trade union movements of the six large Western OECD countries (Galenson, 1986: 71).

Germany) experienced a relatively mild 3% decline in membership for the same time period. Canadian unions, on the other hand, saw membership levels increase 15.6% throughout the decade (OECD, 1991: 101-103).<sup>7</sup>

Union density figures for roughly the same time period reveal a similar degree of variation across the six countries.<sup>8</sup> France again led all other major OECD countries in the magnitude of union decline. Union density fell from 17.5% in 1980 to 9.8% in 1990, for a negative change of 44%. Unions in the United States were the next hardest hit, with density levels dropping from 22.3% in 1980 to 15.6% in 1990, a decline of approximately 30%. Unionization in Italy and the United Kingdom also significantly decreased during the decade, with each country exhibiting a relative change in density of -22.4% and -21.3%, respectively. Whereas 49.3% of the Italian civilian wage and salary workforce was unionized in 1980, only 38.8% were organized in 1990. In the United Kingdom, the density level dropped from 50.4% at the beginning of the decade to

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<sup>7</sup> Membership data comes from the OECD's Employment Outlook (1991: 100-103). Except for Canada, all figures refer to union members that are employed. Canadian figures are based on the total recorded membership, whether employed or not. This slightly inflates Canadian membership levels relative to other countries.

<sup>8</sup> The figures on union density for the six nations come from a later edition of the OECD's Employment Outlook (1994). Once again, the figure for Canada is based on the total recorded membership, not on union members employed, as in the other five countries.

39.1% by 1990. Germany experienced a more modest decline in union density, from 35.6% in 1980 to 32.9% in 1990, for a relative decline of 7.6%. While the unionization level in Canada also exhibited a decrease, it was comparatively minor in contrast to the other five countries. The density level of 35.8% in 1990 was only slightly under the level of 36.1% in 1980, a relative drop of barely 1% (OECD, 1994).

Unevenness in union decline was manifested within nations as well. Specifically, private sector unions in each of the six OECD countries suffered the most drastic decreases in membership and density levels during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s (Troy, 1990). Public sector unions, in contrast, generally maintained their positions or suffered relatively small losses.<sup>9</sup> Canada again was an exception to this latter trend, where union density in the public sector increased significantly from a level of 47.8% in 1975 to 66.2% in 1985 (Troy, 1990: 132-135). This "meteoric rise in public sector unionism" served to mask a fairly precipitous decline of nearly 20% in the private sector, where union density fell from 25.7% in 1975 to 20.7% in 1985 (Troy, 1990: 132-135).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As I hope to demonstrate in later chapters, however, there are important exceptions to this pattern (e. g. the National Union of Mineworkers in Great Britain).

<sup>10</sup> More recent data for the late 1980s in the OECD's Employment Outlook (1991) also reflect the patterns noted by Troy (1990).

## Explanations for Union Decline

To account for the marked waning of trade union power during the 1980s, sociologists and other social scientists have focused on an array of possible causal factors. To simplify matters, these numerous factors are often grouped into broader categories (OECD, 1991: 103; Robinson, 1988; see also Goldfield, 1987: 94-112). The most heterogeneous category, and one that by far has received the greatest attention from researchers, consists of economic variables, including those of both a cyclical and structural nature.<sup>11</sup> Four other frequently used categories pertain to the oppositional practices of management with respect to organized labor; the strategies and organizing activities of unions themselves; public opinion and/or cultural values regarding collective action; and the nature of national political institutions and policies. I will address each category in turn below.

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<sup>11</sup> By cyclical factors, it is meant those relatively short-term market fluctuations, such as unemployment and inflation levels, that primarily affect the bargaining position of unions. Structural factors refer to more long-term transformations, such as demographic and industrial trends, that primarily affect unionization levels as a whole (e. g. Lipset, 1986b: 422-429; Robinson, 1988: 34-35; Visser, 1988: 130).

## Economic Factors

The global economic downturn occurring in the mid-1970s is frequently depicted as a key event that signaled a sharp change of direction for organized labor movements in advanced capitalist societies (e. g. R. Edwards, 1986; Jacobi et al., 1986). Spawned by the dramatic increase in world oil prices in 1973-74, recessionary forces rippled across global markets throughout the rest of the decade and beyond. Nearly all Western nations experienced marked economic problems that contrasted sharply with the relatively lengthy period of postwar expansion (Jessop et al., 1986: 6; Krieger, 1986: 22). Slower, if not stagnating, economic growth, chronic and increased rates of unemployment, record levels of inflation, and declining rates of profit were just a few of the symptoms that were to become intransigent features of many of the capitalist nations in North America and Western Europe (Altvater et al., 1986).

While capital and labor were both adversely affected by this cyclical downturn, the latter predictably bore the brunt of the impact. It was after all working people who suffered most from fewer jobs, spiraling prices, and stagnating wage levels. Further, those fortunate enough to retain employment found it difficult to stem intensification of

the labor process as employers strove to recoup lost profits (R. Edwards, 1986: 6-7). Concomitantly:

As workers suffered, the organizations established to represent them came under increasing pressure to defend the workers' interests, and yet the unions operated in increasingly unfavorable economic circumstances (R. Edwards, 1986: 7).

Thus, with labor market conditions favoring employers, unions bargained from positions of weakness and were frequently unable to meet the now quite pressing needs of their constituents. This impotence not only made the retention of existing union members extremely difficult, but also made the organization of new workers an increasingly arduous task (Visser, 1990: 68).

Though the economic crises of the mid-1970s and the aftershocks that rippled into the next decade undeniably had a negative effect on the power of organized labor movements, the consequences of these factors were far from uniform in terms of their scope and severity. Specifically, there was evidenced an unevenness not only across different countries during the same period, but across time within single countries as well. Visser (1988), for example, examined the correlation between one cyclical variable, unemployment, and the unionization levels of ten

Western European countries.<sup>12</sup> He found that "a significant relationship between the level of unemployment and the decline in membership or density cannot be established" (Visser, 1988: 143). Galenson (1994: 24-26) came to a similar conclusion in his study of numerous industrialized and developing nations during the 1980s.

While the experiences of many countries in the 1980s (e. g. Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) offered partial support for the thesis that higher unemployment negatively affects unionization levels, Visser (1988: 143) found there were just as many exceptions to disprove the rule (e. g. Belgium, Denmark and West Germany).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, even in those countries where there appeared to have been a relationship between unemployment and density levels during the 1980s:

there was no similar correlation in the 1970s. When unemployment levels in Europe began to rise after 1973, union growth continued unabated (OECD, 1991:106).

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<sup>12</sup> The potential negative impact of unemployment on union density is two-fold. First, workers are likely to forfeit their union membership when unemployed for long periods of time. Second, high unemployment levels may have "a dampening effect on union organization among employed workers who may be fearful of employer reaction" (Galenson, 1994: 24).

<sup>13</sup> Belgium, for example, had an average unemployment rate of 10.8% between 1980 and 1989, yet experienced a negative change in union density of only 6.2%. Compared to the six largest Western OECD countries, this was the highest average unemployment rate during the decade and the lowest overall decline in union density except for Canada (-1.4%). Canada also had a relatively high unemployment rate of 9.3% for the same period (see OECD, 1991: 40).

Overall, then, the relationship between unemployment and unionization proves to be less than straightforward, with a negative correlation holding true only in particular national and historical contexts. Research has demonstrated that other business cycle factors (e. g. inflation, wage levels, profitability) also share this variable relationship to union membership and density levels (Visser, 1988: 143-151; 1990: 67-91; also see Galenson, 1994: 21-27; Goldfield, 1987: 153-179).

Visser and others (e. g. R. Edwards, 1986; Galenson, 1994: 13-19) have correctly noted that the effects of many cyclical factors on union strength frequently depend on how they mesh with the broader structural economic conditions of a particular country during a given historical period. Specifically, identical fluctuations in the business cycle may have devastating effects on unionization in one context but prove virtually inconsequential in another. Unfortunately for Western organized labor movements, the former scenario was manifested most frequently during the later 1970s and 1980s. As R. Edwards (1986: 7) argues in discussing the 1973-74 oil shocks and their aftermath, unions in capitalist democracies were significantly "challenged by the particular nature of the crisis--by the fact that the crisis involved extensive structural change as well as poorer economic performance." In effect, these more fundamental structural shifts made the impact of cyclical

economic factors all the more salient and detrimental (R. Edwards, 1986: 5).

At a broad level, for instance, labor movements were generally hindered rather than aided by the accelerated expansion of world markets and the global economic restructuring that occurred throughout the 1970s and 1980s. A pivotal consequence of globalization was the intensification of international economic competition, which served to chip away at the postwar foundations of trade union power and the accord between labor and management. This took place along two closely related fronts. On the one hand, cheaper manufactured goods from Pacific Basin countries and other newly industrializing countries resulted in increased layoffs and greater management pressures to improve domestic productivity in the core capitalist democracies. On the other hand, the same transformations in communications and transportation technology that allowed greater imports into national markets simultaneously allowed greater accessibility to cheap labor pools from developing nations. Thus, not only were the workers of the more-established capitalist democracies put into direct wage competition with their Third World counterparts, but threatened and actual capital flight from core nations to those on the periphery became increasingly commonplace.

Structural changes more “internal” to the economies of Western capitalist democracies also occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s. In particular, most developed nations experienced stagnation, and then a contraction, in the proportion of domestic manufacturing jobs available. Hence, that part of the occupational structure where unionization had traditionally been most concentrated was now decreasing in size. Additionally, many Western nations saw greater proportions of women and young people entering the labor market, resulting in a decline in the proportion of those workers most likely to join a union: older males.<sup>14</sup> A resurgence in the number of small firms in many sectors also proved unfavorable to organized labor, since in larger firms “the opportunity to initiate, join and maintain collective organisations appears to be greater” (Visser, 1988: 141).<sup>15</sup>

Many researchers have argued that a more fundamental transformation underlies all of these seemingly disparate structural changes: the post-industrial transition from a manufacturing-based economy to one dominated primarily by services. For many adherents of the “post-industrial convergence thesis”, diminishing unionization

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, this problem is as much the product of earlier union organizing practices as it is of structural economic changes. See the discussion below.

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the relationship of these structural economic factors and others to unionization, see R. Edwards (1986); Goldfield (1987: 96-112); OECD (1991: 107-118) and Visser (1990: 39-66).

levels are to be expected as the economies of advanced industrial nations progressively develop. The theoretical rationale is that organized labor is ultimately a transient phenomenon characteristic only of the early phases of capitalist development (e. g. Bell, 1960; 1973; Kerr et al., 1960; Troy, 1990, 1992). More precisely, unionism is depicted as a necessary accompaniment to the growth of manufacturing, since it serves as a countervailing force to the vagaries and inequities of capitalist industrialization. Technological development and eventual increases in productivity, however, allow for the improvement of both working and living conditions, as well as for an increased expansion of the service sector. As Goldfield (1987: 60) summarizes, for theorists of post-industrialism:

[a]s workers become more integrated into a homogenized middle class, their militancy and their organizations of struggle decline. All this is part of the natural development of capitalism...

From this perspective, then, the decline of labor unions is an occurrence that is ultimately greeted "as a sign of social progress" (Goldfield, 1987: 60).

As is the case with cyclical economic factors, structural economic factors have also been found to have variable effects on unionization levels and union power. Troy (1990), for example, himself an advocate

of the post-industrial convergence thesis, found that the shift from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy could not in itself totally explain changes in the unionization levels of ten different OECD countries.<sup>16</sup> His analysis uncovered a moderate correlation between the structural shift to a service-based economy and declining union density in the private sector for nine cases only (the Netherlands was an exception). Additionally, Troy (1990: 113) conceded that the effects of the transition were mitigated in some countries, most notably in Canada, by such factors as public policy and labor law.

Visser's analysis in the OECD Employment Outlook (1991) further undermines the case for relying solely on structural economic factors to explain union decline, particularly its marked acceleration in the 1980s. Examining eleven OECD countries<sup>17</sup>, he found that "structural drag" resulting from the transition to a service-dominated economy generally had only a minor impact on unionization levels. Most important, however, were the widespread anomalies:

In Canada, Sweden and Norway, employment shifts from manufacturing to services were stronger than in Australia,

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<sup>16</sup> The countries analyzed by Troy (1990) were Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. The time period covered was 1975 to 1985.

<sup>17</sup> The countries analyzed by Visser (OECD, 1991) were Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. The time period covered was 1970 to 1989.

the United States or the Netherlands, and yet union density rates increased. Japan and Germany stand out as the two countries with a relatively stable manufacturing sector...[y]et unionisation trends in these two countries have developed in quite different directions (OECD, 1991: 115).

These cross-national differences aside, even within countries the effects of the post-industrial transition on unionization levels varied across decades. The United Kingdom, which saw unionization levels rise between 1970-79 but decline between 1980-1989, is a key example. Visser demonstrates that other structural economic factors, specifically the demographic composition of labor markets and firm size, have the same conditional and problematic relationship to union decline. Specifically, though the many structural dimensions of the post-industrial shift have clearly had their detrimental effect on unionization, they have not done so in a consistent or overwhelming manner (OECD, 1991: 115-118). Perhaps Galenson (1994: 19) summarized the role of these types of variables best when he stated the conclusion of his quantitative analysis of approximately two dozen capitalist nation-states:

Industrial restructuring was a factor in weakening trade unions in the industrial nations but was neither the dominant nor the major cause...to assert that changes in the structure of an industry do have an impact is no explanation.

## Employer Opposition

The strategies and practices utilized by employers to resist the influence of organized labor, whether in terms of labor processes, labor markets, and/or the capitalist economy more generally, have also been targeted as playing a key role in the widespread union decline of the 1980s. For example, "capital flight", in terms of both financial reinvestment and the physical relocation of production, is perhaps the most extreme measure taken by management to free itself of a unionized workforce. This activity increased markedly during the 1980s as large corporations moved their assets, often across but also frequently within national borders, to non-union "greenfield" sites. As noted by R. Edwards (1986: 8), in addition to the much discussed regional shifts in the United States and Great Britain,

[t]he same shift has occurred in France (from the Northeast to the South), in Sweden (from the North to the Southwest), in Austria (from the "old" regions to the "new" ones), and in Italy (from the industrial North to the Adriatic belt).

In each of these cases, there was a broad movement of capital away from heavily unionized and industrialized areas towards localities where organized labor had historically weaker foundations.

However, employer opposition to unions during the 1980s usually took less drastic forms than capital flight. Practices ranged from the relatively subtle, such as preemptive employee participation programs (e. g. Hogler and Grenier, 1992: 99-124; Smith, 1987: 209-219), to the less than subtle. Examples of more blatant activities by employers to undermine organized labor include: "the use of anti-labor consulting firms, the large-scale growth of anti-union employer organizations, the rise in numerous illegal tactics, the engagement in lengthy election delays, and the lessening of the ready acceptance of union rights and prerogatives, even in traditionally unionized sectors" (Goldfield, 1987: 226). Many American observers, Marxist (e. g. Goldfield, 1987; Moody, 1988) and pluralist (e. g. Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1986; Freeman and Medoff, 1984) alike, have contended that this resurgent capitalist offensive played a pivotal role in union decline in the United States. Employer opposition has also been found to be an integral element in the waning of union influence in countries such as Great Britain and Italy (e. g. Turner, 1991: 230).

While clearly relevant, employer opposition to organized labor loses much of its utility for fully understanding the crisis of unions when placed in a comparative and historical light. In addition to the countries mentioned above, there were strong currents of managerial

anti-unionism throughout the decade in other capitalist democracies as well, such as Germany and Sweden (Turner, 1991: 230-231). And managerial hostility to unions was also quite prevalent in Canada, despite widespread assertions to the contrary (Troy, 1992: 11-14).<sup>18</sup> In all of these instances, however, employer resistance to organized labor was constrained by the power of unions themselves, state organizations, or both, and was thus a less detrimental factor than might otherwise have been the case (Turner, 1991: 230-231).

More generally, employer opposition to worker organizations has traditionally been posited by sociologists and others as a perennial and defining characteristic of industrial relations in capitalist societies. This assumption is most clearly evident in research from the Marxist tradition (e. g. Hyman, 1975), but is no less integral to the pluralist perspective. As Klein and Wanger (1985: 76) note, for example, "[r]emaining nonunion has always been a management preference." This being the case, if managerial anti-unionism is presumed to be more or less relatively constant, taken alone it cannot offer much insight into the crisis of unions in the 1980s. Importantly, other factors are also

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<sup>18</sup> Researchers comparing unionization trends in the United States and Canada often argue that there is a greater acceptance of organized labor in the latter country (e. g. Huxley et al., 1986). Yet as Troy (1992:12) pointedly challenges, the economies of both countries are to a large extent dominated by the same transnational corporations, "many of them headquartered in the USA, and why should they behave differently north of the border?"

clearly involved that allow managerial resistance to have a greater or lesser impact on organized labor at particular times and in particular places (Robinson, 1988: 36; Turner, 1991: 231).

### Union Strategies

The strategic tactics of labor organizations comprise a third set of causal factors singled out by observers as having contributed to union decline. A frequent theme is that the collective bargaining practices and institutions established in the initial postwar decades outlived their utility and became impediments that prevented labor's successful adaptation to the volatile and global markets of late capitalism. Thus in Italy, for example, the two-pronged strategy of a strong plant-level unionism by local branches and a more politically-oriented unionism by peak confederation leaders proved a formidable combination until economic crisis produced a detrimental split between rank-and-file members and the union hierarchy (Garonna and Pisani, 1986: 165-167). The situation in Germany has been similarly diagnosed, whereby the waning of union power "is explained by the 'dual system' (in which unions and works councils are legally distinct) and by the actions of

unions themselves in transferring power to firm-oriented works councils" (Turner, 1991: 8). In Great Britain, missteps by the British labor movement are also pointed to for much of the union decline in that country. These include a failure to adapt to geographic shifts in employment (Basset, 1986: 22-23) as well as an excessive militancy, evidenced most blatantly during the 1978-79 "Winter of Discontent", that soured public opinion toward unions and the Labour Party (Turner, 1991: 8). Finally, the latent dysfunctionality of "business unionism" in the United States has been extensively documented, with American labor viewed as having priced itself out of world markets (Blanchflower and Freeman, 1992); having remained attached to an antiquated adversarialism (Kochan et al., 1986); or having alienated rank-and-file members because of excessive bureaucratization (Moody, 1988).

Purportedly anachronistic collective bargaining structures aside, unions in many of the capitalist democracies are seen by some as culpable for their decreasing influence in light of their own organizing practices. Specifically, throughout much of their history, Western organized labor movements had been the exclusive bastion of white males located within large manufacturing firms. Explicit policies of sexual and racial exclusion were historically often in operation in many unions (Hodson and Sullivan, 1990: 156-157; Schur and Kruse, 1992: 90).

In addition, the predominantly white male memberships of unions were also the product of an exclusive labor market that relegated women and racial/ethnic minorities to peripheral jobs and/or the informal economy. As increasing numbers of women and racial/ethnic minorities entered the workforce, however, and as service sector employment expanded in size, unions became further out of sync with the laboring population.<sup>19</sup>

As noted by R. Edwards (1986: 6), for example:

[T]he rapidly increasing percentage of women in the labor force has drastically changed the nature of the unions' potential base of support; yet, reflecting their traditional centers of gravity, unions have continued implicitly to accept male blue-collar workers as their principal constituency.

It is thus argued by many researchers that because unions were slow in making concerted efforts to organize beyond the white and male dominated manufacturing industries, as that sector shrank, so too did the overall size and influence of organized labor.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See OECD (1991: 29-61) for figures on female and minority employment and the increasing size of the service sector in OECD countries throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>20</sup> Even when unions have reached out to workers from previously excluded groups or economic sectors, they have frequently done so on the assumption that the interests and needs of women, minority, and service sector workers are identical to those of white-male manufacturing workers. The response to such organizing efforts is understandably often less than enthusiastic (e. g. Kessler-Harris and Silverman, 1992).

While the strategies and activities of unions themselves undeniably proved detrimental to the health of organized labor, as with the variables discussed above, such factors alone cannot adequately account for union decline. Specifically, the effects of these factors exhibit too much variability both across and within countries. If dual unionism is the primary culprit in both Italy and Germany, what explains the much more marked decrease in union density in the former country (-19.7%) compared to the latter (-8.6%) between 1980 and 1988? If taking an out-dated adversarial approach to labor-management relations is the key factor, why was the rate of union density decline so different for "Type I" countries such as the United States (-28.7%), Great Britain (-18.1%) and Canada (-1.4%)?<sup>21</sup> And if union organizing practices are the pivotal problem, why has there not been a concomitant rise, or at least a mitigation of the decline, in overall density levels within countries to match the rise in unionization levels for women and other previously

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<sup>21</sup> Bamber and Lansbury (1987: 23) make a useful distinction between Type I countries, whereby industrial relations are primarily antagonistic and adversarial, and Type II countries (e. g. [West] Germany, Sweden, Denmark, etc.), whereby there is more of a cooperative "social partnership" between labor and management.

excluded groups?<sup>22</sup> Overall, then, explanations that focus primarily or exclusively on organizing or bargaining practices to account for the decline of organized labor need to also examine what factors mediate the effects of union strategies and lead to differing outcomes.

### Cultural and Attitudinal Factors

A fourth set of variables frequently examined to account for the crises of unions in capitalist democracies during the 1980s focuses on broad shifts in broad societal values and worker attitudes toward organized labor. Such explanations take a variety of forms and focus on different levels of analysis. Turner (1991: 7), for example, notes that one variant of this argument stresses the emergence of new social movements:

activist students and younger workers in industrial societies are more interested in peace, the environment, and gender and racial equality than they are in unions and traditional labor concerns...

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<sup>22</sup> While slow to change, the organizing practices of most Western labor movements did become more inclusive throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. For example, nearly all OECD countries saw significant increases in the unionization levels of women during that period (OECD, 1991: 115-117). Indeed, in the United States, African-American males are currently the group most likely to be unionized (Hodson and Sullivan, 1990: 156).

In this view, the importance of unions wanes in capitalist democracies as the politics of class are increasingly displaced by the politics of new social movements (Turner, 1991: 7).

Similar in breadth is Lipset's (1986b) contention that differing national value systems best explain the changing fortunes of organized labor. Across countries, for example, Canadian unions were seen as faring much better during the 1980s than their American counterparts because the former country had a strong collectivist tradition which meshes well with the ethos of organized labor. The more individualistic values of the United States, it is argued, were never really conducive to collective organization. In fact, for Lipset (1986b: 445) the growth of unionism in the United States was essentially an anomaly that resulted from the Great Depression, an "unprecedented event [which] undermined traditional American beliefs" and allowed for the development of the class-based movements of the New Deal era. The resurgence of the culture of individualism in the United States thus turned public opinion away from unions and led to their decline.

In addition to changes at the macro-cultural level, more immediate and micro-level factors have also been targeted as affecting worker attitudes toward collective action and organization. Bassett (1986: 27-28), for example, notes how the organization of high-tech work

"exaggerates individualism." The high-tech worker typically works alone, is singularly responsible for task completion, and is paid based on personal achievement. The worker consequently develops a highly individualistic orientation, and it is "[h]ardly surprising, then, that the level of trade unionism is low" in the high-technology sector (Basset, 1986: 28). As this sector increases in importance relative to other sectors, overall unionization rates can be expected to decrease.

Another attitudinal explanation for the crisis of unions focuses on how younger workers no longer appreciate the importance of collective labor organizations. As Hodson and Sullivan (1990: 162) elaborate:

Ironically, one factor that has produced a decline in unions is their very success in securing benefits for workers through collective bargaining, social welfare legislation, and spillover effects on nonunionized jobs. It is easy for workers to forget how hard it was to win these benefits.

In essence, the fruits of past labor struggles are taken for granted by present generations of the working class, making it increasingly difficult to recruit younger workers into unions (e. g. Basset, 1986: 31). An often heard refrain, one that echoes post-industrial convergence arguments, is that while unions were once necessary to improve working conditions, they have now become obsolete institutions in the political economies of advanced industrial nations.

Closer examination of arguments that single out attitudinal and cultural factors as the primary precipitators of union decline reveals several weaknesses. At an empirical level, for example, studies of worker attitudes in the United States show that while younger workers may have a negative perception of union leaders, they express a preference for unionization equal to or exceeding that of older workers (Freeman and Medoff, 1984: 227; Goldfield, 1987: 225). At a more theoretical level, many arguments about the importance of broad cultural values contain glaring logical problems and inconsistencies. Lipset, for instance, placed Canada between the more individualistic United States and the more collectivist Great Britain in terms of its national value system (Lipset, 1986b: 442), yet the magnitude of union decline in each of the latter two countries greatly exceeded that of the former. Lipset further weakens his own argument when he discusses how the economic context of the Great Depression "undermined traditional American beliefs" (Lipset, 1986b: 445). The utility of focusing solely on cultural values to understand the problems of organized labor is placed in doubt if economic conditions at times override what is posited as the principal independent variable.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For further criticisms of Lipset's theory on union decline, see Robinson (1988: 38-39).

## Political and Institutional Factors

A fifth set of variables deemed to have explanatory potential with regard to union decline during the 1980s focuses on the influence of political and related institutional forces on industrial relations outcomes. In particular, researchers from a variety of theoretical and disciplinary quarters have pointed to the effects that such factors as public policy, labor law, and institutions for interest representation have had on the position of organized labor within democratic capitalist societies (e. g. OECD, 1991: 118; Robinson, 1988). Freeman and Medoff (1984: 242-243), for example, though giving causal priority to the interests and strategies of employers and unions in their explanation of union decline, note that legal environments clearly affect unionization levels as well. They cite as evidence cross-national variations in union membership between the United States and Canada, each having markedly different labor law systems, and intra-national unionization differences within the United States, specifically between those states having "right-to-work" laws and those without. Freeman and Medoff nevertheless fail to extensively develop this line of thought. A similar problem occurs in the structural economic theory of union decline put

forth by Troy (1990; 1992). Although Troy (1992: 16-23) also recognizes that differences in public policy are important for understanding cross-national differences in unionization, again specifically in reference to the United States and Canada, he never systematically incorporates this insight into his particular version of post-industrial convergence theory.

Other explanations of union decline, specifically those emanating out of the more orthodox recesses of liberal and Marxist social science, while explicitly including political and institutional factors in their theoretical cache of relevant variables, nevertheless tend to give the activity of state managers, labor law, or public policy insufficient attention when it comes to actual empirical analysis. Perhaps it is more often the case that political influences are treated as being of secondary importance to union decline, with state actors being the reactors to, rather than the initiators of, transformations in industrial relations. Thus, liberal pluralists like Kochan et al. (1986) single out structural shifts in the global economy and the corresponding strategic responses of employers and unions as the primary factors contributing to the problems of organized labor in the United States and Europe (1986: 3-4). As for the impact of the political sphere, Kochan et al. (1989: xii) view decreasing levels of unionization in the 1980s as occurring "very much" in "a 'pre-public policy' period of experimentation, or trial and error, on

the part of labor and management, acting largely without an active government role."

Coming from the Marxist theoretical tradition, Edwards and Podgursky (1986) also attribute union decline, specifically in the United States, primarily to structural economic change and the activities of employers and unions. In this account, the political institutions and practices of the postwar labor accord are recognized as having had the effect of preventing unions from "responding in a creative and flexible way to the crisis they face[d]" (Edwards and Podgursky, 1986: 49). The state's New Deal institutions, viewed by Edwards and Podgursky as secondary byproducts of labor and capital's postwar compromise, are consequently deemed outdated and characterized as having exacerbated the already extant crisis of U. S. unions. It is subsequently deemed to be the state's responsibility to respond with new institutions that accommodate the transformations in industrial relations brought about by others. Overall, then, like Kochan et al., Edwards and Podgursky treat the state less as an active agent and more as a passive reactor within industrial relations systems.

### Possibilities for Further Research

In his own fairly extensive review of the literature on union decline, Robinson (1988) provides two important suggestions for further research in the area. The first of these is primarily conceptual in nature and urges sociologists and other researchers to “take more seriously the causal importance of political factors” (Robinson, 1988: 42). Robinson found that most accounts to date were logically flawed and/or offered only partial insight into why organized labor experienced crises in a wide array of capitalist democracies during the 1980s. At the same time, the one area that seemed to offer the most promise for a more fruitful explanation, the role played by political institutions, was being sorely neglected or received only minimal attention from social scientists.

By the early 1990s, many researchers on union decline finally began to take Robinson’s first recommendation to heart. As Strauss (1991: 73) observed:

Indeed, there appears to be increasing agreement that differences in government policies provide the main explanation for why, during the 1980s, union density increased or held steady in some countries (e. g., in Scandinavia) but fell dramatically in others (e. g., the U.S., UK, and Japan).

While a greater focus on the role of political factors in union decline was surely a welcome occurrence, this belated attention did present difficulties. Of primary importance was the fact that industrial sociologists, and sociologists in general, had long avoided systematically theorizing the nature of the political realm. Thus, while motivated to turn their collective attentions toward the state and related institutions in order to understand the crisis of organized labor, many researchers often did so with inadequate characterizations of the political sphere and its concrete articulation with other social arenas (Frenkel, 1991: 49; Howell, 1995: 163). Throughout the 1990s, however, there have been marked developments in the sociological analysis of political institutions (e. g. Immergut, 1998; Jessop, 1990; Steinmetz, 1999a; Steinmo et al, 1992). A few researchers of union decline (e. g. Turner, 1991; Western 1997) have already drawn on these developments, and I will address them in greater detail in Chapter Two as I lay out the theoretical framework that guides the present study.

Robinson's (1988) second recommendation for more productive research into union decline pertains more to methodological than theoretical issues. Robinson (1988: 49) counsels that along with a greater emphasis on the role of political variables, there also needs to be a greater "commitment to detailed cross-national comparisons." He

specifically asserts that comparative analyses will assist in the further delineation of how various political institutions were precisely articulated with the crises of organized labor in the 1980s. Robinson additionally contends that such comparisons will lend further insight into the purported “transnational” character of union decline.

The need for more detailed comparative analyses of union decline is certainly pressing. Many previous investigations, for example, while addressing more than one nation, ultimately compare countries at a very superficial level. The studies by Troy (1990), Visser (1988), and Western (1997) are cases in point. While examining unionization levels in a number of democratic capitalist societies, each study only assesses general trends common to each case (e. g. percentage employed in manufacturing, unemployment rates, and so on). Aside from these broad-level statistical comparisons, neither study provides much insight into the concrete manifestations and contextual nuances of union decline within a particular country, let alone into more detailed facets of the differences and similarities between countries. In effect, despite serving as useful overviews of the scope and key dimensions of union decline, works such as those of Troy, Visser, and Western are best viewed as necessary prologues to more systematic and more fruitful comparative research.

Irrespective of their various weaknesses, however, the aforementioned studies do represent sincere efforts at true comparative research. The large majority of other investigations into the waning of Western organized labor movements have unfortunately been comparative only in a nominal sense. Still others have not even made the attempt at cross-national analysis. The comments of Strauss (1991: 75), though directed at a wider, yet related, body of research, are particularly useful here:

To date most of what has been called comparative industrial relations has consisted either of studies of single countries or of parallel description. In the typical comparative book one chapter deals with Britain, another with France, and so on.

While explicit single-nation case studies of union crises (e. g. Goldfield, 1987; McIlroy, 1988; and Smith, 1987) should not be taken to task for failing to accomplish what they never intended, those works claiming to be comparative analyses of union decline deserve closer scrutiny.

Indeed, several of the studies reviewed earlier in this chapter are essentially examples of 'parallel description', whereby country-specific chapters on the situation of national organized labor movements are tied together by a brief introduction and the occasional concluding summary. The collections on union crisis by Edwards et al. (1986) and Jessop et al. (1986) are premiere examples of this type of comparative

research. The edited volume by Lipset (1986a) more or less falls into this camp as well. Ultimately, given the popularity of this type of “cross-national” research, it is reasonable to argue that the problem of union decline in many contemporary capitalist democracies has in fact not yet received sufficient and systematic comparative attention.

With the above caveats in mind, the general focus of my research can now be broadly summarized. To avoid past mistakes and to further explore promising paths already begun, I used the suggestions provided by Robinson (1988) for more productive research into the nature of union decline in the 1980s as my primary guidelines. Thus, at a broad level I aim 1) to focus on the role of particular political factors in the crises of organized labor during the 1980s, and 2) to examine such political factors and union crises utilizing a more systematic comparative framework. Overall, I will more fully explicate the precise methodological rationale underlying this research in Chapter Three. Before I do this, however, I first turn my attention to the theoretical issues involved in the sociological analysis of politics and the state.