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Sylvie Contrepois, Steve Jefferys*

Founding Values or Instrumentalism? Comparing Bank Sector Trade Union Activism in France and Britain**

This Franco-British research reports on interviews concerning CFDT-Banque and UNIFI union activists' values and trajectories towards activism. The authors find some national differences but few generational differences. In both banking sector unions the younger union conference participants largely share the same values of social justice as the older activists, and have similar trajectories from being non-members to becoming activists. The authors criticise the argument that as the contemporary European trade union movement has become more bureaucratised and remote from the workers so its activists are likely to have become increasingly instrumental and individual in their union involvement.

Wertbasierte oder instrumentelle Orientierung? Vergleich von Bankgewerkschaftern in Frankreich und Großbritannien

Anhand von Interviews mit Aktivisten französischer und britischer Bankengewerkschaften (CFDT-Banque und UNIFI) berichtet diese französisch-britische Untersuchung über Wertvorstellungen und Perspektiven des gewerkschaftlichen Aktivismus. Die Autoren finden einige nationale, aber keine generationenspezifische Differenzen. In beiden Sektoren haben die jüngeren Aktivisten ähnliche Vorstellungen über soziale Gerechtigkeit wie ihre älteren Kollegen. Zurückgewiesen wird die Ansicht, dass die gegenwärtige europäische Gewerkschaftsbewegung sich bürokratisiert und von den Arbeitnehmern entfremdet habe und dass die Aktivisten in ihrer gewerkschaftlichen Betätigung zunehmend instrumenteller und individueller eingestellt seien.

Key words: **Trade unions, activism, values, membership, bank sector, France, Britain**

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Why become active in a trade union today? In recent European research this question has only rarely been referred to, with discussion focusing instead on the extent of and reasons for union decline (Hoffman and Waddington 2001, Visser 2002). But the question is a key one. If unions do not have a continuous supply of grass roots activists to keep their voluntary organisations running, then even were members to join, the unions could lose the capacity to provide meaningful local employee representation. However, if unions do not have local activists then it appears unlikely that they can continue to recruit. In the UK local representatives directly recruit as high a proportion as 37% of new members (Waddington and Whitson 1997), while union activists were found to be equally crucial in a qualitative study in a traditional engineering, paper and printing employment zone just south of Paris (Contrepois 2003).

When the question of activists is referred to, it is dealt with largely in terms of a discussion of their training and vocational needs. Some commentators even take it for granted that since the unions have been entirely integrated into the dominant socio-economic system those who become active do so for individual motives concerning the promotion of their own skills and interests. Thus in France there is one ten-year-old study of union-leavers in the 1980s that drew on survey evidence to conclude that over time activists were becoming increasingly instrumental, and were tending to adopt roles that would enable them to advance their individual careers (Labbé and Croisat 1992). Its conclusions fall strictly within the argument advanced by several French authors that French trade unionism has become 'institutionalised' (Rosanvallon 1988). This argument notes that unions have become neo-state institutions, are often part publicly-funded, and that their leaderships are often distanced from the rank-and-file. In an era of growing flexibility and insecurity in the workplace this 'bureaucratisation' at the top of the unions is compounded by a reality at the bottom where even the basic task of providing union information is often rendered difficult (Bourdieu 2000). Certain observers go further and no longer consider the trade unions as organisations that embody a mission seeking substantial progress for the whole of society (Touraine 1996). This bleak assessment of the trade union movement is not exclusive to France. Thus the Belgian author Corrine Gobin (1997) notes critically that unions have been largely reduced either to negotiating redundancy terms or, through their co-option into the policy-making processes of the European Union, to facilitating the transmission of neo-liberalism. While it is rare that they are even mentioned, several of these analyses share an un-stated assumption that union activists are also becoming less independent of the employer.

In contrast over the past few years several studies that the current authors have conducted separately and jointly in France and Britain lead us to question the suggestion that time is running out for independent employee representation (Contrepois 2003, Jefferys *et al* 2001, Thornley *et al* 1997). Those activists we have studied still tend to refer to distinctive and independent cultures of struggle, often including anti-capitalist elements. Although the content of their activism has been significantly modified by the evolutions that have taken place in the role of representatives and in union strength, our findings suggest that activists' guiding

motivations have changed surprisingly little, being still focused around the demand for social justice.

This paper presents findings arising from a comparative research project where we interviewed activists participating at successive conferences of two bank unions: UNIFI in Britain and the CFDT-Banque in France. Five conferences were covered between 1999 and 2002.¹ The evidence discussed here is largely based on face-to-face interviews with 33 UNIFI and 39 CFDT activists. These are supported by telephone interviews with a further 32 CFDT activists and questionnaire surveys of those attending the conferences. While partially building upon our quantitative survey data we deliberately focus here on our qualitative data since, arguably, this approach offers more in terms of understanding activism as a complex social process that embraces both attitudes and experiences. Most recent studies that touch upon activism largely rely upon snapshot survey data (Pilemalm *et al* 2001, Bacon and Blyton 2001, D'Art and Turner 2002). However good, they tend not to recognise their limits, something Visser (2002: 425) does when in discussing the importance of social custom theory for explaining trade union decline he admits that 'we lack individual – attitudinal and experience – comparative data across countries'.

The paper is in four parts. It first describes the banking sector in the two countries and presents a profile of the activists interviewed and surveyed. It then attempts to make sense of the activists' motivations from two complementary points of view: their belief systems (Part 2) and how they were recruited (Part 3). In these discussions we are particularly interested in whether there are generational differences between activists. In the fourth concluding part we will briefly address the importance of presenting a comparative dimension.

1. The banking sector

We selected the banking sector for two main reasons. First, it is the market-oriented business activity where across Europe the proportion of white-collar workers who are union members is consistently higher than elsewhere (Luton 2001). This makes it a particularly appropriate sector in which to investigate the processes forming workplace activists: unlike certain other parts of the 'post-modern' economy, it actually does have activists. In both France and the UK there are long histories of bank union organisation – that facilitate inter-generational comparisons – and of struggles against a powerful managerial paternalism that only finally and reluctantly ceded pride of place to more sophisticated human resource management techniques in the 1980s in the UK and in the 1990s in France (Morris 1986, Siwek-Pouydesseau 1996).

Second, we chose banking because it is a sector undergoing huge changes both in terms of the focus of the 'banking product' and in how work and remuneration are organised. The old forms of limited competition between banks, the servicing relationship to other sectors of the economy, the personal relations with clients, along with the personnel management systems and collective industrial relations are all being turned upside down. There is an increasing emphasis upon the individualisation of the

¹ Three annual UNIFI conferences and two triennial CFDT-Banque congress.

employee-bank pay relationship (Dressen *et al* 1996). This context provides major challenges to the unions and to the processes forming individual union activists.

The consequences of the broadening of the banking product range and of intensifying competition in a period of economic growth and falling unemployment from 1996 through to 2001 meant that total retail bank employment in both countries over this period was roughly stable. Yet this stability did not mean employees felt free of risk. What happened was that as new jobs were created in call centres or in financial advice, they were lost in other parts of the sector. Thus despite sectoral employment climbing a little above its 1996 low by 2001, both countries saw redundancies affecting substantial numbers of workers and the industry continues to shed any remaining reputation for job security.

The activists we researched in the two countries had their hands full, not only with important changes in the sectoral labour market, but also with major adjustments in management industrial relations strategies. The unions they came from were the *CFDT-Banque* in France and UNIFI in the UK. These are similar in that they are the unions with the largest memberships in the retail banking sectors of their respective countries. Overall trade union density in French retail banking has been estimated at 14.1% (Siwek-Pouydesseau 1996: 159), higher than the French national average of 9.1% in 1997 (Andolfatto 1998). But although this is much lower than the 53% level of density in British banks in 1994 (Luton 2001), the real influence of UNIFI and the *CFDT-Banque* is arguably much closer, making the comparison more relevant. Thus UNIFI secured a 43% minority vote in favour of strike action over pay at the NatWest Bank in 1999 (UNIFI 2000), while the *CFDT* jointly with the other unions was able to secure national one-day stoppages by 21% of the AFB workforce in February 1998 and by 31.5% in November 1999 (employers' figures reported in *Le Monde*, 30.11.99, 2.12.99).

As a result of mergers with two staff associations UNIFI's total membership rose from 110,000 in 1998 to about 150,000 in 2001, when it reported recruiting a record 20,000 new members while simultaneously losing 25,000 in the same year (UNIFI 2002). The union thus dwarfs the *CFDT Banque's* approximately 20,000 members. But the two unions' actual totals of *activists* (defined as workplace members who participate in union organisation and activities) are not dissimilar. For the *CFDT Banque* a rough estimate of the numbers of activists with positions of 'responsibility' is 1,000-1,250, 5-6% of its approximately 20,000 members.² This proportion is very close to the 5% of the total UNIFI membership who were 'workplace representatives' in a national survey of UNIFI members carried out in 1999 (UNIFI 1999). Yet in UNIFI, holding a position of 'workplace representative' usually means much less than it does in France. In the UK 'union reps' or 'safety reps' often do not attend union meetings and in banking they were little more likely to have voted Labour in 1997 than were ordinary members. On the basis of the definition of an activist as someone who has some responsibility *and* who has attended a union meeting within the last year, a

² *Guy Nortier interview*, Paris, 29.9.00. He was the seconded, full-time national *CFDT* representative responsible for negotiations with the French retail bank employers' association, the AFB.

reasonable estimate for *UNIFI* is around 2% of total current membership or about 3,000 individuals in total, an estimate that is of the same order as the combined activist body of the five French retail banking unions.³

Who were the activists we focus on in this paper? We interviewed 104 while a total of 166 *CFDT* congress participants and 188 *UNIFI* conference participants also completed eight-page questionnaires in 1999 and 2002.⁴ The 33 *UNIFI* interviewees worked for 14 different companies, while the 71 *CFDT-Banque* activists came from ten.⁵ As would be expected at national union conferences, a majority had worked for 20 years or more in the same firm. All of them carried out some of their union work paid for by their employer: half (a higher proportion among the *CFDT* activists) actually did union work for more than half their employed working hours. Table 1 describes the gender and ages of the different activists we interviewed. Reflecting the gendered composition of the conferences (40% women at *UNIFI*, 15% at *CFDT*) we interviewed more men (64) than women (39), but the 48 interviewees aged less than 45 were deliberately selected to ensure we had a balance of different generations.

Table 1: Gender and ages of 104 banking union activists interviewed, 1999-2002

	CFDT-Banque			UNIFI			
	1999	2002	Total	1999	2000	2002	Total
Men	39	10	49	4	2	9	15
Women	12	10	22	6	5	7	18
18 – 24 years	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
25 – 34 years	4	2	6	3	3	1	7
35 – 44 years	15	8	23	2	2	6	10
45 – 54 years	24	9	33	4	0	3	7
55+ years	2	1	3	0	1	5	6
No response	6	0	6	0	1	0	1
<i>Total</i>	51	20	71	10	7	16	33

Focusing on union conference participants enables us to make an international comparison of key union activists, of the people who comprise the two ‘activist elites’. These activists are the union members who are interested enough to commit several days of their time to their national union, they come from the better organised workplaces and usually work for banks that continue to pay them while they are at

³ In addition to the *CFDT-Banque* there are four other unions with a national membership in French retail banking: the CGT, FO, the CFTC and the second largest centre, the SNB-CGC. Today the SNB not only recruits among the managers who were its original core, but also among non-managerial staff.

⁴ The response rates were approximately the same – roughly one third of all participants, and about half of the activists who were not employed full-time by the union or by a Works Council (in France).

⁵ The larger total for the *CFDT-Banque* is explained by 32 telephone interviews conducted after the 1999 Lille Congress.

conference. Our comparison, then, is of those who collectively provide each of the two unions' organisational and ideological backbones.

What these activist elites believe, and how they came to union activity are issues that we considered are best analysed through the semi-structured interviews we conducted and through subsequent analysis of this very rich qualitative data. Our analytical approach involved a close reading of the transcriptions by the French and British authors (who both carried out interviews in the 'foreign' language with activists in the other country). We looked for responses to certain open questions, and for wider internal evidence of the interviewees' attitudes to union purpose, union adhesion, the employers and to their fellow employees. Our results allow some international comparison, but by further analysing the responses by gender and age we should also be able to detect the difference, if any, that these factors make.

2. Union commitment: A matter of values?

To try and understand these activists' value systems – how they see the world and their relationship to it – we posed two open questions and one closed question (where we physically showed them a list) towards the end of interviews that lasted an average of 45 minutes, but ranged from 30 minutes to an hour and a half. The questions were:

1. What do you like the most about being an activist, and what do you like the least?
2. What values does trade unionism best represent for you?
3. Which of these values do you find most important? *Solidarity, Fairness / Fair Treatment, Working with management for the benefit of all, Working for justice and rights, Fighting back / standing up to management, or Getting the best for the workers.*⁶

Qualitative analysis is about interpretation. At one level our interpretative analysis reflected the triangular distinctions advanced by Hyman (1996), where he posited the presence within European trade unionism of three ideological poles, 'market', 'class' and 'social integration' trade unionism. Activists' values are likely to reflect a combination of 'labour market' pragmatism with 'class hostility' and a strong belief in 'social rights'. At another level we were just looking inductively for patterns among the different discourses we analysed. The outline framework of meanings and associated words that informed our coding of core values is presented in Table 2.

Among the UNIFI activists there was general agreement that the common aims, purposes or values of trade unionism (and our respondents used these three terms interchangeably) are to 'Get the best for the members', through establishing 'Fairness' at work and ensuring that 'justice and rights' are maintained (Jefferys 2002). Where disagreement exists it is over the means: some suggest an open resistance strategy of 'fighting back'; others a collaborative strategy of 'working with management for the benefit of all'; while a third, more political, group suggest that showing and practising 'solidarity' with others is a more effective approach.

⁶ This third question followed on from earlier work on bank workers' attitudes to job change and the role of their union (Thornley *et al* 1997), and a pilot series of interviews where these six 'values' had been repeatedly signalled as important for a group of British bank worker trade unionists

Table 2: Distinguishing concepts of values and means among union activists

Core union values or purposes	Means to achieve values or purposes	Words used
Getting the best for the workers		<i>Not to forget your members, trying to protect their interests, trying to improve pay and conditions for all members</i>
Justice and rights		<i>Human dignity, opposing injustice, campaigning for their rights, justifiable grievance, should there be a problem</i>
Fairness		<i>Everyone should be treated equally, equality to staff and equal opportunities</i>
Democracy and citizenship		<i>The capacity to represent people within an emancipatory conception of the world, the possibility of letting people take more control of their lives, emancipation, democracy... fair rules</i>
	Solidarity	<i>We're all in the same boat and to the extent that is possible should help each other, united front, knowing that you've got support, stand with my colleagues... helping the members, defending the weakest</i>
	Fighting back / challenging management	<i>Run-ins with management, you've got to stand up for yourself, we took them head on, defending people, struggling together</i>
	Working with management	<i>When a union works properly it is an advantage to both management and employees</i>

In France, by contrast, the first and strongest response was that trade unionism represented '*solidarité*'. Solidarity has been analysed as having three levels: group, wage earner or instrumental solidarity and political solidarity (D'Art/Turner 2002). But only six out of 33 UNIFI activists referred to solidarity compared to 26 out of 39 face-to-face *CFDT-Banque* interviewees, confirming a clear national difference. The term was used across its full range of meanings. One illustrates the first social level:

It's the solidarity you must have with others, the terrific camaraderie, the real warmth you find inside the union... (short pause). More especially perhaps within the *CFDT*, I don't know. But me, as far as I'm concerned, I found myself in a big family, and I can say that because I could test it myself. When my husband died a year ago, well, the union really helped me get over it.. so, lots of human warmth, lots, lots.(Woman, 40, *Crédit du Nord*, *CFDT*)

The UNIFI activists were more likely to stress the somewhat more instrumental level of seeing solidarity as a means by which the strong can help the weak:

Sticking up for the weak against the strong. Certainly sticking up for, well workers who as individuals would be very poorly placed to fight their own battles with their employers. And being able to give them some kind of support so that they can take on the employers who, after all, are organised; and giving the employees some kind of organisational back-up and helping them to fight their battles. So basically it's sticking up for the little guy is the main thing I would say. (Man, 46, *Xansa*, UNIFI)

The political meaning of solidarity can be seen in this wide-ranging answer from a CFDT activist:

Solidarity, because it's the foundation of union organisation that defends the whole working class. So it's that idea, but not simply on the defensive, it is also about the necessity of defending the working class by political action as well as even in daily activities including physical help in cases of distress. I think this is something absolutely basic in trade union organisations. (Man, 40s, CIC, CFDT)

This reflects the Catholic origins of the CFDT confederation, but also the strong emphasis in French trade unionism on its French Revolutionary republican origins and on '*solidarité-fraternité*' (Launay 1990:15; Jefferys 2003). Rather than being used essentially as a means to achieving other purposes, *solidarité* is seen by the CFDT activists as a fundamental value in itself.

In common with the UNIFI activists the two other most cited CFDT activist values were 'justice and rights' and 'getting the best for the workers'. For us this interviewee from the still-nationalised French Savings Bank is prioritising justice and rights:

Well, in first place I'd put justice, because, well, more and more, in the workplace the employers are picking those people who please them rather than those who are possibly the best. But OK, you keep quiet, you don't say anything. That's the way the wind's blowing, as they say. (Man, 49, Caisse d'Epargne, CFDT)

The link between unfairness and injustice and the need to oppose both was repeated often:

The most important values... Dignity, dignity at work. Your right to be heard, to be treated like an adult and fairly, has got to be the main value of trade unionism... Fairness is probably what I think, and justice. I can't stand injustice, which is how I got involved in this, I can't stand injustice. (Woman, 41, Lloyds TSB, UNIFI)

Both French and British interviewees drew the link between trade unionism and the collective possibility it provides of giving employees a democratic voice:

Democracy. The collective voice. Strength in numbers. The education I think which it provides. (Man, 40, National Australia Group, UNIFI)

For the activists of both countries the challenge to deliver justice, rights, fairness and democracy constitutes a fairly clear world-view: the world of work can be unfair, unjust and may discriminate against or exclude the individual; a union is necessary to provide a form of 'counter-weight' to the employers in order to improve everyone's working conditions and dignity. There was much less unanimity, however, about how that 'counter-weight' should be exercised, and there were greater divergences between the UNIFI and CFDT activists on the means to achieve their goals than there were on the core values themselves.

The two ways of achieving trade union purposes or core values were quite clear alternatives: working with or resisting management. One activist made the distinction between ends and means explicit: 'challenging management isn't an end in itself, it's a means of getting somewhere' (man, 33, Crédit Mutuel de Bretagne, CFDT). An endorsement of 'working with management' was quite common among the UNIFI interviewees (10), but very rare (3) among the CFDT-Banque. The UNIFI position

was in part one that simply acknowledged the balance of forces, as these two NatWest activists observed:

I think you get no-where by sort of going and bashing your head against the management and saying, “We want this, we want that”. You’ve got to work with this, because in the end, it’s all compromise. You know, we’re never going to get everything that we want, but then again the management shouldn’t get everything that they want. (Man, 37, NatWest, UNIFI)

I mean now it’s working with the management. I think that’s now a change from what it used to be. We’ve got partnership agreements in NatWest which works mainly for the employer when it suits them but at least if we know about things early on we can act on them accordingly. (Woman, 37, NatWest, UNIFI)

This logic of a necessary compromise is also assumed by the French face-to-face interviewees who endorsed ‘working with management’:

It’s really, really very important as well to know how to work with the employers so there’s for a good result for everyone, you know. That’s right, you know? Sometimes it’s easy to say no to hastily, when, with the management, it’s important, from time to time, to know also when to make concessions, so that you don’t only think that it’s only you that has the answers to the system you’re working in. (Man, 55, Caisse d’Epargne, CFDT)

Yes, why not? To test, how do you say it, ‘dialoguing’ or ‘working with management’ – with loads and loads of quotation marks around them. That is to say not selling your soul, but if you can deal effectively with them, and negotiate in the interests of the employees and only in their interests and in defence of their jobs... yes, then OK, ‘negotiate’, ‘negotiate’ ... But I still use quotation marks everywhere (laughs). (Woman, CFDT)

The alternative approach of seeing ‘struggle’ as a basic approach of trade unionism (which we created through combining those responses that used language such as ‘standing up to’ or ‘defending’ or ‘class’) was much more present among the whole group of CFDT interviewees (31 out of 72) than among the UNIFI ones (3 out of 33). There is another real difference here between the UNIFI and CFDT activists, yet it is possibly less than appears at face value. For among the 39 *face-to-face* CFDT interviewees ‘struggle’ was only volunteered spontaneously by two interviewees in response to the open question about values, while as we show in Table 3, *‘Fighting back / standing up to management’* was selected by 16 among the 86 UNIFI and by 10 among the 82 CFDT 2002 conference survey respondents. Our inference is that both unions’ activists are less ready to volunteer sharing the ‘struggle’ value in face-to-face interviews than they are when they are asked a closed question in a telephone interview or in a questionnaire. When the issue is posed, however, significant proportions of activists from both countries appear to still hold on to a world-view that includes struggle against the employer (and their class).

Our analysis of the qualitative data largely confirms the large international measure of agreement about two basic values of trade unions shown in our survey question in Table 3, where two-thirds of the respondents in both unions select ‘getting the best for your members’ and ‘working for justice and rights’. The interview data, however, additionally points to the contingent relationship between these core or basic values and the means used to secure them. Thus for the UNIFI interviewees, where the tactic is most common, ‘Working with management’ is clearly seen as being a necessary process imposed by the contemporary power realities they face on a daily basis.

Table 3: Which three of the following trade union values best represents what trade unionism means for you? UNIFI and CFDT-Banque surveys, 2002

2002 Union Conferences	UNIFI		CFDT	
	Nos	%	Nos	%
Fairness/fair treatment	71	80.7	39	46.4
Getting the best for your members	61	69.3	55	65.5
Working for justice and rights	58	65.9	58	69.0
Working with management for the benefit of all	27	30.7	10	11.9
Solidarity with others	26	29.5	68	81.0
Fighting back/standing up to management	16	18.2	10	11.9
<i>TOTAL OBS.</i>	86		82	

By analysing our face-to-face interviewees responses to the values questions by age as well as by union, we are also able to loosely compare the ‘older’ generation (generally those who joined or became active in the 1970s) with ‘younger’ ones (whose activism dates from the 1980s or 1990s). Such an analysis confirms that the older activists in both unions are more likely to emphasise ‘*struggle*’, and less likely to mention ‘*working with management*’. This finding could provide support to the thesis that activists formed in the 1980s and 1990s (particularly those in UNIFI) are moving from a *resistance* to a *partnership* culture. Yet the overall distribution of core values and advocacy of means to achieve those objectives suggests an essential continuity of beliefs and motivation: three-quarters of all the values referred to by both the older and the younger activists were either the two shared core values or the solidarity value or means.

3. Membership and activism

An analysis of the processes leading to their activism sheds more light on the continuities and discontinuities in the motivations of today’s activists. Activists in both countries are now broadly defined as those union members who regularly attend union meetings and hold representative positions within the workplace, and who generally also take on local, area or national union responsibilities. The activists we interviewed certainly corresponded to this profile: the French activists we surveyed at the 1999 CFDT conference at Lille, for example, held an average of 3.2 representative responsibilities each, while at the 2002 UNIFI conference at Blackpool each British activist averaged 3.5.

How, though, did these conference-participating activists arrive at taking up these responsibilities? What are the national or generational factors at work? We consider first how the activists joined and then how they took on their responsibilities.

Joining the union

The process by which individuals join a union involves both individual, personal factors, as well as contextual employment issues (Visser 2002, Contrepois 2003). As a result union recruitment is a highly complex area of study.

To analyse the activists’ answers about how they joined the union we use the analytical framework developed by Labbé and Croisat (1992), where they

distinguished between ‘externally-determined’ factors, ‘internally-determined’ and ‘utilitarian’ or what are better described as ‘individual defence’ reasons (Contrepois 2003: p 51 – 70).

‘Internally-determined’ reasons were by far the most common reasons given by the bank union activists we interviewed. These were largely about a belief in trade unionism. ‘I always believed in trade unionism’ was a common response (Woman, 37, RBS-NatWest, UNIFI; Man, 47, Xansa, UNIFI). Others reported always ‘being concerned about justice’ (Woman, 46, Barclays, UNIFI) and joining ‘in order to be able to make your voice heard’ (Male, 30, BNP, CFDT). Another answered that ‘since I was young I’ve always been fascinated by politics’ (Man, 52, BNP, CFDT), and in two cases French activists who had been Socialist Party and on the far political left answered they had joined the union under instructions by their party (Man, 46s, BNP, CFDT; Man, 50, CIC, CFDT). Finally, another five male CFDT activists explained that political beliefs had played an important role in their deciding to join (Man, 40, Caisse d’Epargne, CFDT; Man, 50, Crédit du Nord, CFDT; Man, 53, Banque populaire, CFDT; Man, 42, Caisse d’Epargne, CFDT; Man, 50s, Caisse d’Epargne, CFDT). Three of these further explained that their choice of the CFDT had been motivated originally by its workers’ control orientation.

‘Externally-determined’ reasons for joining are elements triggered by other people and work-life events or combinations of the two. Here the work environment plays a key role. It is often the wider work context or colleagues that shape the decision to join. Many interviewees joined after having moved to firms or departments where the trade unions carried more weight than in their previous jobs (Man, 46, Crédit Lyonnais, CFDT; Woman, 41, Caisse d’Epargne, CFDT). Others were approached by colleagues. One activist described how he joined after a close friend described their union activity and how it added value to working life (Man, 24, HSBC, UNIFI). Another reason was being approached by a local activist after observing what they considered were injustices within the workplace (Woman, 48, Bank of Scotland, UNIFI). One did so when approached by an existing activist after the management decided to introduce flexible working hours (Woman, 53, First Data, UNIFI). Some joined because it was the normal thing to do at the time in the workplace they were in (Man, 41, Lloyds-TSB, UNIFI; Man, 43, BNP, CFDT). In some cases individuals were influenced by their partners: ‘My husband was a member and when I met him I suddenly became interested’ (Woman, 46, Barclays, UNIFI). For certain activists external events played a key role. One joined after participating in a campaign to stop the sale of the firm he was working for (Man, 43, Insurance, UNIFI). In France the impact of the general strike movement of 1968 was important for older interviewees (Man, 49, Caisse d’Epargne, CFDT).

Among the more recent recruits in both countries there was often a very short gap between joining and taking up a representative position. In France some had even been asked to stand for election on a trade union slate before actually joining (Man, 46, Crédit Lyonnais, CFDT). Another detailed the process: ‘I was elected to the Works Council before joining. My colleagues had said that if I stood on the list no-one would force me to join. Later it was me myself who said “Now I want to join”’ (Woman, 46, Société Générale, CFDT).

‘Individual defence’ or ‘utilitarian reasons’ was the explanation least cited by our interviewees. This low level of reference to individual defence might appear very surprising in the light of other studies such as that of Waddington and Whitston (1997) that show 70% of British private service sector workers who joined unions in the early 1990s reporting they did so for the support the union could give them at work.

Two points need to be raised here. The first is about the problem in interpreting and analysing interviewees’ answers. Joining a union is, often, an extremely complex process that can owe as much to individual conviction as to circumstance. Here we retrace the major explanations given by the interviewees, those they themselves highlighted, but these can be influenced even by the interview context.

A second point of equal importance must also be stressed: the explanation of individual defence or insurance for joining a trade union can also mask a form of collective worker consciousness. This may also challenge the values of individualism and competition that the employers attempt to propagate. Thus one activist reported getting help from a union representative when they had a problem after returning to work after maternity leave (Woman, 50s, CFDT). Another reported having had a personal grievance in her previous job in a non-union environment and deciding to join as soon as she entered a company where a union was present (Woman, 23, Lloyds-TSB, UNIFI). This ‘insurance’ argument is similar to that of the activist who explained, ‘I was made redundant a few years before and think the union can be helpful’ (Man, 36, Xansa, CFDT).

Finally, the most tricky responses to classify using the Labbé-Croisat framework since they clearly include both internally and externally shaped factors, were those where activists explained their joining through the course of a collective defensive movement in which both they and their colleagues were implicated.

In Table 4 we produce a detailed analysis by age and by union of 69 of our interviewees. This suggests that ‘internally-determined’ factors tend to be more important overall than ‘externally-determined ones’, although this observation is more marked among the CFDT-Banque activists of both generations.

Table 4: Reasons for union adhesion by union and age, face-to-face interviews

Membership	UNIFI		CFDT-Banque		Total
	Under 45	45 and over	Under 45	45 and over	
Internally-determined	11	5	11	11	38
Externally-determined	5	7	3	7	22
Individual defence	3	1	1	4	9
<i>Total</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>69</i>

This difference may be associated with the family-link identified in the ‘social custom’ theory of union membership (Visser 2002): having a trade union member or activist as a parent or grandparent, spouse or sibling is a common background feature of nearly

two-thirds (40) of these activists.⁷ The generational differences reported to us remain, however, quite small. The younger activists in both countries are slightly more likely to give ‘internally-determined’ reasons for joining, while the older UNIFI activists are more likely to identify ‘externally-determined’ reasons. Yet in both unions, and across both generations, it appears that the ‘insurance’ or ‘individual defence’ motivations rank quite low in activists’ memories of how they joined in the first place.

In Table 5 we analyse the contextual responses of the activists who gave ‘internally-determined, ideological, reasons for joining.

Table 5: Union adhesion by ‘ideological’ activists according to age and union

Internally-influenced	UNIFI		CFDT-Banque		Total
	Under 45	45 and over	Under 45	45 and over	
Union activist parent	5	1	3	4	15
Union member parent	2	3	0	1	6
Non-union parent	1	1	11	12	25
Joined immediately	3	4	3	6	16
Joined 1-5 years after entering firm	4	1	8	6	19
Joined 5 or more years after entering firm	0	0	2	6	8
Politically involved	3	1	3	5	12
Involved in another voluntary organisation	0	1	7	9	17
No other involvement	4	1	4	5	14
<i>Total activists</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>49</i>

There are some small national differences here. In Britain, with 50% trade union density in the 1970s compared to half that level in France, it is of no surprise that proportionally more of both generations of UNIFI interviewees either had an activist or a union member as a parent than was the case among the *CFDT-Banque* activists. This provides some support for ‘social custom’ theory among these ‘ideologically-motivated’ activists. The UNIFI activists were slightly more likely to have joined within their first five years at work, and by comparison with the *CFDT-Banque* were less likely to be involved in other voluntary organisations. This flows from the different significance given to membership in the two countries discussed above, as well as from the historically more tolerant attitude of sections of British employers. In France, too, trade union involvement often reflects a more general tendency for some individuals to commit themselves to several different voluntary organisations (such as political parties or sports clubs) (Ion 1997).

⁷ The stronger meaning of ‘membership’ in France may explain why family influence appears stronger there.

Activist trajectories

What about how some union members end up becoming activists? Here we analyse the 50 activists who were directly posed this question⁸ following a threefold classification developed by Contrepois (2003). Essentially this distinguishes a clear moment when a personal decision is taken for internal or external reasons linked to beliefs or events, a more fluid process of co-option, and a more conscious decision linked to career hopes and expectations.

Two 'personal decisions' were explained simply like this: 'I joined and I decided to take on responsibilities' (Man, 53, Caisse d'Épargne, CFDT); 'It was what I believed in. I couldn't conceive of a career as a spectator' (Woman, 36, Société Générale, CFDT). A 'gut-activist' woman explained that she took on union responsibilities after coming back from maternity leave (Woman, 30, Caisse d'Épargne, CFDT). There was more likely to be a longer gap between joining and becoming active among the UNIFI activists, although in one case it was just three months (Man, 24, HSBC, UNIFI). One explained only taking on responsibilities nine years after joining because things kept getting worse at work (Man, 40, Lloyds-TSB, UNIFI). Another explained taking the decision to get involved four years after joining but immediately following a union training course he had gone on (Man, 35, RBS-NatWest, UNIFI).

'Co-option pressure' was a constant theme among activists in both countries. 'So and so came to see me and suggested I might be interested in taking up a representative post... so I became a part-time (seconded) activist and had to change the work I did' (Man, 40, BNP, CFDT). Most frequently the pressure came from the local union leadership, but sometimes, it came from friends. 'I became a rep five years ago when a friend asked me to do it' (Woman, 47, FDR, UNIFI).

The third classification of 'career step' embraces just two of the 50 interviewees for whom we have data, one of whose answer to the question of how they became an activist stressed how they had 'advanced' through the union (Man, 50s, CIC, CFDT) and another who had only become an activist after she was elected to a full-time seconded position (Woman, 40, Banque de France, CFDT).

An analysis of the interviewees' answers concerning their trajectories from member to activist is provided in Table 6. We can see that the reasons are fairly evenly balanced between a 'personal decision' and 'co-option', with the CFDT activists slightly more likely to stress the former.⁹

Here too there is little to distinguish the trajectories reported by the two generations. The older CFDT activists are marginally more likely than the younger in our sample to suggest that it was a 'personal decision' and the older UNIFI activists marginally less likely. But there is no clear water between generations.

⁸ The semi-structured interview schedule and time and place constraints of the interview did not always permit every thread to be followed.

⁹ Influenced, certainly, by the sharper political distinctions between different union confederations in France than in the UK (see Jefferys 2003).

Table 6: Activist trajectories by union and age

Activism	UNIFI		CFDT-Banque		Total
	Under 45	45 and over	Under 45	45 and over	
Personal decision	6	3	7	10	26
Co-option pressure	5	4	6	7	22
Career step			1	1	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>50</i>

There was also no clear pattern linking how our interviewees joined and their activist trajectories. Thus while many of the activists whose joining was ‘internally-determined’ reported taking ‘personal decisions’ to become active, their ‘ideological’ state of readiness also triggered actions by others to ‘co-opt’ them into taking on union responsibilities. While our findings thereby confirm the complexity of the processes by which individuals gravitate towards activism, it does not support the thesis that this process is in any way different for the younger than it was for the older generation in either country.

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4. Conclusion

This study compares two neighbouring EU member states with similar-sized economies, populations (58m) and banking sectors. The union activists we interviewed belonged to two very different unions located in very different industrial relations systems, but they are also grappling with parallel processes of change in employees’ working lives. We hope the discussion presented here of a part of their experiences has shown the value of going beyond national specificities. The comparison has enabled us to understand better the significance of the universal factors that draw individuals towards union activism than would have been possible if we had not attempted it.

The Franco-British comparison also enables us to investigate at a qualitative level whether the dynamics of the ‘union reputation’ effect that draws many individuals into membership and activism (Visser 2002) are the same in countries where the union density is as far apart as in the UK (30%) and France (9%). On this question the *current* levels of union density appear to make little difference. The French unions clearly have a ‘reputation’ at least as important as the British unions, even if they don’t

have the members. Yet the earlier higher levels of UK density do appear to have played some 'social custom' role in encouraging many of UNIFI's younger 'ideological' activists to join.

The findings we present here do not comfort those who suggest the emergence of an increasing instrumental individualism among activists. The negligible differences in both countries between the different generations of this sample of conference-attending activists, suggests that those who are motivated to spend a considerable proportion of their lives, voluntarily, on union activities remain broadly committed to a similar range of union values. Their passage through the different phases of sympathising with the union, to joining and to becoming local and subsequently national-level, conference-participating activists often took varying amounts of time in the two very different national industrial relations contexts. Yet at the end of the process they committed themselves in very similar ways, often at some personal cost in terms of missed promotions or pay, to voluntarily 'working' for recognisably similar collective associations of working people.

Our understanding is that although a different discourse in each country marks the precise path towards activism, the essential reasons why people still become national-level activists continue to reflect the strength of a core set of union beliefs (for social progress, in social justice, in asserting independence from and resistance to the boss, in collectivism). Of course the ways in which these beliefs are formulated have changed pragmatically in line with changes in society: they no longer include the commitments to a 'general strike to overthrow capitalism' or, in the British case to a narrow sectionalism, that were important a hundred years ago. But rather than finding a bureaucratic inertia, a fatalistic pessimism, or an instrumental individualism among today's union conference activists, this small-scale research suggests that the appeal of core, internationally-shared union beliefs remains a key element in attracting and shaping union activists.

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