

AGRH Conference

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Les mondes des militants syndicaux britanniques et français du secteur bancaire:
Trade union activism in British and French banks

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Both France and Britain have experienced general declines in trade union membership over the last 20 years. While unions are experiencing greater difficulties in attracting new and younger activists, the employers, often aided by the state, have been quite successful in shifting the focus of job regulation from national and sectoral bargaining to the level of the individual enterprise and in counterposing commitment to the firm to class or trade union commitment.

This paper compares the ideologies and company commitment of trade union activists in banks in the UK and in France. In particular it focuses on the relationship between critical *micro* and critical *macro* visions of employment relations. These important issues for human resource management and trade unionism are examined through interviews and surveys comparing the values, political attitudes and company commitment of banking trade unionists who attended their union conferences in the UK in 1998 (BIFU and UNIFI) and in France in 1999 (CFDT), compared with samples of trade unionists and non-trade unionists who were not similarly 'active'.

This comparison enables us to compare roughly similar sorts of activists who are organising and working in the same sector and facing many of the same HRM policies and technological processes but who come from trade union traditions frequently contrasted in terms of their degrees of politicization. The paper's tentative conclusion is that although the meaning of trade union activism is different in both countries, it is likely that a turn away from broader vision unionism may threaten the longer-term process of activist renewal.

Mots clés

Militants, syndicats, secteur bancaire, France, Royaume Uni, ideologies syndicales

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The force of the challenge to Western European trade unions in the 1980s and 1990s can be seen most obviously in the general declines in trade union membership, in the greater difficulties unions have in attracting new and younger activists (Ion 1997), and in the success of the employers, often aided by the state, in shifting the focus of job regulation from national and sectoral bargaining to the level of the individual enterprise (Brown, Deakin et al. 1998; Groux 1999). This shift has placed enormous pressure on trade union activists in the workplace to reach local compromises with their managers, frequently making 'micro-corporatism' appear as the least worst option. This development may be leading to an ideological strengthening of enterprise unionism at the expense of wider political and social commitments to whole labour market regulation. If this does occur it could help decouple 'non-political' from 'political' trade unionism, thereby reducing the political leverage exerted by citizens as workers over the wider societal distribution of resources.

In this paper my concern is to explore another possible consequence of any refocusing of trade union activists on the workplace. This is its possible impact on activist renewal. For if the roots of union activism lie in a symbiotic relationship between critical micro *and* critical macro visions of capitalism, then a turn away from broader vision unionism may threaten the longer-term process of activist renewal.

This paper is based on a study comparing the issues, values and political identities of banking trade unionists who attended union conferences in the UK in 1998 and in France in 1999. Trade union density in French banking at 14.1% (Siwek-Pouydesseau 1996: 159) is higher than the French national average of 9.1% in 1997 (Andolfatto 1998), partly because of the large proportion who still work for nationalised and mutual banks. But although this is much lower than the 53% level of density in British banks in 1994 (Luton 2000), the real influence of the two unions we compared is much closer since the *CFDT Banque* took one-third of the votes in the 1998 elections for the Works Councils in the AFB (major retail) banks and according to the employers national multi-union strike calls in February 1998 and November 1999 achieved responses of 21% and 31.5% respectively and double those figures according to the unions (*Le Monde*, 30.11.99, 2.12.99). Although BIFU's total 110,000 membership in 1998 was thus nearly 90,000 higher than the *CFDT Banque's* their actual totals of *activists* (defined as workplace members who participate in union organisation and activities) are not dissimilar (Thornley, Contrepois et al. 1996). This was one reason for making this comparison of activists.

Focusing on those attending their conferences enables us to compare roughly similar sorts of activists who organise and work in the same sector but who come from trade union traditions frequently contrasted in terms of their degrees of politicisation. By exploring and comparing these activists' routes to and convictions about trade unionism we hope to better understand the role that different images of trade unionism play in 'making' them.

The activists we are comparing here are those who were interested enough to commit several days of their time and who were generally working for banks that would continue to pay them while they attended their union conference. In the *CFDT Banque's* case, most of them were entitled seconded lay trade union officials. About 180 of the roughly 220 *CFDT* congress attendees were seconded on trade union mandates for between half and all of their normal working hours by their employers under the requirements of French labour law. Of the roughly 350 *BIFU* conference attendees there were 60 officials paid by the union, another 25 lay representatives who were seconded full-time by collective agreement with their employers and approximately another 30 (mainly executive committee members) who worked between half and full-time by arrangement with their employers.

We studied the conference activists using five different methods: observation of the conference debates; documentary analysis of the conference reports and agendas; taped and transcribed interviews with 12 delegates attending the 1999 *BIFU/UNIFI* merger conference and with 16 attending the 1999 *CFDT Banque* congress; interviews with both unions' general secretaries; follow-up telephone interviews with 32 of the *CFDT* congress respondents where they were asked directly about their reasons for union adherence and their trade union values; analysis of returns of the same self-completion questionnaires distributed to those attending the 1998 *BIFU* and the 1999 *CFDT*

conferences. There were 98 usable returns from the BIFU conference and 82 from the CFDT Banque congress, giving response rates of 28% (BIFU) and 37% (CFDT).

We found that Hyman's (1996) discussion of trade union ideology in the UK, Germany and Italy provided us with a helpful framework within which to analyse the contrasting emphases placed by the trade unionists on *market*, *social integration* and *class struggle* unionisms. But we also found useful a distinction drawn in an Irish context between 'political' activists and 'non-political' activists (Flood, Turner et al. 1998). The former sees trade unionism as a vehicle for their political objectives, the latter rejects 'politics' and sees trade unionism as being largely about workplace concerns.

We begin by describing the themes and issues of the two conferences and the grievances reported by both groups of banking union activists. Then we examine why the conference participants became union members and activists, how they view trade union values and what it means to be a 'political activist'. The conclusion attempts to bring these elements together, and argues that union renewal is likely to be dependent upon striking the right balance between broad-scope and enterprise-level politics.

1. Conference issues

Both the organisation and content of the two conferences were different, although there were many overlapping features. In part this was because the *CFDT Banque* only has federal congresses every three years, making them much more the locus of debate on long-term union strategy than is the BIFU annual conference. But it is also because the purposes of the two conferences were different.

The 21st *CFDT Banque* Congress at Lille was held over five days, the first of which was devoted entirely to a debate on the General Secretary's report. After that there was continued lengthy discussion of different parts of a 13-page Federal Council General Resolution (covering much of the same ground as had the General Secretary but in more detail), and three still more detailed formulations. These Federal Council report-resolutions faced just seven amendments of which only two were passed. Congress also debated two counter resolutions, two emergency resolutions and four constitutional changes - including establishing a 25% minimum quota of women among the 24 elected positions on the Federal Council, which it then elected. In the evenings the delegates ate together with wine at the table, but there were no special parties or the heavy drinking that accompanies British union conferences. The key issue at the Congress was how to construct sufficient political unity within the union to be able to offer a clear lead to other unions and to the banking sector workforce as a whole over the tearing up by the employers' association of the sectoral collective agreement.

The 80th BIFU Annual Delegate Conference (ADC) at Liverpool was shorter, lasting less than three days, of which the last was superfluous, essentially providing a rationale for the last evening's social events which lasted well into the early morning. Whilst it too began with a General Secretary's report, this was much narrower in scope than his CFDT counterpart's, and did not structure the rest of the debate at conference. Instead the debate was around 134 motions and hundreds of amendments, most of which were framed by branch activists, although on key issues resolutions and amendments also appeared in the name of BIFU's 26-strong National Executive Committee. The more participatory agenda and the different purpose of the conference led to more time being focused more on the issues directly concerning their members than at the CFDT (see Table 1).

Table 1 Contents of the 1999 CFDT Banque and 1998 BIFU conferences (number of ticks is indicative of importance in terms of time spent and numbers of references)

Themes		BIFU	CFDT
Political issues	Restructuring of finance sector		vv
	Neo-liberalism, globalisation		vv
	Role of state regulation and nationalisation		vv
	Policies of government	v	v
Union issues	Inter-union relations and merger	vvv	vvvv
	Internal union cohesion, nature of trade unionism		vv
	Union communication and services	v	v
	Trade union rights	v	v
	Trade union education	v	
	Recruitment	v	
	Industrial action	v	v
Collective bargaining	Company bargaining	vvvv	vv
	Equality issues	vv	vv
	Shorter working week		vv
	Excessive overtime		v
	Professional training		v
	Employee mobility		v
	Redundancies	vv	
	National collective bargaining		v
	Pay demands	v	
	Understaffing	v	
	Holiday schedules	v	
	Bullying	v	

For BIFU, a major conference function was the socialisation of delegates. This involved encouraging activist participation in the business of conference, which was therefore structured around a large number of generally focused issues on which local activists could feel at home speaking. There was even a special parallel ‘Understanding Conference Course’ laid on for 20 ‘new’ young activists to help prepare the next generation of participants. To enable deaf delegates to participate the whole conference was ‘signed’, and BIFU’s Youth Network was given a prominent role. The ADC also involved making time for heavy drinking and partying. Conference’s purpose appears to be to strengthen personal links between activists, creating stronger levels of trust, and binding them more deeply into the organisation. It offers comparatively little scope for raising broader policy or political issues, but there was also at no time any criticism of the union’s leadership. Insiders suggested that this lack of internal dissent reflected the combination of two different factors. First, there was a continuing sense of political anticipation arising from the election of a Labour Government in 1997 and its soon-to-be-announced policies on union recognition. Second, there were the continuing merger talks between BIFU and two major staff associations, NWSA (National Westminster) and UNiFI (Barclays). The merger prospect created a powerful incentive to all BIFU activists not to ‘rock the boat’ by saying anything to frighten off the more ‘moderate’ staff associations. Despite a new tide of bank restructuring, this was the major issue of the 1998 ADC.

At the CFDT, the major purpose of the congress appeared to be provide legitimacy to the political positions adopted by the six-strong Executive Committee and the other 24 members of the Federal Council. These were quite distinctive positions. They place the *CFDT Banque* federal union among the left opposition to the national centre-right leadership within the whole CFDT Confederation. The *Banque* federation criticises the Confederation for not campaigning more clearly for a 32-hour week, for not having supported calls for national demonstrations calling for more teeth in the 35-hour law, for having been equivocal over the Juppé pension reforms of 1995, and for verging on neutrality in the 1997 French general election (Banque 1999: 9). Criticised strongly for these positions by up to a third of the delegates, the union leadership saw its main task in the run-up to the Congress and at Lille itself as securing majorities for its positions and its Federal Council candidates. The General Secretary’s appeal

for the 60-70 union branches that made up the Federation to coordinate themselves better and to act less as individual units 'firm by firm' in part reflected his desire to encourage union unity in the face of very considerable political division. For the branches, also, the three-year span of Federal Council accountability was far too long for a detailed review. Only nine union branches out of the 67 represented formally moved amendments or resolutions.

2. Workplace pressures

In the different contexts of these two conferences we discovered some very similar workplace experiences. Around 60% of the activists replying to our survey at both conferences reported that their own employment in their organisation had come under threat in the last two years, and 50% of BIFU activists and 57% of CFDT ones said the threat was still there. *'It's all quite simple,'* said a French BNP activist. *'We simply have major worries about the future because of all the restructuring that is taking place in banking.'* One 36-year-old woman lay representative at the Société Générale (SG), the bank that was also privatised in 1986 and which was just about to launch a major take-over bid for another big French bank, commented:

The biggest worry is jobs. It's work that will stay. That is to say are we going to keep our, our job or is someone going to end our careers as bank clerical workers?

Another woman lay activist, a 47-year old BIFU full-timer at Barclays, confirmed the self-doubts that the current climate induces:

It's job security, which there isn't and they're really worried about what the future holds for them. And also they don't believe that they've got anything they can offer the outside world. 'They've been working in a bank, who's going to want to employ them?'

We asked conference delegates to select from a list of 21 grievances the five that were most commonly reported to them. The survey results and our interviews suggest a much more similar workplace experience than conference experience. Thus although the CFDT respondents agreed that three very common ones (performance pressure, workload and overtime) stood out from the rest, eight of the top ten grievances in both countries were the same (see Table 2).

Table 2 The five most common grievances reported by CFDT and BIFU activists

Grievances (% of respondents) (Total respondents)	BIFU (98)	CFDT (82)
Performance pressures Pression productivité	55.1	79.3
Pay Le salaire	49.0	51.2
Workload issues Charge de travail	27.6	72.0
Overtime Heures supplémentaires	33.7	61.0
Management attitudes Attitudes de la direction	32.7	39.0
Health and safety Hygiène et sécurité	30.6	24.4
Staffing issues Nombre d'emplois	25.5	25.6
Grading issues Grille de classification	30.6	15.9
Hours Heures de travail	28.6	12.2
Holiday issues Les vacances	25.5	7.3
Flexibility L'aménagement du travail	8.2	18.3
Discipline	19.4	1.2
Equality issues Égalité des chances	5.1	17.1
Redundancy Licenciements	15.3	3.7
Bullying Mauvais traitements	17.3	1.2
Interpretation of agreements L'interprétation des accords	6.1	13.4
Victimisation Persécution syndicale	10.2	7.3
Welfare issues L'assistance sociale	8.2	1.2
Dismissals Licenciements abusif	7.1	1.2
Shiftwork issues Travail par équipes	7.1	0.0
Race/sex discrimination Discrimination sexuelle ou raciale	0.0	3.7
Others Autres	2.0	1.2
TOTAL % (Number of grievances selected by respondents)	100 (436)	100 (375)

High among these common grievances, as would be expected, was pay, often also linked to grading worries. Thus a full-time 33-year-old BIFU lay representative who works for an insurance company suggested that when members feel they will not achieve their expectations through collective bargaining and have little confidence in industrial action, they respond by raising individual grading grievances:

The main issue really that members bring to you is your pay... When it comes around to this time of year you get a lot of 'What's happening with the pay situation?', erm, and in my experience, they're not really, the staff aren't very bolshie. They let a lot of it carry on and it tends to be individuals that will come to me, erm, about gradings and they want to appeal against whatever grade that they've had. That is the main issues.

It's the pay and the gradings are the main issues they come to us with.

Three of the top eight issues in both countries also focused on the increased pressure to produce (performance pressures, workload issues and staffing issues). One male 50-year-old full-time lay CFDT representative at the SG that was privatised in 1986 explained how this was driven by the fall in numbers of staff:

The biggest problem still now is, well, the falling numbers of staff, which has been happening for years and years and years in the name of profitability, and which worsens the working conditions of those who stay, who stay in place.

This was echoed by a 27-year-old BIFU representative at Lloyds Bank:

One of the major concerns which I think is with most branches, is the staff shortages and initially when I was first at this branch, you know people weren't taking the lunch hours because basically they never had time to complete their normal daily workload and have a lunch break.

A 40-year-old full-time lay representative from the BNP (Banque nationale de Paris) repeated: '*For the workers it is essentially problems of working conditions in so far as workload and the division of workload are concerned.*' While a 52-year-old from another BNP branch added:

I think that often, the, the conflicts that can arise come about because management demands more and more from the personnel in terms of profit targets. They demand more and more and the staff have had enough.

It appears, therefore, that despite the different purposes of their two conferences, BIFU and CFDT activists report similar degrees of workplace job insecurity and those they represent are raising similar grievances. In particular, in both countries complaints about managerial attitudes featured in the top five grievances of a third of all the respondents, confirming other survey evidence from the UK that management initiatives designed to secure employee motivation and commitment are often overwhelmed by work intensification (Whitston, Roe et al. 1999). Does this mean these activists were drawn to trade unionism and union activism in similar ways?

3. Becoming active

It is possible to see some common paths to trade union activism among both the CFDT and BIFU activists we interviewed. There are some interesting similarities in why these activists originally joined unions, with the key common features reported being a family trade union background, which could also be short-hand for a form of ideological or cultural tolerance, beliefs in unionism and personal experience of unfair treatment. The top part of Table 3 summarises the responses of the small numbers of activists we interviewed face-to-face and asked to identify the principal factor behind their adhesion decision, and of the 32 CFDT activists we additionally interviewed by telephone, whom we asked to identify all the factors explaining their original membership decision.

Table 3 Union adhesion and activism

Issues Numbers of citations by those interviewed	BIFU	CFDT	
	Face to face	Face to face	By phone
Interview method			
Explanations of union membership			
Colleagues were largely members			4
Religious beliefs			5
Positive support by union		1	15
Role of union in industrial action	1		8
Wider political beliefs	1	3	19
Union as an insurance in case of problems	2		10
To help develop yourself	3	2	15
Personal unfair treatment by management	4	1	7
Belief in unions	4	3	6
Family member (parent, partner) in a union	8	8	10
Explanations of union activism			
Hatred of injustice, gut feelings, previous history of activism	2	5	
Effect of union training	2		
Persuaded by existing activist colleague	3	3	
Link with the profession		4	
Conflict with management		1	
Numbers of activists ⁱ	12	16	32

BIFU activists were slightly more likely to point to a specific incident of management unfairness, and to the view of union membership as an 'insurance' against such unfairness. CFDT activists were much more likely to stress their political beliefs, their wish to develop themselves and a positive image of the union. These differences arose in part from the fact that the CFDT activists were generally much older (two thirds over 45) than the BIFU activists (one quarter over 45), having joined largely after the highly political mass strike movement of 1968 in which many of them participated at school or university.

We are concerned more here, however, with why they thought they became *active*. Some indications are given in the bottom part of Table 3. Several activists from both unions explained their activist commitment primarily in terms of approaches to them made by existing activist colleagues. One CFDT activist explained that he had spent several days weighing up the pros and cons before deciding. The BIFU activists tended to answer in a more jocular and self-deprecatory way:

I came into it blind basically when I became a rep. I didn't know, I mean Sheila just sort of said, 'We need a rep,' you know, 'how about it?'. That's how I came into it. But I've got no regrets (BIFU woman, 47).

I was approached by my Branch Secretary and he said to me through conversation he said to me would you like to become a representative, and I said 'Yer. I'll do it (laughter).' ... I mean it was a very informal conversation, but he knew he was preaching to the converted. To start with 'cause I've always said I'm in the Union because I support what Unions do and you know my reasons for being in the Union. And he approached me and said 'I think that you'll be a good candidate because you'll stand up for yourself and you will help people and also you've got a good repartee with the staff around you so I think you'd be quite good to do the job.' And I said 'Yes that will do me'. (laughter) (BIFU man, 33)

There were important differences in the activist-forming process. None of the CFDT activists referred specifically to having been 'converted' to activism by a union training course, while this was important for several BIFU interviewees. Unlike them, some of the CFDT activists drew a link between their occupational profession and union activism. For them activism is a means of protecting the clearly drawn lines around their profession: what they would and would not do, giving the individual a voice over job regulation.

I don't think it can be disassociated from my professional life...er...Quite simply because it gives me the possibility of raising my voice from time to time. Today we are in an economic context where the company has become a zone of non-rights. There are no more rights and, unfortunately, er, often when you've got a personality and you're being faced with, if you like, with employer pressure, well, er, the fact of being alone in face of this opposition, well, er, it doesn't get you anywhere, it marginalises what you have to say and, er, eventually creates problems for you (CFDT woman 34, BNP).

I couldn't conceive of a working life as a spectator. I wanted to be an actor, effectively at the heart of my company and of the trade union movement in general. And OK, for me this mean that I have to get involved. Getting involved only as a member wasn't good enough. I wanted to get involved in the choices, in the debates, in the decisions (CFDT woman 36, SG).

Among the CFDT interviewees there was a greater stress on 'gut feelings' and the sense of being 'born' an activist. One said, '*It's because I think I am a combative sort of person, and I don't like injustices and it's the only way to, to fight them*' (man, 33, BNP). Another repeated: '*I've always struggled. I've always hated injustice and such things, and I think we're all a bit alike*' (woman 30, Caisses d'Épargne). These reflections are generally more politically focused than those of the BIFU activists. When struggle was involved it was more retaliatory than consciously about a wider agenda. Thus one recalled why she had decided to become an activist in these terms: '*So I thought, right you buggers I'll get you back, and I'm going to fight back, and that's what I did*' (woman, 47, Barclays).

Since the CFDT congress had a much more overtly political agenda and purpose than did the BIFU conference, the more frequent references to 'fighting injustice' as a motivation for activism at Lille are perhaps not too surprising. But what do these mean for the trade union values shared by activists in each of the different unions? Does trade unionism mean the same thing to banking activists in the two countries?

4. Trade union values

To try and understand the value systems of the two groups of activists, we first asked those we interviewed what trade unionism represented for them. Once they had replied to that we then prompted them to indicate which from a list of six different ideas based around Hyman's (1996) three poles of trade union ideology particularly reflected their values. As a proxy for *market* ideology we used 'Getting the best for your members' and 'Working with management for the benefit of all'. Unprompted responses stressing common interests and the need for partnership between management and union were also placed close to this pole. For *society* or *social integration* unionism we used 'Fairness' and 'Justice' and included unprompted references to 'rights' and to the pluralist concepts of bargaining and negotiating. As a proxy for *struggle* or *class* unionism we prompted with the terms 'Solidarity' and 'Fighting back' and added unprompted references to 'standing up', 'struggle' and 'collectivism' and dialogue that directly or indirectly implied an 'us' against 'them' world view.ⁱⁱ

What was the texture of the activists' responses? Here we give some examples from the three poles. The following was an unprompted BIFU reply:

When a Union works properly it should be both beneficial to the employees as well as the employers. You know, it's a kind of thing in the middle, because you have got the Management up there who are concerned about one thing, the profits, and everything else you have got the Union who are concerned with staff and morale and, you know, sort of human type issues. So, at the end of the day, it is there in the middle, and it promotes better relations between employees and management, and when it works properly it helps to get more out of the employees for their employer, and in, you know, a way that is beneficial to everyone (BIFU man, 31, Bank of England).

We plotted this close to the *market* union consciousness pole. From the Nat-West Bank a part-timer activist argued: '*Now it's working with the management. I think that's now a change from what it used to be*' (woman, 36). The stress on common interests between employer and employee was repeated by two different BIFU women activists at Barclays Bank which launched a big 'partnership' programme following a successful two-day strike in October 1997. One said, '*Now I think a manager and work mates should complement each other. There shouldn't be a tug in the middle. Both needs each other*'. The other argued:

I think the tide is turning slightly with employers and their relationship with us, the trade union. They don't see us as the big bad guys, we're there to sort of help them as much as we are the members. I mean we want to keep people in jobs and we want to make sure the business runs so we do keep people in jobs.

A similar position was taken but much more tentatively by a male CFDT 33-year-old activist at the BNP after being read the prompt list. He argued that '*It's a little of those two points: to 'get the best for the members' and also 'to work with management' (long pause). When it happens that's when they call us social partners.*' He believed in it a bit, but was not too confident, so he was mapped halfway between the social integration and market poles. This more tentative reference to market ideology was made explicit by a 55-year-old CFDT male activist at the Caisses d'Épargne. He emphasised, '*It's, it's also very important to know how to work with the employers precisely in order to really achieve something, er, together, no? That's for sure, no?*'

The CFDT activists' caution about articulating market ideology was partly because this was *the* political hot potato of the Congress, where the wider divisions within the Confederation ensured that the nature of trade unionism was a key part of the *CFDT Banque* Congress debate. Patrice Lafont, a delegate from the Savoie branch, summarised the majority perspective within the bank union federation:

A gap has thus been hollowed out within the CFDT (Confederation) between two types of trade unionism, and the hope of our union (*CFDT Banque*) to be a kind of bridge has collapsed. The CFDT has gone from being a trade unionism combining protest and negotiation to a trade unionism of support (for the contemporary evolution of capitalism) (Banque 1999: 12).

Bertrand Burel, from the Rouen branch, argued that these tensions were occurring throughout the French trade union movement and would lead to the establishment of two poles:

A 'reformist pole', that involves accepting the evolution (of capitalism), intervening only on the consequences... and a 'union pole in favour of social struggle', that

rejects the current choices and organises the workers to impose other choices (Banque 1999: 13).

Jean-Paul Halgand of the Caisses d'Épargne branch was even tarter. His branch, he suggested, believed that a restructuring of trade unionism around 'a unionism of resignation (or) a unionism of resistance, is becoming a necessity' (Banque 1999: 14). In this context it was thus to be expected that those we interviewed who placed a greater stress on enterprise-level negotiations and working with the employers expressed their minority views more tentatively.

This 'looking over your shoulder' even influenced some of the CFDT responses capturing the readiness to negotiate to achieve fairness and justice close to the Social Integration pole. One insisted on using quote marks to distance herself slightly from any 'dubious' implications:

I would say above all justice. Yes. Solidarity and yes, why not try, I know, how they say, to 'dialogue' and 'work with management', with everyone. Loads of quote marks. That is to say we must not sell our soul. But let's say that if we can deal effectively with him, negotiate in the interests of the employees, and uniquely in their interests and defend their jobs etc (pause) yes, but OK, 'negotiate'. But I put in lots of quote marks (laughs) (CFDT woman, 47, SG)

But most CFDT activists, like the BIFU ones, were more straightforward:

Justice, all the same, has to be the first point. People have rights that mustn't be messed with. They must have a minimum of rights and of defence. So it's justice (CFDT man, 43, BNP).

Um, it stands for justice. You know, I think trade unions are there to provide security and protection for their members. In summary I would say it provides a fair deal to staff, erm, equality to staff, erm, and equal opportunities (BIFU man, 27, Lloyds).

Erm, it's just trying to represent them fairly, trying to protect their interests, erm, obviously negotiating with the bank on pay and conditions (BIFU man, 34, Nat West).

The broadest interpretation of social integration was given unprompted by an 80% union time CFDT woman activist:

For me it is social justice. It is equality. It is respect and the respect for being human, whether a woman, man, unemployed, employed. Well, for me it is fundamental. It's that. It is equality between people of, whatever nationality they are from, and of whatever, how shall I put it, social milieu. I think that's the principal value for me (36, SG)

This response also illustrates well the tendency among more of the CFDT interviewees than BIFU ones to move from the particular to the general, a tendency we see as part of the greater politicisation - in a non-party sense - of the CFDT activists to which we will return again in the next section. It implies that even though activists may share the same values, they may also see and live them differently.

Struggle ideology could be distinguished in unprompted responses such as this from one of the several '68ers' active in the CFDT who recalled that '*for us, more and more as we left school, we learned that you had to fight. It's hard, OK, but it's in trade unionism that you find again those values of solidarity and justice*'. He is a 50% trade union-time lay official in the still nationalised Savings Bank (Caisses d'Épargne) and comes from the traditionally more militant northern France. Another activist, a 48-year-old BNP male based in Paris raised the idea of a balance of forces: '*The most important values, er (long pause), I think for me are that trade unionism must represent a, er, force that, that can reflect justice and reflect fraternity*.' A woman activist summarised a fairly classical class struggle view:

Sincerely, I think it is impossible for activism as I see it and trade unionism as I see it to find points of agreement with the employers. History is there, as far as I'm concerned, to show that between the workers and the bosses there are completely divergent interests, and I don't think that you can at an given moment 'pull in the same direction' (in quote marks) or that at a given moment you can have convergent interests in face of the kind of situation, when the economy is growing and a sector is growing... I think that the workers' struggle is really very separate, and that it must be strongly distinctive from the point of view of our employers and of the employers in general (CFDT, 36, SG).

Some of the CFDT activists interviewed by telephone spoke, unprompted, of trade unionism for them being ‘workers’ emancipation’, ‘individual emancipation through collective involvement’, ‘an offensive organisation opposite the employers’ and as ‘a counterpower to power’.

Paralleling the way CFDT responses were much rarer and more tentative about market ideology, so too were the BIFU responses that approached the struggle pole. This experienced BIFU activist is plotted near that pole since unprompted she raises a sense of trade union collectivism and implicitly criticises market values:

Well I think because there’s the collectiveness of it all and if you become involved then you feel part of something worthwhile. Because it’s so easy in the working environment to do the same old routine, to go in, do the job, leave it. Whereas in the trade union movement if you do it properly then, well I think, I feel as if I’m doing something for people rather than for making money (woman, 47, Barclays).

The most recent and youngest BIFU activist we interviewed was less articulate but more explicit about ‘fighting back’, although her vision was of the union enabling the *individual* to do so rather than emphasising the collective:

I suppose that’s your fighting back. You know, well, even personal experience if someone tries to manipulate things and you’ve got to stand up for yourself. And that’s what this union should be offering for their members (woman, 23, Lloyds)

Our classifications of activists’ trade union values cannot be precise. In many instances their unprompted and prompted reflections were close to different poles. At other times, as in this example, they fell between two poles (*Social Integration* and *Struggle*). The BIFU activist just quoted also reflected a world view that implies collective conflict with management without being ready to fully acknowledge it:

Q: What for you are the most important values of trade unionism? What does trade unionism stand for, for you?

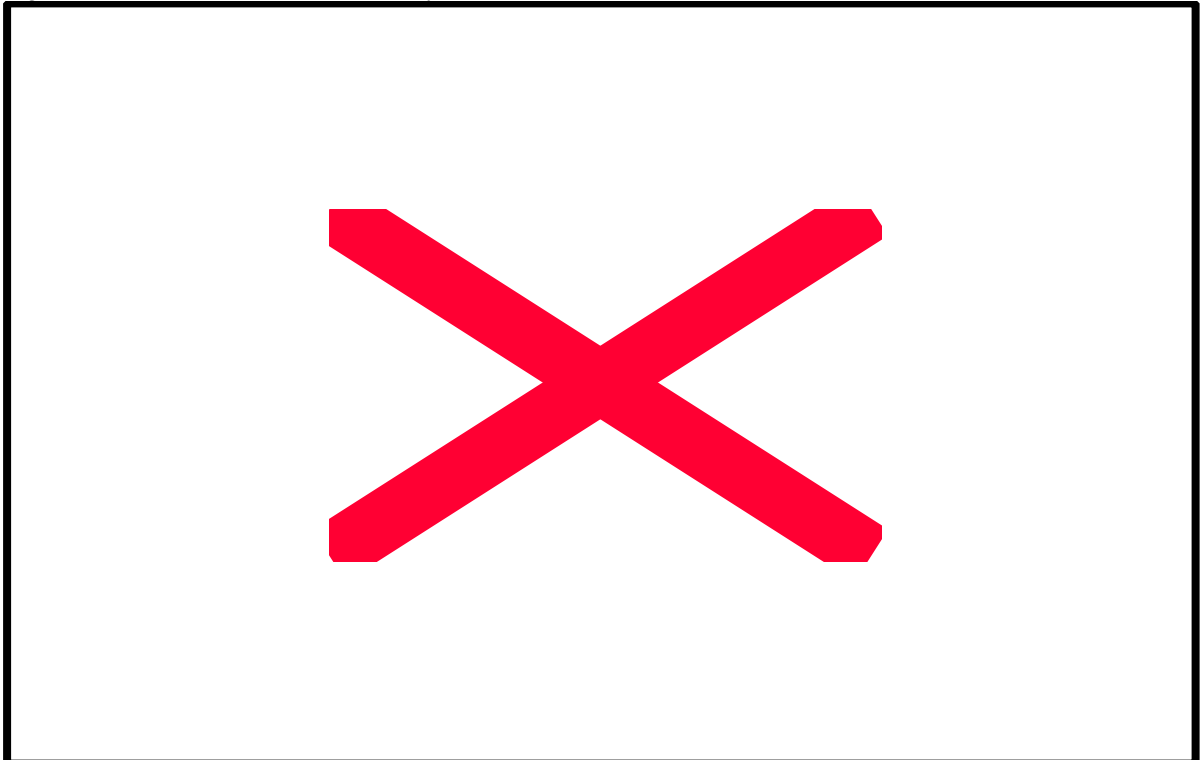
A: Erm, standing up for your own rights.

Q: Standing up for your *own* rights?

A: Well, everybody’s rights, that’s better. Knowing that you’ve got support, if you have got any problems in the workplace

Overall, we find that the responses of the BIFU activists suggest that they share social integration and market values, and more rarely refer to struggle values. By contrast the CFDT activists share social integration and struggle values, and hardly refer to market values. The value systems of the 12 BIFU and 16 CFDT activists interviewed are plotted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Trade Union Values of BIFU and CFDT activists



The diagonal plots represent BIFU and the circular ones CFDT activists. The larger plots represent unprompted views; the smaller ones record values highlighted after the activists had been prompted from the list of six value statements.

This admittedly heuristic analysis confirms Hyman's (1996) argument that the domination of two of these poles tends to exclude the third. However, while Hyman theorises that British union ideology is predominantly distributed between the *market* and *struggle* poles, we find that for banking union activists in the late 1990s it is largely split between *market* and *social integration*. Given that we are dealing here with activists recruited in Britain from white collar bank workers, a significant minority of whom still voted Conservative in 1997, the absence of a stronger set of class or struggle values should not surprise us. What is perhaps of greater interest is that although contrasting strongly in the presences and absences of market and struggle values, there is, nonetheless, a considerable overlap of values between the French and British union activists around social integration values. This tends to support another of Hyman's (1996: 67). arguments that 'social-democratic and Christian democratic unionisms came to share significant common ideological attributes: a priority for gradual improvement in social welfare and social cohesion, and hence a self-image as representatives of social interests'. But are there other features which divide those grouped close to the *social integration* pole? To answer this we need to examine the different ways the activists identify their union activity as being more or less political.

5. 'Political' and 'Non-political' activists

What do we mean in the trade union context by 'political'? We do *not* mean a reference to whether the activist is *party*-political or even to how they vote. The meaning we attribute the term is more about whether the activist sees a link between their workplace activity and changes needed in the wider society. It is about the difference between those who see injustice as wrong within the workplace and those who ally themselves with the struggle against injustices throughout the world. It is *broad-scope* compared with *narrow-scope* trade unionism.

Our survey asked the CFDT and BIFU activists to classify their own union involvement as being 'political' or 'non-political'. Their responses showed a major difference between the two sets of conference activists. While four out of five CFDT activists saw their trade unionism 'as an extension of

my politics’, as many as two out of five BIFU activists defined themselves as ‘not interested in the political aspects’ of trade unionism (see Table 4).

Table 4 Political and Non-political attitudes to union involvement

Involvement %	I don't mind being a member	I don't get involved with the union/staff association except on special issues	I am a loyal and active member but I am not interested in the political aspects	I am an active member and see my involvement in the union as an extension of my politics	TOTAL (No. of activists)
BIFU	1.0	2.0	42.9	51.0	100 (95)
CFDT	1.2	1.2	15.9	80.5	100 (81)

How should these results be interpreted in the light of the mapping of trade union values discussed above? Looking back at Figure 1 it is possible to imagine a vertical line drawn through the triangle to separate a more ‘non-political’ identity on the left of the diagram from a more ‘political’ identity on the right. Thus identification with a ‘non-political’ unionism squarely embraces the *market* pole but also includes many of the BIFU and a few of the CFDT activists who share *social integration* values. One BIFU activist said: ‘*I am only a unionist because I want fair play. I'm not political so they don't see me as a threat*’. In the CFDT an equivalent activist who had been a representative in the Caisses d'Épargne since 1968, complained about wanting to sign agreements in his bank that the Federal union refused to sanction, stating ‘*me, I'm not a political type*’. A non-political stance was essentially against the logic of generalisation. The identification *my union activity = my politics*, by contrast, sits naturally with the project of the *class / struggle* pole of trade unionism, but is also strongly present among activists with views around the *social integration* pole. It is the combination of these two poles that explains why ‘political’ activists were much more numerous among the CFDT activists (66 of the 82 respondents). This follows our earlier discussion of the political purposes of the Lille Congress, and our remarks about broader societal concerns being expressed when CFDT activists spoke about their trade union values. What is perhaps surprising is that although none of the BIFU activists we interviewed were members of any political party as many as half the BIFU activists (50 out of 98) also identified their union engagement as ‘political’.

What implications can be drawn from this? It is probable that a degree of politicisation - the aim of intervening on macro issues as well as on micros ones - is an essential part of the make-up of the core of union activists who play a role (at least at conference and for several also as National Executive or Federal Council members) in *leading* (however remotely) their national unions. But do those who see their union engagement as ‘political’ see the workplace differently from those who do not share this political identity? To find out we looked at how the ‘political’ and ‘non-political’ activists in both unions viewed other key issues.

On several issues the ‘political’ activists were more positive about the union and identified less closely with their employers than did the ‘non-political’. For example, asked whether they believed their union could do anything to stop job losses, ‘political’ activists from both unions were much more likely to believe the union could make a difference (see Table 5).

Table 5 Role of union in preventing job losses

Can prevent job losses %	Political activists (N=116)		Non-Political activists (N=60)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
BIFU	78.0	22.0	55.6	44.4
CFDT	68.2	31.8	53.3	46.7
TOTAL %	72.4	27.6	55.0	45.0

Similar results came from survey questions probing the extent to which the activists had confidence in the union as ‘best representing’ their interests on a basket of ten bargaining issues (see Table 6).

Table 6 Activists' views on who best represents their interests

'Best representation' provided by %	Trade union representatives	Management	Yourself	Nobody
CFDT 'political' (66)	71.7	9.5	11.6	7.3
BIFU 'political' (50)	65.6	17	11.8	5.6
BIFU 'non-political' (45)	59.5	20.6	13.6	6.4
CFDT 'non-political' (15)	45.4	24.8	10	19.9

'Political' activists thus appear more likely to place greater reliance on the union to resolve the kinds of grievances members were raising with them than were the 'non-political' activists, who relied more upon management. Yet two other comparative points also stand out. First, it is noteworthy that 'political' BIFU activists were nearly twice as likely to rate management as their 'best representatives' than were their CFDT 'political' counterparts. Second that the differences between the two groups of 'non-political' and the 'political' CFDT activists were much greater than between the BIFU ones, a gap that perhaps reflects the depth of divisions at the *CFDT Banque* Congress.

Another indicator of 'political' versus 'non-political' workplace attitudinal differences came in their degree of 'social integration in the firm'. This was defined by Gallie (Gallie 1978: 300) as 'a high level of commitment to the key substantive and procedural norms of the enterprise', and we tested for its presence using the Mowday (Mowday, Porter et al. 1982) 15-question organisational commitment measure. While most activist respondents expressed weak levels of commitment to their individual companies, the 'political' BIFU activists identified significantly less strongly. They averaged just 2.9 on a seven-point Likert scale (where seven represents total commitment to the firm) compared to 3.3 for the 'non-political' activists. Even among the CFDT respondents, where the greater age of the 'political' activists compared to the 'non-political' skewed their commitment scores upwards, the 'political' activists scored just 3.5 compared to the 'non-political' activists' average of 3.6. 'Political' activism appeared thus to be associated with greater attitudinal independence of the employer.

6. Conclusion

This paper has compared the issues and contexts of the 1998 and 1999 BIFU and *CFDT Banque* union conferences in Britain and France, and presented some of the results of interviews and surveys conducted with the activists who attended. While the relatively low numbers interviewed and the low response rates mean we have to be cautious, the data we have allows us to report three principal findings. First we found that in both unions the current generation of union activists are absorbed on a day-to-day basis by bank employees' problems of work intensification. Yet their own routes to trade unionism and activism tended to include broad scope common factors such as a non-hostile family background and a belief in unions or wider political beliefs often involving a dislike of injustice. It was this latent potential which was then sometimes triggered by a spark of mistreatment by management and in the context of an effective trade union presence that led to the activists we interviewed and surveyed. This result is in line with other studies of British and French union adhesion (Waddington and Whitston 1997) (Piotet, Correia et al. 1992).

Second, we found that while the trade unionisms to which the BIFU and CFDT activists are committed both include a strong vision of *social integration*, they are dissimilar in that while BIFU activists also share a strong *market* set of values, the CFDT activists tend to share an opposite set of *struggle* values. While trade union consciousness is well and truly 'mixed' in both unions, and as Hyman (1996: 68) observes 'all trade unions face in three directions' there is, arguably, a smaller ideological gap between 'social integration' and 'struggle' values than there is between the 'social integration' and the 'market' values. Hyman (*ibid.*: 66) suggests that the origins of *social integration* unionism are part 'as rival' to and part as 'mutation' from the radical *class struggle* pole. The 'struggle' perspective, after all, includes the vision of going beyond a compromise with capital and perhaps it is the legacy of a need to compete with this vision that continues to inspire the more critical and political perspective of the social integration unionism. An implication of expressing belief in justice and fairness is that there is a considerable degree of injustice and inequality in the world.

Third, the paper has presented evidence to suggest that overlaying the three distinctive models of trade unionism focusing on the market, society or class, is another distinction that partly parallels the first, but also goes beyond it. This is the contrasting identification between 'political' activists who see themselves as playing a wider part in shaping the kinds of choices made about whole labour market regulation and the future of society, and those who see their activism as more limited in scope. Non-political activists focus more on the occupational, professional or more frequently workplace group from which they come, and our evidence suggests they are more likely to ally themselves with the employers and less likely to participate in wider union training and union-building. While the *class* and *market* poles are more clearly at separate sides of this 'political / non-political' divide, there is much less clarity of identity among those who share notions of rights, fairness and justice. Some who articulated social integration values considered themselves 'political', others did not.

Bringing these findings together suggests two general conclusions. First, we can confirm Gallie's observation that employee attitudes to management vary considerably between countries, despite considerable similarities in the work undertaken. There still appears no technological imperative - and we would add today no globalisation imperative - dictating a unique pattern of social integration. In particular, twenty years after his study of the 'new working class' found that 'French workers had an "exploitative" image of the firm, whereas the British workers had a co-operative image' (Gallie 1978: 300), we conclude that French and British banking union activists' still reproduce these older images.

Second, at a time when collective bargaining is being increasingly decentralised to the level of the firm, and the pressures on workplace trade unionism to restrict its scope are growing, we find a strong tendency for activists to respond in the words of the CFDT General Secretary, '*le boîte par boîte*' (company by company) (Banque 1999: 8). Yet if *enterprise* unionism is adopted, our study of contemporary activists in two very different contexts suggests that unions stressing this focus to the exclusion of the two others (*societal integration* or *class struggle*) may find the recruitment and integration of activists *more* difficult rather than easier. This is partly because the union's attractiveness to those with a broad scope view would be reduced, and partly because broad scope activists appear more likely to emphasise issues that are external to the workplace. It is also probable that narrow scope activist recruits are in greater danger of losing an element of independent representativity in their relations with management. Besides denying workers a collective voice within society as a whole, a dominant focus on enterprise and market unionism might well be counter-productive to the recruitment of the next generation of independent activists.

There is no simple solution to this problem at a moment of considerable employer labour market strength. Yet in the context of massive international banking restructuring there is an opportunity to link common specific employee concerns about job insecurity and employer arbitrariness to an understanding of the importance of whole labour market and societal-wide regulation through political action. In the newly-merged UNIFI (the former BIFU) there appears to be a need to stress political issues; while in the politically-fractious *CFDT Banque* there would appear to be a need to focus more on basic worker grievances. In a phrase, this modest piece of research suggests both unions need a greater politicisation of employee concerns.

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ⁱ The BIFU interview total is increased from 7 to 12 by the addition of two NWSA interviewees and three UNIFI (formerly Barclays Staff Association) interviewees. These interviews were all carried out in May 1999 at the Blackpool founding congress of the new merged union, UNIFI.

ⁱⁱ The prompts worked well, with one exception. The CFDT was created from the secular majority of the Catholic CFTC in 1964, and this means that on family and internationalism the CFDT's official discourse is still closer to its predecessor than to the CGT and FO (Hetzl, Lefèvre et al. 1998). It also means that the term 'solidarité', which in France means *both* the English sense of a readiness to act on behalf of another *and* the Catholic duty of compassion towards others, is more frequently used with this second sense within the CFDT. When used by *CFDT Banque* activists its precise meaning had to be deduced from the overall context of the interview.