

European Trade Union Institute

From the Selected Works of Kurt Vandaele

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**Reports. European trade unionism in transition?
Workshop, Berlin, 9 and 10 September 2008**

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kurt_vandaele/57/

Sociology Professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and director of the GEDIME directed the event as a whole, introducing the keynote speakers and coordinating the opening and closing ceremonies.

Further information can be found on the symposium website:
<http://gedime.wordpress.com/>

Translation from the Spanish by Kathleen Llanwarne

References

Glick Schiller, N., L. Basch and C. Szanton-Blanc (1992) 'Towards a Definition of Transnationalism. Introductory Remarks and Research Questions', in N. Glick Schiller, L. Basch and

C. Szanton-Blanc (eds.) *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity and Nationalism Reconsidered*, New York: New York Academy of Sciences.

Portes, A., L. Guarnizo and P. Landolt (1999) 'The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of an Emergent Research Field', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22 (2), 217-237.

Sònia Parella and Leonardo Cavalcanti
Researchers at GEDIME
and coordinators of the symposium
'New challenges of transnationalism
in the study of migration'

European trade unionism in transition?

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In recent years the pervasive doom and gloom concerning the future of trade unions has lifted somewhat in academic research. Inspired by labour history, industrial relations researchers have by and large shifted from a rather deterministic view of the union movement towards the recognition that unions have some room for manoeuvre. In line with this more voluntaristic view, an international workshop entitled 'European trade unionism in transition?' was held in Berlin on 9-10 September, hosted by the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB, Social Science

Research Centre, Berlin). Both trade union practitioners and scholars participated in the workshop, which was sponsored by the German Hans-Böckler-Stiftung and the ETUI-REHS.

While underlining in his introductory welcome the normative role of unions in defending and broadening democracy, Nikolaus Simon, director of the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, declared that one of the main objectives of the workshop was 'to analyse and to evaluate counter movements and tendencies within trade unionism in Europe'. But notwithstanding the

workshop's optimistic intentions, the first two contributions – on the international and domestic challenges facing trade unions – painted a rather dark picture of their prospects. Such an overview may well be necessary for an understanding of how and to what degree unions can make their own history under the current economic circumstances, however.

Ulrich Jürgens (WZB) outlined three consequences of the 'new international division of labour'. In Jürgens's view the shift in power between labour and capital in favour of the latter and the undermining of solidarity between workers have been caused by ongoing economic restructuring at the global level, the internationalisation of companies and the growing financialisation of the economy. The outlook for trade unions scarcely looked any brighter when Jürgen Hoffmann (University of Hamburg) presented a number of current 'national' trends in Europe which overlap with the neoliberal globalisation wave. The structural shift in employment from manufacturing to private services, often in combination with changes in employment forms; the accompanying erosion of the social and cultural ties among blue-collar workers; and the hollowing out of the nation state, within the framework of which the trade union movement was born and moulded; all cast a dark shadow over trade union possibilities for revitalisation.

Yet in the ensuing debate several participants made a number of telling points and, overall, sounded more hopeful. So, while it is easier for companies in industry to move to places with lower wages and poorer working conditions, 'pack and go' opportunities in the private services sector are sparser. In the UK, the trade

unions have even been able to target large firms in the private services sector to organise workers, despite the small, dispersed workplaces. What is more, one participant recalled that in recent quantitative studies 'traditional' variables – education level, gender, and so on – have been less successful in predicting union membership, which indirectly indicates that unions' membership composition is changing. At the same time, the union presence in the workplace is still a very robust factor in those studies.

The importance of trade union organisation at the workplace in explaining union membership seems not only to be stable over time but also between different places. Overwhelming empirical evidence for the latter, despite the cross-national institutional variation, was provided by Jeremy Waddington (University of Manchester and ETUI-REHS) in his well received presentation. On the basis of surveys of union members in various countries in Europe – including some new Member States – it could be concluded that the union presence at the workplace is of great significance in terms of how members think about their union. Union-dominated workplace representation, organised by union representatives or works councils, or both, clearly improves members' perception of general trade union performance, although union members are not necessarily content with such workplace representation in itself. Furthermore, the surveys made it clear that union members favour 'traditional' forms of union support, though highly qualified union members also ask for more support as regards training and career advice.

The next contributions to the workshop shifted the focus from existing trade union

members to the recruitment of new ones. Expert on recruiting and organising non-union workers Ed Heery (Cardiff Business School) presented a clear and critical overview of the current state of research on the 'organising model'. Although a lot is already known from the Anglo-Saxon context on the constraints of the organising model and the conditions for its success, a major criticism of the available research is the apparent lack of a cross-national comparative perspective, especially with countries with a different institutional setting.

The practitioner's view from Agnes Schreieder provided a first, but well-informed assessment of the potential of the 'organising model' in a non-Anglo-Saxon context. As a Deputy Regional Secretary in Hamburg of ver.di, the most important service sector union in Germany, Schreieder pointed out that the organising techniques in themselves are not new for German unions. Experience and knowledge of a more consistent, formal, planned and systematic approach to membership recruitment is, however, fairly undeveloped. More financial resources and the establishment of a department for training on organising seem necessary if the relatively provisional character of organising campaigns in Germany today is to be overcome. As Klaus Dörre (University of Jena) made clear in his contribution,¹ the deterioration of the institutional power of German unions, as reflected in the decentralisation of collective bargaining and the erosion of bargaining coverage, demands more and better organising efforts to increase workers' associational power. From the perspective of the new Member

States, and of Poland in particular, Juliusz Gardawski (Warsaw School of Economics) addressed the increased need for cross-border organising campaigns given the more worrying – financial – situation of most trade unions in central and eastern Europe and the wider possibilities open to global companies to use divide-and-rule strategies.

From the ensuing discussion among workshop participants it turned out that organising homogenous groups of workers is easier and that union democracy tends to give priority to allocating resources to the application of familiar tactics and methods and existing structures. To some extent the unions give the impression that they are reluctant to try to recruit workers beyond their 'traditional' membership. Furthermore, it is not only a matter of recruiting under-represented groups of workers but also of integrating them successfully into trade union representative structures, a theme that was addressed by the next three speakers. Lise Lotte Hansen (Roskilde University) caught the audience's attention by asking 'what do women want?' More prosaically, she then focused on gender democracy within trade unions, as did Alexandra Scheele (University of Potsdam), while Michael Fichter (Free University of Berlin) introduced the issue of migrant workers and unions. A common conclusion of the three contributions was that formal measures with an emancipatory orientation – such as quotas – do little to challenge vested interests within trade unions. Encouraging transformational change and putting the interests of under-represented groups of workers into a broader societal perspective are more promising means of empowering such workers.

1 Presented by Oliver Nachtwey (University of Jena).

The pattern observed in various countries that unions are better at organising homogenous groups of workers returned in the final theme of the workshop, concerning the rise of specialist and professional unions. In a context of high but declining union density in Sweden, the latter partly due to the amendments to the unemployment insurance system initiated by the new government in 2006, Anders Kjellberg (Lund University) confirmed that more heterogeneous unions are clearly losing members, while specialist and professional unions are gaining members within the main union confederations. In his analytical contribution² Bruno Cattero (University of Eastern Piedmont and associated researcher at ETUI-REHS) shed light on the fragmented union structure in Italy, especially in the public sector – with the extraordinary phenomenon of ‘one-man-unions’ – and addressed the similarities and differences between the ‘traditional’ and new autonomous unions. Compared with the latter, ‘traditional’ autonomous unions seem to be more moderate in their strategy, although the ‘radical’ left-wing unions are an exception. In his case study on the 2007 national rail strike in Germany Rudi Schmidt (University of Jena) showed, however, that even one of the oldest professional unions – the German Train Drivers’ Union was established in 1867 – could display a ‘willingness to act’ when their traditional status was weakened due to the implementation of private sector managerial practices in the public sector.

A concluding round table with Isabel da Costa (Institutions et Dynamiques Historiques de l’Economie – Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan), Jon Erik

Dølvik (Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Oslo), Francesco Garibaldi (Istituto per il Lavoro, Bologna), Anke Hassel (Hertie School of Governance, Berlin) and Richard Hyman (London School of Economics) displayed a remarkable academic consensus but this does not make the trade unions’ task any easier. Various speakers emphasised that ‘bread-and-butter’ policies, adapted to workers’ direct interests, are instrumentally useful in recruiting and retaining members. But the unions should also develop a new vision, according to Richard Hyman, if they want to become more appealing to young workers and have more say at the workplace and in society. In line with this, the point was also made that building coalitions with social movements and political parties is worthwhile on selected issues. Moreover, given the central power of the Council of Ministers within the decision-making structure of the European Union, national coalition building is absolutely necessary for helping to realise the social dimension of the European Union. At the same time, there was agreement that unions should raise awareness of the European Union at the workplace in a pro-active way and transnational union cooperation should be further strengthened by making use of existing structures, such as European Works Councils.

Is European trade unionism in transition? On the one hand, trade unions, in a way combining features of Janus and Proteus – figures of Roman and Greek mythology, respectively – have always had the difficult task of taking on a number of faces and forms (which are often contradictory) at different policy levels at the

² Presented by Francesco Garibaldi.

same time. In this way, trade unions give the impression of being continuously in transition. Moreover, the dominance achieved by industrial unions over craft unions demonstrates that they were able to adjust to different industrial structures and production regimes. Yet this 'adjustment' is not the result of a certain functional logic but of continuous conflict and debate, including within the union movement itself. It is not surprising, then, that the expression 'a bird in the hand is worth

two in the bush' was the *fil rouge* of the Berlin workshop, expressing trade union hesitancy in allocating resources for re-empowering strategies. Hence, on the other hand, the question mark in the workshop title seems still to be justified.

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