Factors of cooperation - Exploring union engagement in the German Clean Clothes Campaign in the context of labour internationalism[1]

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Against the background of the globalization of the world economy and the hegemony of deregulatory discourses over the last decades, trade unions all over the world struggle to adapt to a social and political environment with increasing international competition and pressure on workers' rights. Both in literature and in practice calls for "Labor's Turn to Globalize" (Evans 2010: 352) are increasing. However, reality looks different as many unions are still concentrating most of their activities on the national sphere, while severe violations of labour rights continue at a global level. While effective transnational trade union activism was still in a nascent stage, an increasing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from various other social movements has taken up the issue of exploitative working conditions in global production networks since the 1980s. Today, these non-union actors play an important role in building transnational solidarity, hence offering a chance of coalition-building for trade unions in the struggle for better working conditions worldwide.

However, intense cooperation between unions and other social movements in order to build transnational solidarity between stakeholders in global production networks (i.e. in their identities as workers, consumers, citizens) is still rather exceptional. Which factors determine the engagement of trade unions in such transnational union-NGO networks for better working conditions? Why do some unions focus more on inter-union cooperation when it comes to building transnational solidarity while others cooperate more intensely with other social movements?

In order to explore these questions, this paper looks at the engagement of the two biggest German trade unions ver.di and IG Metall (IGM) in the German Clean Clothes Campaign. The Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) is a global network of NGOs, trade unions and other civil society organizations. Founded in 1989 in the Netherlands, the campaign tries to improve working conditions in the global garment industry and comprises today 15 national campaigns within Europe. The German national CCC consists of a broad network of civil society organizations both from the NGO and union spectrum, including IG Metall and ver.di. As the industrial trade union IGM is organizing the textile and clothing sector, it would be expected to be more active in the German CCC than ver.di which is organizing the services sector. However, in reality ver.di is far more active in the German CCC than IGM. Against the background of this counter-intuitive setting, the paper seeks to explore the factors which determine union involvement in the German CCC in order to generate insights for the overall question of union cooperation with social movements in the transnational realm.

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An analysis of the factors which determine the cooperation between trade unions and other social movements in the international context is relevant both in scientific and practical regard as revitalization and internationalization appear as crucial aspects for the future of the trade union movement. Based on the theories of sources of trade union power (Wright 2000; Silver 2003), trade union identities and solidarity formation (Hyman 1994; 2002) and varieties of labour internationalism (Waterman 2001; Munck 2002; Webster et al. 2008), the paper uses a comparative research design with a qualitative content analysis of the two unions' members journals, their websites on international issues and congress proposals as well as supporting expert interviews and an analysis of secondary literature.

The findings suggest that the engagement in alliance-building activities as part of a revitalization process is shaped by the specific 'trade union identity' (Hyman 1994) which dominates at a particular point of time. The trade union identity, in turn, seems to be shaped by the trade union 'sources of power' (Wright 2000; Silver 2003). It is argued that if there are structurally powerful workers in the organizational area of a trade union, the union is more likely to focus on a member-oriented business union strategy in its revitalization efforts (IGM) instead of promoting elements a social movement union identity which engages more in alliance-building with other social movements and building transnational solidarity through this avenue (ver.di).

The results of the analysis furthermore suggest that revitalizing through a focus on business unionism is more compatible with the 'embeddedness in institutional structures' (Behrens et al. 2003) than revitalizing through social movement unionism. The aspect of institutional settings of industrial relations as a facilitating or restraining factor for different forms of union revitalization and consequently for building transnational solidarity through cooperation with other social movements appears as an interesting field for further research and discussion.

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Short Biography and research profile

Tandiwe Gross works as a freelance collaborator at the Bureau for Workers' Activities at the International Labour Organization and is active in the international union network TIE. She has a Master's degree in "Labour Policies and Globalisation" from the University of Kassel and the Berlin School of Economics and Law (Global Labour University). Being a former fellow of the Hans-Böckler-Foundation, her research interests are in the area of labour internationalism, cooperation of trade unions and NGOs and working conditions in global supply chains. Her research semester at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in India was focused on industrial relations in India and on research on local and global organizing strategies in the Indian garment sector.