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Abstract: Win-Win or Sacrifice? On the rationality of international labour solidarity. The case of German trade unions' relationships with undocumented migrant workers

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Even as international labour solidarity is hailed as the old, yet increasingly pressing challenge for trade unions, it remains unclear under what premises it ought to be realized. In the academic debate (e.g. Bieler & Lindberg 2011; Bieler et al 2008; Bronfenbrenner 2007 etc.), international solidarity is widely taken synonymous for “cooperation”, typically researched empirically in case studies. Unfortunately, such studies hardly have theoretical ambitions. Without theory it is difficult to apply insights from one particular case to another. Theory seems a necessary ingredient, if we take Hyman's call for a reconceptualization of solidarity serious: *“New vocabularies which give meaning to the identity, standing and programme of trade unionism are part of the key to union survival and renewal”* (Hyman 2011:25).

In this presentation, I will consider the issue of motivation for labour solidarity with undocumented migrant workers. I am interested in the rationality of labour solidarity as the most generalizable form of motivation. Differentiating between instrumental and moral rationality, I will argue that both rationalities cannot offer satisfying accounts for the development of trade union solidarity with undocumented migrant workers in Germany.

In the first part, I will propose to consider the relationship between trade unions and undocumented migrants from the perspective of international solidarity. One reason is that this relationship is structured by membership in different nation-states. Moreover, undocumented migration is facilitated by a context of international uneven development—solidarity at a national level would fall short of engaging this dynamic.

In the second part, I will briefly reconstruct a debate among trade unionists who seek to foster solidarity with undocumented migrant workers. On the one side, it is argued that trade union solidarity can only be sustainable if the relationship brings advantages to everyone involved—in other words, if it is a “win-win” proposition. On the other side, other activists claim that solidarity is a moral duty. Union members who are citizens are in a privileged position which obliges them to support disadvantaged undocumented migrants before expecting any (material) improvements in return.

In the third part, the main part of the argument, I will relate these different claims to theories of rationality. There is a widespread conception of a fundamental difference between instrumental and moral rationality. None of these rationalities, as I will try to show, is able to provide a satisfying perspective on how international solidarity is supposed to expand, particularly in the context of undocumented migration.

If we understand international labour solidarity instrumentally, we confront the Mancur Olson's “Problem of collective action”. Even as it may be possible to devise a common interest between “documented” and “undocumented” workers (e.g. higher wages), instrumental rationality would make it attractive for workers to “free ride” on other people's efforts. In response to such free rider problem, Elinor Ostrom's concept of the *commons* envisions institutional mechanisms that reduce

the incentive to free ride in collective efforts. While it helps to conceive of a trade union commons between “documented” and “undocumented” migrant workers, the idea of the commons immediately raises another problem by emphasizing the boundaries between members and non-members. Today, “trade union commons” are de facto based on boundaries that exclude undocumented migrant workers. Against this, solidarity efforts have been made to build a more inclusive trade union commons, as e.g. by institutionalizing special trade union centres for undocumented migrant workers (“MigrAr”) in Hamburg, Berlin, Munich, Cologne and Frankfurt or devising new organizing campaigns among migrant workers with precarious status (such as the European Migrant Workers Union). The problem, however, is that such efforts have not (yet) produced self-sustainable commons. The investments, however little, were largely not considered to yield enough returns to warrant new investments to sustain or expand the effort.

By contrast, if we understand international solidarity morally, the challenge is to provide an account for such moral foundation. In particular, based on what grounds should we expect morally-based form of labour solidarity to emerge and prevail, when its demands run counter to instrumental rationality? In the context of shrinking resources (for trade unions and individual workers), why should we expect a shift in priorities to fund such solidarity efforts with uncertain outcomes, while de-funding trade union activities that have been well established and supported by vested interests? Theoretically speaking, it is unclear how such emergence of moral rationality relates to trends that were described as (bureaucratic) rationalization (Weber) or commodification (Marx)?

The hope that an organizational crisis (declining membership, financial resources, political influence etc.) could lead to new moral practices within trade unions seems far-fetched. An insight that “we can't go on like that” does not necessarily translate into organizational change. Social psychologist Harald Welzer (2008), for one, highlights historical instances in which declining resources have led to struggles between groups, rather than innovations for greater collaboration. Such exclusionary dynamic may also be observed within trade unions as studies repeatedly confirm the growing significance of national-chauvinist argumentations in trade union policy (Wompel 2006) and among trade union members (Zeuner 2007). Complementing this picture, existing solidarity efforts with undocumented migrant workers, such as MigrAr, are severely underfunded and key concerns of undocumented migrant workers are not reflected in the political agenda of trade unions.

Given the shortcomings of conceptions of instrumental and moral rationality to envision the possibility of trade union solidarity with undocumented migrant workers, the conclusion, therefore, raises the question, whether we should and can conceive of an alternative, “third kind” of rationality.

Bio:

Markus Kip: I am a PhD student in sociology at York University, Toronto. My dissertation focuses on labour solidarity with undocumented migrant workers in Germany by researching actually existing practices of solidarity. Since 2011 I am actively involved in a trade union centre for undocumented migrant workers in Berlin. My personal motivation for this research relates to my two-year experience as a day laborer in New York. I have obtained an MA in sociology from the New School for Social Research (New York) and a BA in philosophy and theology (Munich and San Salvador, C.A.). Currently, I live in Berlin.