

INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP

EUROPEAN TRADE UNIONISM IN TRANSITION?

SEPTEMBER 9TH AND 10TH, 2008

at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung

The workshop aims to stimulate an intensive discussion among European experts in industrial relations on the central tendencies, problems and perspectives of European trade union movements. The workshop will be financially supported by the Hans-Böckler-Foundation and the European Trade Union Institute – Research, Education and Health and Safety (ETUI-REHS)) and will be organised at the International Science Centre Berlin (WZB).

For more than three decades trade unions in Europe have been under pressure as a result of declining membership and political influence. The relatively high density rates and the hegemonic position that trade unions had been able to secure during the post war period of ‘Fordism’ and ‘Keynesianism’ dissipated as production system were restructured after the world economic crisis of the mid-70s, the ‘neoliberal counter-revolution’ of the 1980s, the intensified internationalisation of capital (‘globalisation’) of the 1990s and the recent upsurge of finance capital. Moreover, the long-term growth of the service sector and white-collar employment, integral to which was the feminisation of labour markets, challenged the basis of trade union membership. Trade unionism remained over-reliant on the traditional industrial, blue collar and male-dominated segments of the economy for members. The recent emergence of the so-called ‘knowledge society’ has merely intensified the sense of trade union dislocation. The end of the East-West-conflict marked by the breakdown of state-socialist economies and growing opportunities for companies to invest in low wage countries of the East (to chose the ‘exit – option’) also fostered the weakness of union movements. Neo-liberal and globalised capitalism often seems to be the only future perspective, whereas class orientated trade unions negotiating through sectoral collective bargaining are presented by many as ‘dinosaurs’.

The purpose of this workshop is not to document the ‘pessimism of knowledge’; but to analyse and to evaluate the counter movements and tendencies found within trade unionism – in the sense of an ‘optimism of action’ (to use the phrase of Antonio Gramsci). Many initiatives have been taken by European unions to recruit new members and to mobilise their membership in order to establish hegemonic positions in society. Organising, a concept which was originally developed in the USA, has become more prominent within continental European unions. The traditional vertical forms of organisation have, in part, been supplemented by new forms of representation and participation that have encouraged the mobilisation of traditionally under-represented groups of workers (such as, women, migrants, precarious workers and young workers). In contrast, there is an obvious re-emergence of professional unions (*COBAS* in Italy, *Organisation Cockpit*, *Marburger Bund* and the train drivers union *GdL* in Germany), which represent small groups with homogenous interests and have considerable bargaining power. The emergence of these organisations has increased the pressure on sectoral or class orientated unions and their collective political approach.

The workshop will analyse and attempt to find answers to the questions raised by these developments from different national perspectives. The workshop is organised in four substantive sessions and a round table. For most sessions there will be two or three short (no more than 15 minutes) introductions followed by debate from the floor. The workshop is thus intended to be participatory. The language for the workshop will be English.

Conference Conveners

Michael Fichter: Free University of Berlin
Jürgen Hoffmann: Hamburg Centre for International Studies, University of Hamburg
Ulrich Jürgens: Social Science Research Centre Berlin – WZB
Jeremy Waddington: University of Manchester – European Trade Union Institute
Brussels

DAY 1

10.00 – 10.30: ARRIVAL AND COFFEE

10.30 – 11.45: INTRODUCTION

This section will identify the key changes in the labour market and employers' practices that impinge on the issue of union organisation with separate emphases on manufacturing and private sector services. The questions addressed in the session include. What are the implications of new forms of production – in industry and services - for union organisation? What specific challenges arise from the shift in employment towards private sector services? How are both manufacturing and service sector unions dealing with the challenges of internationalisation?

Introductory

Welcome: Nikolaus Simon

Speakers: Ulrich Jürgens and Jürgen Hoffmann

Chair: Maria Jepsen

11.45 – 13.00: THE UNION OVERVIEW

The decline in unionization, the difficulties of organizing workers in the expanding private sector services and the views of hitherto under-represented groups (women, young and ethnic minority workers) are well documented. The intention of this session is to raise a number of questions/topics that will be discussed during the course of the workshop. The central theme will be the importance of workplace union activity to members and the reversal of recent declines in union membership.

Speaker: Jeremy Waddington

Chair: Wolfgang Schroeder

13.00 – 13:45: LUNCH

13:45 – 15.45: THE IMPACT OF ORGANISING

Organising appears to be new recruitment. Unions are implementing initiatives throughout Europe under the banner of organising, but each initiative differs from others. We can reasonably ask the question: what is organizing? Is there any evidence that it works? Is, and if so to what extent, organizing transferable from Anglo-Saxon union movements to those operating within more social market oriented economies? What influence have the activities of the SEIU had on organising initiatives in Europe?

Speakers: Ed Heery, Agnes Schreieder, Klaus Dörre, Juliusz Gardawski.

Chair: Nikolaus Simon.

15.45 – 16.15: COFFEE

16.15 – 17.45: ARE NEW FORMS OF REPRESENTATION AVAILABLE?

Traditionally trade unions have relied on vertical (industrial) and geographical forms of representation. Recently, these traditional forms have been supplemented by horizontal forms of representation intended to encourage higher rates of participation among under-represented groups of workers. How are under-represented groups represented within trade unions? What is the character of recent changes to union democracy and systems of representation? Do the new forms of representation work? How do under-represented groups want to be represented? To what extent does the organising of migrant workers and workers from ethnic minorities depend upon the qualities of internal union representation?

Speakers: Alexandra Scheele, Michael Fichter, Lise-Lotte Hansen.

Chair: Udo Rehfeldt.

20.00: DINNER

DAY 2

09.00 - 10.30: THE RISE OF SPECIALIST AND PROFESSIONAL UNIONS

In Nordic countries the rate of membership growth of specialist or professional trade unions is higher than for other unions; in Britain and France similar unions have established key positions in collective bargaining; and in Germany a range of such unions (GDL, Marburger Bund, Vereinigung Cockpit, UfO) has fought for or negotiated improvements in terms and conditions of employment superior to those negotiated by the unions affiliated to the DGB. What do these developments tell us about the character of trade union representation in the early twenty-first century? Do specialist and professional unions constitute a threat to larger and more heterogeneous unions and, if so, what is the nature of this threat? How can/should larger unions respond? What are the implications of these developments for collective bargaining?

Speakers: Rudi Schmidt, Anders Kjellberg, Bruno Cattero.

Chair: Jens Lind.

10.30 – 11.00: COFFEE

11.30 – 13.30: ROUND TABLE: DOES EUROPEAN TRADE UNIONISM HAVE A FUTURE AND, IF SO, IN WHAT FORM?

The European trade union movement has been one of the staunchest, long-term supporters of the 'European project'. As the character of European integration becomes more neo-liberal in orientation and the prospect of the trade union movement being marginalised increases, how can the trade union movement respond? What is the future of trade unionism in Europe? Can internationalization be achieved? What are the immediate changes required to respond to changes in the labour market, political economy and polity? The ETUC now states that it is 'on the offensive': what does this mean in practice?

Contributors: Jon Erik Dølvik, Francesco Garibaldi, Anke Hassel, Richard Hyman, Isabel da Costa

Chair: Walther Müller-Jentsch,

13.30: LUNCH