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Editorial

The Future of Trade Unions in Europe. Part II

This is the second special issue on ‘The Future of Trade Unions in Western Europe’. In the first issue we presented contributions on recent debates in Germany; the situation in Belgium, Spain, and Poland; as well as the development of industrial relations in the Nordic countries. The present issue includes papers on Britain, France, Italy, Greece, and Hungary.

Despite the limitations of this scope and the obvious fact that individual nations seldom reflect the developments of entire regions, we believe that we have nonetheless succeeded in providing a survey of the most relevant systems of labour relations in Europe. While we managed to treat a region like the Nordic countries as a whole in the first issue, we are this time focusing on the peculiarities of the situations in individual countries. Britain, for example, is a “strange phenomenon” and Italy is not just a Mediterranean example but moreover an “enigma”.

Incomparabilities always confront social scientists with problems. Trade unions appeared to be clearly defined. The solidarity of the masses had to stand up to the power of capital. Particulars such as partisan affiliations, occupational traditions, and government regulations on participation in and co-determination of the welfare state did not appear to affect the core of the trade union movement.

The essays in this issue, however, show that national peculiarities determine path dependencies and that the situation of trade unions in Europe today has become highly diverse. The only thing still uniting them seems to be their crisis-like state. While the first issue managed to identify positive trends in Scandinavia and Belgium, the general outlook this time around is bleak.

Gregor Gall notes that British unions, which once instilled terror in Conservative governments, have faded to mere shadow of themselves. Relative membership figures have dropped by half, their ability to strike has evaporated, and their influence on the Labour Party has declined considerably. *Dominique Andolfatto & Dominique Labbé*’s diagnosis of France offers little more hope. Here, dwindling memberships have led to a situation in which union officials have become stronger and more professional. Their role in reducing transaction costs is, however, so valuable to employers that the latter have entered the field of trade union funding. *Andreas Niko-*

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Iopoulos & Eleni Patra consider the state of affairs in Greece. Trade unions here used to be very competitive and tended to outbid each other with their demands. Now, however, the negotiations on wages and labour conditions that are typically reserved for trade unions and employers are being taken over by legislative measures to reduce labour costs based on demands of the troika. *László Neumann* detects a similarly strong political ambition to neutralise the power of trade unions in Hungary. The difference here is that the right-wing Orbán administration has succeeded in dividing the likewise partisan trade union movement along its fault lines and coercing parts of it into complicity with government policies. *Ida Regalia* describes how in Italy the traditionally contrary partisan orientations of the trade union federations do not necessarily prevent joint activities as social movements. The situation in Italy also shows that membership in and loyalty to a trade union are not necessarily identical.

Despite the many national differences, a few common trends remain. Old age pensioners, for example, who had hitherto played only a marginal role in classical trade union theory, are becoming pillars of support for trade unions throughout Europe. Austerity-oriented governments often set their sights on pension policy. As a result, senior citizens have become an unexpected political force. Also, the fact that practically everywhere civil servants have a disproportionally higher degree of unionisation is not as paradoxical as it may seem. The most likely explanation for this phenomenon would be that switching employers is easier in the private sector. If, however, the 'exit' option is blocked, only 'voice' remains.

Another interesting observation is that strike ballots can have unexpected effects: instead of obstructing strikes they signal – in the event of success – a readiness to take action. The introduction of works councils has not necessarily weakened unions either, since trade union representatives often dominate such committees.

So what is new about our assessment? During the last quarter century, studies of trade unions have appeared backwards and outmoded. New movements – environmentalism, feminism, gay/lesbian rights, various forms of local activism – have raised hopes of shaping a post-material future. Traditional employment models have made way for the paradigm of the independently operating 'entrepreneur', who requires neither representation nor organisation in a trade union.

The current crises are changing the rules of the game yet again. Wages are falling relatively or even absolutely, working conditions are deteriorating, and social security systems are being scaled back. It would be naive to expect these developments to strengthen the trade union movement. The workforce is still developing contrary to traditional patterns of mobilisation: it is better trained, more female, more foreign, and has more flexible working hours. However, trade unions can adapt. For example, women occupy the position of trade union leader in two EU countries. Several of the contributions also call attention to first signs of revitalisation.

What remains to be found is a trans-national perspective for Europe. Austerity policy is being orchestrated and conducted across borders while protest movements generally remain on the national level. The contributions in these two special issues show that, due to the variety of trade union systems, a simple addition of interests may be difficult to accomplish. The first coordinated wave of strikes on the European Day of Action and Solidarity against Austerity in mid-November 2012, however, proved that it may not be impossible.