Interests and Interest Representation of White Collar Workers in the German Manufacturing Sector. New Initiatives, Opportunity Structures, Framing and Resources.

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Introduction

White-collar workers in the traditional sectors of German manufacturing seem to be difficult to organize for works councils and unions. It is a well-known fact for decades that work related interests of white-collar workers differ from those of blue-collar workers (Lockwood 1958), and the differences did not have become smaller as more recent studies show (Hoose et al. 2009; Kotthoff 1997; Kudera et al. 1983). Hence, white-collar workers have a high professional orientation and a high motivation to work, they want to make their own contributions to the success of their companies and they are interested in hierarchic careers. These orientations are hard to reconcile with traditional forms of interest representations of unions and works councils who act as countervailing powers based on solidarity and corporatist interest formation. The individualistic feature of white-collar workers' interests seems to make them much more difficult for collective interest aggregation than demands on higher wages or shorter working times. In contrast to that, as research has shown, white-collar workers use to pursue their interests in an individual fashion by talking to their superiors and not by contacting

works councils or unions and asking them to act on their behalf (Kotthoff/Wagner 2008; Hoose et al. 2009). Interest representations are appreciated by white-collar workers, both in the sense of being a countervailing power to capital and of being an advocate of the employees with less power; however, they are not appreciated by this group of employees as important actors for the representation of their own interests.

The situation for works councils and unions seems to be dilemmatic. On the one hand, the interests of white-collar workers are hard to organize, on the other hand the importance of white-collar workers is continuously on the rise. In 2012 already half of the workers in the German manufacturing sector have been white-collars. Unions who continue to put their efforts in representing blue-collar workers mainly are in danger to become fractal organizations representing only a minority of workers in their organizational domain (Dörre 2011). Moreover, white-collar workers, and the more the higher their hierarchical position or their qualification is, have a high structural power (Wright 2001) that would be important for works councils and unions to make use of, both as voters in elections of works councils or a experts asked by works councils or as union members willing to strike.

The problem is far from being new; unions in Germany have dealt with it for the last 30 years or so, however with little success so far. However, in the last years unions in the metalworking and the chemical sectors have developed new attempts to cope with the problem. There seems to be a big difference between these new and the old attempts that have been made in former times, for two reasons. First, unions, and especially the metalworkers union IG Metall have recognized white-collar workers as the central target group for membership recruitment, and they have shifted resources in form of money and people to local projects designed to organize white-collar workers in the plants. These activities, second, are embedded in broader strategies of organizational

reforms of the unions mainly oriented on organizing, membership participation and activation of works councils (Turner 1998).

However, the main level of action for strengthening membership and organizational power for unions and for works councils is the plant level. It is in the plants where employees articulate interests, where interest representations can shape their profile as supporters and defenders of employees and their interests and where employees decide for or against union membership. This is the reason why I will focus my analysis on the activities of works councils and unions on plant level. I will analyze new initiatives of interest representations to attract white-collar workers, both with respect to new topics or new processes they have developed in this context. How do these initiatives look like? What are the issues they are focusing on, what are the processes to integrate white-collar workers? How to white collar-workers respond to the initiatives? And, finally, in how far does this go hand in hand with a more fundamental change of the forms interest representation of labor is practiced in the plants?

These questions will be tackled by referring to results of a research project financed by the Hans-Böckler-Foundation during the last two years. Before I will show the results in detail, I will discuss the problem of the interplay between interests and interest representation in a more conceptual way.

The interplay between labor interests and interest representation

Do initiatives to attract white-collar workers have any prospects to be successful in the shorter or longer run? Looking at the evidence in the literature cited above, there is little scope for hope. However, there are some different hints to find in the subtexts of the literature. In this way, Boes and Kämpf (2011) have stated that interests of white-collar workers change in the course of growing levels of offshoring, standardization and insecurity of work, observable in reduced motivation to work, a more critical stance

towards the enterprise and a growing willingness to accept conflicts in the pursuit of interests. Several years earlier, Schmidt and Wentzke (1991) have stressed the important role of different experiences workers make on plant level, depending on the strength, union orientation and willingness to conflicts of works councils. The more this is the case, the less the white-collar employees are aligned with their employers and their work.

This evidence gives some hints that the room of maneuver might be bigger for interest representations than one would have expected at first sight. However, the perspectives for collective actors of labor interests remain unclear, owing to the single edged point of view taken in research. For labor representatives are analyzed in the way of static institutions, not of actors able to change their environment. The only real actors the analyses focus on are the white-collar employees. Labor representatives seem to have to accept the interests and the membership decisions of the workers the way they are; opportunities to influence these interests and decisions are not discussed. How could an interplay between both be conceptualized?

On the one hand there are the work related interests of the employees, which are based on structured definitions of the situation (Neuendorff/Sabel 1978), on interpretations of work related developments and problems and on goals of action to cope with these developments and problems. The interests of workers can be manifold, as shown by the difference between subject interests and labor power interests developed by Schuman et al. (1982), distinguishing interests in careers or work autonomy from interests in wages or working times. And workers' interests can be contradictory (Kudera et al. 1979), take for example interests in high wages which may go hand in hand with overtime work and long working hours and interests in sustainable working conditions and the preservation of labor power.

On the other hand, labor representatives can shape and form collective interests, and the decisive question seems to be in how far and in what ways they try to integrate and to influence interests of white-collar workers. An important precondition for doing this is the development of definitions of situations in which white-collars and their interests play a central role. Another important factor is the number of white-collar workers as members of the works councils and the pressure they put on the pursuit of white-collar interests. In this respect, institutional entrepreneurs in the councils might play a decisive role in changing the orientations within the councils.

There are mainly three aspects that are of crucial importance for the dynamics between workers' interests and interest representations (see also Levesque/Murray 2010). The first aspect is the *resources* labor representatives have at their disposal and the organizational power they have. The more resources with respect to time or personnel they have, the more they can deal with white-collar employees and take up special interests or expectations into their policies, or the more they can try to influence interests of the employees themselves. These investments could have the form of intensified communication with the employees, of defining responsibilities for white-collar workers within works councils or of extended forms of support from the unions to the works councils. Of special importance could be the presence of institutional entrepreneurs or change agents who have the interests and the power to push white-collar politics in the plants and to influence the orientations of the labor representatives (Heery/Conley 2007).

Second, interest representatives can try to change or shape employees' interests actively. This process is well known as 'framing' in social movement theory and has been adapted also in the sociology of industrial relations (Kelly 1998). Framing means the creation of a common frame of interpretations and definitions forming the base for the mobilization and organization of individual actors for collective interests and collective

interest groups. First and foremost, frames have two functions (Gahan / Pekarek 2913): to offer interpretations and to mobilize support for collective goals by referring to options of action. Frames can be adapted or changed according to situational requirements in several ways: By bridging with other frames, by the amplification of latent norms, by the extension of frames with respect to new issues or groups or by transformations in the sense of creating a new frame replacing the old. An interesting aspect is the way frames are created: they can be created on the top and then be disseminated to the bottom of an organization, or they can be created based on the participation of individual actors from below.

The third aspect, finally, is the political opportunity structure (Mc Adam et al 2001). Political opportunity structures define a room of maneouvre political actors can use by developing a repertoire of action which is adapted to the opportunities they are facing. Works councils could pick up white-collar initiatives developed by the unions in their internal politics, or they could take up the threat of increasing shares of white-collar employees in the plants. Opportunity structures could also have their origins in developments of collective bargaining and new topics like qualification or work-life-balance agreed upon there.

Methods and the sample

The core of the empirical analysis is based on plant cases in which works councils have developed new initiatives to represent the interests of white-collar employees. These initiatives can be characterized by two aspects: First, new political issues can be taken up that are related to interests of white-collar employees; second, interest representation can develop new processes of interest formation or of participation, mobilization or organization of white-collar employees. Initiatives of this kind have been

analysed in 11 cases in the metalworking and the chemical sectors, both together forming the core of manufacturing in Germany.

In the case studies several methods have been combined: expert interviews with works councils, employee interviews and employee surveys among white collar workers. In five of the 11 cases only expert interviews with works councils have been possible because we did not get access to the employees. Most of the plants are situated in the metalworking industry; in many cases they have R and D departments or are head-quarters of firms. The firm size is ranging from 90 to 30.000 employees, the white-collar share among the employees from 30% to 100% (table 1).

Table 1: The Cases Study Sample

Cases	Industry	Plant	Employees	Share of White-Collars	Interviews / Survey
Abgas	Metal	R and D Production	90	85%	5 Experts Survey
Anlagenbau	Metal	R and D Admin.	250	100%	2 Experts 2 Employees
Dynamo	Metal	R and D Sales Production	800	50%	1 Expert 9 Employees
Elektronik	Metal	R and D	1.200	100%	2 Experts 7 Employees Survey
Navigation	Chemical	R and D Admin.	560	50%	2 Experts 3 Employees
Verwaltung	Metal	Headquarters	1.300	100%	3 Experts 7 Employees
Zulieferer	Metal	R and D Production	1.000	30%	2 Experts
Kommuni-kation	Metal	R and D Service	450	100%	1 Expert
Mineral	Metal	R and D	300	90%	1 Expert
Automobil	Metal	Headquarters R and D	>30.000	60%	2 Experts

Rohrstahl	Metal	Headquarters Production	5.400	28% (5%)	3 Experts

White-collar initiatives in the plants: New Issues and Goals

In the plants we analyzed, several new issues and goals of white-collar initiatives can be observed (Table 2). Among the new issues and goals developed by the labor representatives, there are three types of cases to classify. The first type is the fight for the institutionalization of labor relations, the second is related to safeguarding of jobs and the third is characterized by new issues or issues that are handled in a new way by the interest representatives.

Table 2: New Issues and Goals

Cases	Issues and Goals
Abgas	Establishement of works council Collective bargaining coverage Working times
Anlagenbau	Health Psychological stress
Dynamo	Safeguarding of jobs Plant business strategy
Elektronik	Working time
Navigation	Working time Health Safeguarding of jobs
Verwaltung	Working time Health / good work
Zulieferer	Mobile work
Kommunikation	Collective bargaining coverage
Mineral	Qualification Working time
Automobil	Working time and work life balance
Rohrstahl	Safeguarding of jobs

The *fight for the institutionalization of labor relations* is predominant in the cases *Abgas* and *Kommunikation*. Here, the labor representatives tried to pursue the goal of getting their plants covered by collective bargaining agreements and, in the case of *Abgas*, to establish a works council from scratch. At *Abgas* it was the arrival of a new owner that

created a new opportunity structure. The new owner and his management tried to implement a new working time system based on working time accounts. Before, the employees organized their working time on their own, a formal regulation did not exist and they saved their overtime on informal accounts. One of the demands of the new management has been that the informal overtimes were to cut in the course of the introduction of the new working time system. The predominantly white-collar workers have been shocked by this announcement. Discontent was further fuelled by new information about the wage levels at the other German plant of the new owner, which was covered by collective bargaining agreements and paid higher wages. The employees got this information from job advertisements hanging out at the notice boards. This was the time when innovative actors entered the stage, two or three employees who developed the initiative to establish a works council and to fight for collective bargaining coverage. When they went to the union to ask for support and resources, they were told that as a precondition for substantial union action they would have to organize union members in the plant, otherwise the union has no legitimacy to help them; at least 50% of the 90 employees should be organized, from about just three or four members at that time. Besides mobilizing resources, the innovative actors also had to convince the other employees by developing a new frame based on the feeling of injustice and disadvantage. When the works council has been established finally (mainly composed of the innovative actors), he has been elected by 95% of the employees which is an extraordinary high share. At the same time, they tried to convince the other employees of union membership, arguing that it is the precondition for collective bargaining coverage of the plant. This argument has been successful, for in a rather short period of time the works council managed to convince 60% of the employees to be-

come union members. This was the starting point for the union to negotiate for a collective bargaining agreement with management, and this was done in a rather participatory manner by coopting "simple" employees in the union's bargaining commission.

At *Kommunikation*, the situation has been different in the way that a works council already existed and similar in the way that the conflict here also was focused on collective bargaining coverage. With one plant being covered and the other not, management announced not to accept wage increases any longer, with the exception of collective bargaining wages. This was the opportunity structure for the works council to demand collective bargaining coverage, based also on a frame of injustice like at *Abgas*. The works councils intensified communication with the employees and convinced them in a learning by doing manner that the collective bargaining agreement is the only instrument to safeguard wages. Then 25% of the employees, who were virtually all non-members before, became members of the union in order to give the union the legitimacy and the resources to negotiate.

The second type of cases starts from *negotiating agreements to safeguard jobs* as an opportunity structure. An important example in our sample is *Dynamo*. At the beginning of the last decade the company has faced a crisis and prepared the decision to close the plant. In this situation the works councils has taken the initiative and developed a new business concept for the plant. There have been two main resources the works council could build on. At the one hand, as a result of a careful selection policy, the works council succeeded in having employees from all the departments of the plant in his body. This gave him broad competencies to understand problems both of production and of development or finance. At the other hand, the works council succeeded in creating a network between middle managers who also had an interest in the long-term survival of the plant and now discovered the works council as a coalition partner.

Within this network many ideas for the organizational and economic modernization of the plant have been developed. The works councils' strategy has been warmly welcomed by the white- collar employees, and the works council was able to increase union membership among the white-collars at least slightly. The strategy of the works council is rather similar at *Navigation*, where the works council is working on strategic concepts for the plant by using so called "future workshops" with the employees as the central resource to develop new ideas and concepts. In these workshops, about 20-25 employees from different areas of the plant come together for an afternoon to discuss strategically relevant topics like reorganization, working times or safeguarding of jobs.

The third type of cases is composed of labor representatives who have taken up *new topics* or deal with older topics like working time in a new way. At *Verwaltung* for example a new agreement on working times was negotiated which, from the point of view of the works council, was to reduce the rather long actual working times especially among the higher qualified employees by making the recording of working time obligatory (which it has not been before) and by reducing the upper limits of the working time accounts. The works council has framed the negotiations by a campaign to comply with the paragraphs of the working time law, which has been rather successful because the employees did not want to be regarded as breakers of the law. The campaign has been coupled with an initiative for good and healthy work that strengthened the power of the frame. At *Electronics*, the negotiations on a new working time agreement have been accompanied by a new way to define the position of the works councils. For the first time, the works council demanded the employees to give him a feedback and to develop ideas how the new working time system should look like. The employees were asked to participate actively in the development of a frame. Also at *Anlagenbau*, finally, it was the issue of psychological strains and health that has been

taken up by the works council after the elections of 2010 when the council was composed anew. At that time, the council has created new committees, among them a committee for health and safety. The three members of the committee have attended the working group for health and safety of the local union office as a resource. At the same time, several cases of burnout have become public at *Anlagenbau*. They formed the opportunity structure for the works councils to identify health and safety issues as an important political issue. The works council wanted to come to an agreement with management about health management and risk assessments. Management refused the request; however, the works council was able to make an agreement about an employee survey, which in the eyes of the works council has been a decisive instrument to frame the issue, for it uncovered the problems and made them visible and transparent for the employees. Following the survey, working groups of employees have been found who developed more than 100 ideas for improvements.

White-collar initiatives in the plants: New processes of interest representation

The initiatives of the works councils show that the design of the processes are of central importance both for the mobilization of resources and for the framing of interpretations. Table 3 gives an overview over the manifold new processes of interest representation that go hand in hand with the initiatives.

Table 3: New Processes of Interest Representation

Cases	Processes
Abgas	Membership recruitment, bargaining commission, membership assemblies
Anlagenbau	Employee survey, consultation of employees, works councils recruitment and organization
Dynamo	Networks; membership recruitment, works councils recruitment and organization
Elektronik	Communication, events for white-collars
Navigation	consultation of employees works councils recruitment and organization

Verwaltung	Membership recruitment
Zulieferer	Employee survey consultation of employees
Kommunikation	consultation of employees
Mineral	consultation of employees works councils recruitment and organization
Automobil	Membership recruitment, information, group talks, qualification of shop stewards
Rohrstahl	Membership recruitment, consultation of employees works councils recruitment and organization

Taken together, three types of new processes can be distinguished. The first one is the *systematical recruitment* of works council members among white-collar employees and stable patterns of *consulting* employees as experts of their work. Recruitment both is to increase the legitimacy of works councils among the white-collar employees and to increase the competencies the works council can dispose of. Stable patterns of interactions with employees could be networks or committees. This strategy is practiced at *Dynamo*, where the works councils has a majority of white-collar workers from all departments of the plant among its members and where he succeeded in building a network with middle layers of management who helped to develop new strategies for safeguarding of jobs . Also at *Mineral* the strategic recruitment of members is an important issue for the works council, however not without problems. The main problem is to find high-qualified white-collars with wages above the upper wage groups of the collective bargaining agreements who are willing to be nominated as members of the works council. The works council has given two reasons for the problems. First, membership in the works council is regarded as an obstacle for career aspirations, and second the increased intensity of work leaves little room for other activities. At Zulieferer, a working group with members from the works councils and white-collar-employees from the R and D center has been implemented in order to identify issues of relevance for the employees.

The second process is the temporary or selective *involvement of employees* in the development of issues or the development of solutions for problems like the working groups at *Anlagenbau* mentioned above who developed innovative solutions for problems of health and safety. In the same way the employees at *Kommunikaton* have been involved. Here the works council also has initiated an employee survey to identify problems of work. The analysis of the results has uncovered a lot of problems, among them a lack of opportunities of further education, problems with the software, or a lack of support of the company to work on the tasks required. Following the survey, working groups of employees started to find solutions and produced more than 100 suggestions which then have been delegated to the respective departments to be implemented. According to the works councils the degree of implementation of the ideas was inversely proportional to the costs they entailed. Meetings have been reorganized without problems, however, new and expensive walls in open-plan offices have not been built. At *Zulieferer* finally, the involvement of employees was the reason for the works council not to develop an issue further. Here the main problem mentioned by the employees who took part in the working group with the works council has been the missing regulation for mobile work and the question how to count working times of employees generated outside the plant, at home or on business trips. Before starting negotiations with management on the issue, the works council wanted to get a broader feedback and made a survey among the white-collar workers in the R and D department. In this survey only the minority 40% of the employees said that they feel a need for regulating mobile work, and therefore the works council removed the issue from the agenda.

The third type of process developed in the new initiatives is the organizing of union members. This process has been important at *Abgas* and *Kommunikation*, where the initiatives referred to collective bargaining issues and therefore directly to issues in the

union's responsibility. In collective bargaining, organizational power is the crucial resource unions can build on, and therefore the union in both cases asked for the increase of organisational density as a precondition to start negotiations for collective agreements. However, in many other cases not directly linked to collective bargaining issues membership recruitment is a central element of works councils' strategies as well. Also in the eyes of the works councils union density is a central power resource. One example to illustrate this is Dynamo. Here the works council has increased the organizational density of the white-collar employees slightly towards 30%, compared to 70% of the blue-collar employees, by visiting them at their workplaces and talking to them about their problems. Similar forms of interaction have been observed in many other cases like Anlagenbau, Zulieferer, Mineral or Kommunikation. Getting into direct contact with white-collars is of special importance with respect to academic workers who are not socialized in the plants by vocational training experiences and who work in environments of low union density where union membership is not part of social customs (Visser 2002).

Interest and Action of White-Collar Employees

We have distinguished three dimensions of interest related action of white-collar employees; their interpretations and definitions of situations, the modes of interest related actions and the individual decisions for or against union membership. With respect to the interpretations it can be said that in many cases the framing of the works councils has been rather successful in tackling real problems of the employees and in initiating reflections that lead to a reframing of situations. At *Verwaltung* for example the works council has set the problem of long working times on the agenda and launched a campaign for compliance with the working time law. Because employees do not want to be

regarded as rule or law breakers, even superiors started to question their own working time practice and the practices of their staff members.

"I am asking myself if that really makes sense what we do to work such long hours, also on weekends and on holidays." (Employee Verwaltung)

At *Anlagenbau* the employees we talked to stressed that health is an important issue that the works council has taken up and that only because of the works council's initiate the problem now has developed from latency to an issue of a political debates in the plant. At *Dynamo* the works council has created a common set of interests for safeguarding the plant and the jobs in the plant, and he has proven to be a competent actor in developing new strategies together with the employees.

"The works council is very competent. And he makes many talks with experts, also with me." (Employee Dynamo)

What are the effects of these frames for the ways employees try to pursue their interests? Here the effects are merely incremental at first sight. The individual pursuit and negotiation of interests of the employees still is the dominant mode of action. However, within this mode changes have taken place in the way that employees increasingly make use of works councils for information or consultation. At *Elektronik* for example a new working time system has been introduced, including long term working time accounts and optional working times in the sense that the employees can choose individually a contractual working time between 35 and 40 hours a week. Today, many more employees than ever before go to the works councils and ask him for advice how to save or take times from the working time accounts. And if they have a concrete conflict, the workers ask what their rights and duties are. With this information at hand, they start the individual negotiations with their superiors. The works council has the role an information agent and a consultant, and his main function is to help people to

help themselves and not to intervene directly into the individual negotiations of employees and superiors. He is an actor of last resort who will only come into play as an active interest representative if the employees explicitly ask him to do this.

Organizing and union membership recruitment as the third form of action are in many cases only weakly tied to the initiatives of the works councils. Only during fights for collective bargaining agreements individual membership decisions are directly rooted in union campaigns. This can easily explained by the fact that in these conflicts it is the union that is the driving force in negotiations, and the relationship between the probability of success and the organizational power of the union is easy to recognize for the employees. On the one hand, this makes it rational to become a member, and on the other hand, the situation of conflict prepares the ground for a frame of solidarity that can be constructed by the interest representatives. In the bulk of the other cases, individual membership decisions have not directly been influenced by the campaigns. According to our surveys there are two main ways to recruit white-collar employees: First, the social customs effect in work environments with a significant share of union members which makes it probable that workers talk about the union and influence each other to become a member. The second main reason the employees mention is that they have been convinced by the works councils to become members. This shows that the attempts to get into contact with the employees and to talk to them individually are crucial for the membership issue. This task can be facilitated by the initiatives we analyzed in the way that contacts have been established between works councils and employees and that the legitimacy of the works councils has been improved. However in many cases it is an add-on task that has to be done actively and continuously by the works councils.

"You can convince the employees only by competence and by continuous presence. You have to be authentic and to do what you say. And you have to help people. The problem with the white collars is that you have to help them four or five times until you can say: ok, now it really is time that you sign the membership form of the union."
(Works Council Dynamo)

Summary

What about the initiatives of interest representatives to attract white-collar workers? Is there an interplay between employees' interests and initiatives to be observed? And are the initiatives successful in attracting, activating, mobilizing or even organizing workers?

The main finding of our analysis is that new styles or forms of interest representation are on the way. The individual pursuit of interests has been and still is the dominant pattern of action of white-collar employees. The initiatives did not change that, and they would not have been successful at all if that would have been their goal and if they would have tried to convince employees that they need representatives acting on their behalf. They real success of the initiatives is that works councils have changed their modes of interest representation, and they did it in three ways. First, they intensified communication and concentrated on information and consultancy in order to help the employees to help themselves and to give them support to pursue their interests on their own. Second, labor representatives involved white-collar workers in the construction of issues and strategies and organized employee participation, both in more continuous forms like working groups or networks or in form of surveys or temporary working groups. In this way they asked the employees for their help as experts of their work, which is highly appreciated by white-collar workers.

Third and finally, based on these new forms of interest representation the works councils and unions have fought for issues that are relevant for white collars, and they have been able to develop frames to attract, activate, mobilize or even organize white-collar employees for collective issues. Differences in pay levels to other plants with collective bargaining agreements have been used to produce a feeling of injustice; safeguarding of jobs no longer has been regarded as a management responsibility only but as a vital task also of the works councils and the unions; and long working hours have been interpreted as problems because they have been connected to issues like health or the compliance of the law.

Central conditions for successful initiatives of this kind are to use the political opportunities the representatives have and to invest resources. The range of opportunities is wide, from a change in the ownership structure of a firm to employment threats by management or union support. Resources have to be invested in form of time and personnel to talk to the employees, to organize and keep alive networks or to organize working groups. And labor representatives have to regard white-collar politics as a long-term issue, for short-term effects especially with respect to membership recruitment are rare. Recruitment is relatively easy to realize in conflicts of collective bargaining, but in other cases it requires continuous communication with and support of the employees.

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