

**Date:** 2014-10-28

**Applicant's Name :** Ms Julia Hofmann

**Workshop Name :** ROUTINISED CRISIS-MANAGEMENT? CHANCES AND BARRIERS OF STRATEGIC ACTION OF TRADE UNIONS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

**Track :** Track 3: Developments and Trends .....

**Chair :** Julia Hofmann (1), Martin Seeliger (2)  
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## **PROPOSAL**

### **Workshop: Routinised crisis-management? Chances and barriers of strategic action of trade unions in the European Union**

Like all other organisations trade unions operate on the basis of standardised action repertoires, which help them to cope with everyday problems. As central labour market actors – at least in most European countries – they are thus vulnerable to dynamics of economic and political crises, which bring their daily routines out of balance. Depending on their power resources and the given opportunity structures they manage to master these challenges more or less successfully.

By looking back at the history of the European integration project, it can be stated that the “negative” character of EU-integration (Scharpf 2010) has shaped the working routine of trade unions especially since the 1970s and 1980ies. The current phase of European integration brings about new challenges for the representation of workers’ interests at the European level: (1) Due to the new order of European Monetary Union member states are denied the opportunity of devaluating their national currencies. (2) As a consequence of the East-enlargement the inequalities between the countries increased enormously (e.g. pay gaps, differences in living conditions). (3) The ongoing EU-crisis management with its focus on macro-economic stability (“European Economic Governance”) has put forward cuttings in social security and tariff standards (Busch et al. 2012). This labour-hostile environment has further increased the pressure on trade unions.

If we understand the EU as a multilevel-system, we see that strategic action of trade unions is caught in the interplay of different frameworks and multiple spatial references (Marginson/Sisson 2004). The chances and barriers of trade union

action beyond the national framework are interpreted in different ways by scholars, as the traditional discussion line between “Euro-Optimists” and “Euro-Pessimists” (Keune 2012) shows.

Especially against the background of the Euro-Crisis, from our point of view, the question of strategic action of trade unions in the European Union becomes more and more urgent: Are trade unions in Europe able to develop effective routines against the negative consequences of EU-integration/the EU-crisis management? Or are – by contrast – these routines the central barrier to engage in an effective political process at the European level? Is it legitimate that trade unions routines are still highly connected to the national framework? Or is a transfer of routines to the European level needed and how can it be implemented?

## **Abstracts**

### **1. Steffen Lehndorff: Living in different worlds? Challenges to transnational labour solidarity in the European Crisis**

**--> this paper was already submitted to Ilera 2015 as a single paper! It will be presented in the workshop if possible.**

In today's Europe, trade unions are facing the challenge of 'building bridges' across borders. In the ongoing crisis in, and of, the Eurozone, the link between the areas of conflict trade unions have to confront at their respective national levels and the issues at stake at EU level may be obvious for workers and unions in the so-called “periphery” but are far from obvious for their counterparts in the so-called “core” countries. Thus, the question what ‘solidarity’ actually means in practice is far from trivial. The paper proposed to the conference argues that unions in individual countries have no choice but to fight the dominant EU crisis management policies primarily at national level. This is where transnational action must be founded, unless solidarity becomes a matter of lip service.

The argument is developed by a comparison between the problems faced by trade unions in Greece and Spain on the one hand, and in Germany on the other. In the “periphery” countries trade unions confront a dramatic dismantling of labour standards which impacts substantially on the institutional potentials of future interest representation of labour. In contrast, unions in Germany may give the impression of a “sleeping giant” as they appear to focus on cooperative measures geared to moderate wage increases and the safeguarding of jobs at firm level. As a closer look at the first half of the 2000s reveals, however, German trade unions were the biggest pre-crisis losers. The weakening of the German collective bargaining system and the defeat in the struggles around the Agenda 2010 were at the heart of the growing economic imbalances within the Eurozone which have surfaced dramatically in the Eurozone crisis. The crisis, growing economic imbalances within the Eurozone which have surfaced dramatically in the Eurozone crisis. The crisis, in turn, is now being exploited to dismantle trade unions' institutional power resources in other countries with a degree of radicalism that goes far beyond the German model. Thus, mainstream policy approaches within the EU have made the disempowerment of one union into a problem for the others. To acknowledge these boomerang effects could be the starting point of serious transnational cooperation.

### **2. Johannes Kiess: Trade Unions in the UK and Germany: What crisis and did it yet end?**

Crisis is a matter of definition. And who defines the crisis defines the solution. Actors thus struggle for the prerogative of interpretation. The contemporary Eurocrisis gives multiple examples of how crisis definitions are forceful – and get challenged. The paper follows this underlying knowledge sociological assumption and interprets the Eurocrisis as an arena for conflicting interests trying to (re)shape European and national market institutions. The analysis draws on a sample (2007-2013) of press releases by German and British trade unions including the national umbrella organizations as well as the construction and the metal sectors.

When did they publicly speak of the crisis? What did they identify as the causes of the crisis? Is the crisis in their perception over yet? Comparisons are made between the different organizations – e.g. different sectors and world market dependencies may have different ideas of how to get back to growth and prosperity – and between a coordinated and a liberal market economy as actors positions may vary between institutional settings. The findings will be instructive for understanding recent difficulties in formulating and lobbying for unified strategies coping with the Eurocrisis.

### **3. Martin Seeliger: Trade unions in the course of European integration - Preference Formation between EU-level federations and National Organizations**

The presentation which I would like to apply with, deals with the potentials of a European trade union-movement, based on the ability of the EU-level federations to develop common political positions among their national member organizations. The leading question is, whether increasing pressures on labour unfolding in the course of European integration lead to the emergence of common political goals among European trade unions. The empirical focus is set onto the constellation in three policy-fields (namely: cross-border coordination of wages under European Monetary Union (1), the regulation of posted work (2) and the question of a European minimum wage (3)).

As the spectrum of political economies in the European union shapes the socio-economic background of national trade unions in a way that might suggest opposing interests among these organizations, the necessity arises for the European federations to coordinate a process of preference formation in a way that enables a European trade union-movement to pursue a common political line in relation to a) national capital and b) the EU-institutions.

As the three policy fields constitute the core-business of trade unionism, the performance in these spheres reflects the capacity of European labor to oppose EU-integration as a neoliberal project. The presentation is supposed to contain the preliminary results developed on the basis of fieldwork inquiring the relation of national trade unions and the European federations in Brussels. The aspired theoretical contribution aims at the role of labors' agency under conditions of political-economic heterogeneity on the structural level.

#### **4. Julia Hofmann: Cross-border trade union action in Europe in times of the Euro-crisis: The case of the European Days of Action**

The European Union is at present confronted with one of the biggest economic crisis in history. The hegemonic crisis management deepens the asymmetry of European integration (Scharpf 2010); neoliberal conceptions of economy and society are reinforced at the national and at the European level (Crouch 2011). The implemented austerity programs had a big impact on labour markets, social policies and work relations in a lot of European countries (Busch et al. 2012). This labour-hostile environment has further increased the pressure on trade unions. They responded to these developments by organising and mobilising resistance on a transnational level, e.g. the European Days of Action. For the first time in history trade unions of four different countries (Spain, Greece, Portugal and Italy) mobilized simultaneous strikes on the 14th of November 2012. Over 40 unions from 21 other countries showed their solidarity with decentralised protest actions at the same time (Larsson 2013). This form of cross-border coordinated trade union action may be astonishing at first sight – especially when one brings in mind the standard assumption that transnational union action faces chronic obstacles posed by institutional, cultural and language differences (Martin and Ross 2001).

In my presentation I'll present explorative findings on the history of the European Action Days and identify patterns concerning the participation rates of trade unions. The following questions will guide my presentation: Which unions did/did not participate in the European Days of Action and why? What constrains, but also: what opportunities have trade unions encountered in their attempts to organise and participate in the Action Days?

The empirical material of the research was gathered via online content-analysis and interviews with trade union activists from different European countries. First results indicate a big participation gap between unions from different member states: The participation rate is especially low in Eastern European countries. Moreover union types and power resources seem to play an important role in the decision for participating in cross-border trade union action.

#### **5. Frank Borchers: Interest Representation and Employment Relations at EU-Level**

The professionalization of lobbying and Interest Representation at European level offers important insights into the development of professions across disciplinary and country borders. This paper seeks to discuss to what extent and how processes of professionalization result in structuring and homogenizing European Employment Relations as a transnational professional field. Lobbying is part of the political reality in the European Union and has kept social sciences and the general public busy for many years. Moreover, a European field of interest groups is considered a crucial element of Europe as a functioning political union, even if lacking transparency and democratic control remain an issue. As more and more competences became delegated from national level to European level throughout the process of European integration, the building of the European Union has an important impact on the field of Social Protection and Employment Relations. Yet, while the topic is well-investigated on an organizational level, only little is known about the actors involved, i.e. the lobbyists themselves. Therefore, this paper aims to shed new light on the issue by drawing on the recent literature about the sociology of professions. In particular, we propose to conceptualize the genesis of European lobbying

as a professional field. We hypothesize that the pluralization and fragmentation of political interest representation observed at organizational level are complemented and partly compensated by processes of integration and internal differentiation. Here, important lessons can be learnt from trade union federations and their representatives, who, by our definition, are regarded as lobbyists. Traditionally, they play a crucial role when it comes to lobbying the national institutions. We argue that a shift of competences from the national to the european level is paralleled by conflicts amongst competing national actors, both in terms of exogenous forces (e.g. regulatory approaches) and internal competitions (diverging occupational groups and national interests). These actors often operate in interdisciplinary and international project teams among other specialists with diverse professional and national backgrounds. Hence, Employment Relations are used as one example that offers interesting insights into new trends in transnational and transdisciplinary professionalization.