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**Anne Dufrense**

*Le salaire, un enjeu pour l'euro-syndicalisme. Histoire de la coordination des négociations collectives nationales*, Presses Universitaires de Nancy: Nancy, 2011; 205 pp.: 97828143-0491, €18

**Reviewed by:** Roland Erne, University College Dublin

Anne Dufrense has written a very important book about a vital challenge European unions are facing. How can unions prevent a 'race to the bottom' in wages and working conditions within an integrated European Single Market and Monetary Union? What can be done to avoid the competition of European workers and unions against each other? One answer consists in the creation of a stronger cooperation between trade unions across borders.

In the late 1990s European unions started to coordinate their wage bargaining policies at EU level, in order to prevent the adoption of disruptive beggar-thy-neighbour wage policies. However, Anne Dufrense shows in this well-documented history of European unions' wage coordination that these attempts remained largely unsuccessful. She suggests the following two principal reasons for this failure: first, the heterogeneity of national trade union cultures, which makes the adoption of joint European policies very difficult. Secondly, the problematic nature of 'German leadership' within the European trade union movement. Hence, Dufrense's explanation of failure rests very much on primordial, national factors. Given that national cultures do not change very quickly, this implies that the prospects of a European coordination of trade unions' wage policies are quite bleak, especially given the absence of a legal framework for transnational collective bargaining at the EU level.

The study ranges from the early 1980s to the late 2000s and covers developments at the European cross-sector level (part 1), the European sectoral level (part 2) and cross-border initiatives at the regional level (part 3). The book's first part documents

the rise and demise of the ETUC's 'inflation and productivity' wage increase benchmark, which was adopted in 2000 in order to guide national wage bargaining policies in an era of increased economic and monetary integration. The second part – on the European sectoral level – traces parallel developments within European Trade Union Federations, especially the European Metalworkers Federation, whereas the third part focuses on the cross-border wage bargaining coordination attempt of German and Benelux trade unions, the so-called Doorn initiative.

Dufrense's study is based on her PhD research at the University Paris-X-Nanterre and the Université Libre de Bruxelles. It relies first and foremost on a vast amount of policy documents from the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF), and other European federations. Dufrense also included participant observations of EU-level union meetings and 19 expert interviews, especially with EU-level union officials. These sources enable Dufrense to provide a very detailed description of the development of ETUC and EMF policy in this field.

The exclusive focus of the study's research design on EU-level experts and documents, however, also has its limits. It is very difficult to comprehend developments at EU level without a good understanding of the internal dynamics that are at work among national actors. Can we really assume that 'nations' are the principle actors in European trade union politics, as Dufrense does?

'Alors que, pour *la Belgique*, la constitution de group de Doorn avait pour motivation principale le remède à sa nouvelle norme salariale extérieure, *l'Allemagne* y cherchait, elle, un terrain d'application possible de la coordination des négociation collectives, bloquée au niveau communautaire depuis 1993' (emphasis added, page 144).

German unions certainly played a leading role in the establishment of the 'inflation plus productivity' norm as a European wage coordination benchmark in the late 1990s. In turn, 'la dérive salariale allemande' (page 155) also contributed to the subsequent demise of the European wage coordination policy. Finally, 'les Allemands' undoubtedly also played a leading role in the ETUC call for minimum wages at its 2007 congress. But does that really mean that 'le *leadership* allemand' (page 156) is the major explanatory factor behind all these contradictory events? Or

does the inconsistent trajectory of European unions' wage coordination policies suggest that the explanation must lie elsewhere?

As argued previously (Erne, 2008), the remarkable policy shifts in German and European unions' wage coordination policy seem to me rather to be a contingent result of the policy battles of the late 1990s and early 2000s between left-wing 'Euro-Keynesian' and right-wing 'competitive corporatist' currents of the labour movement that split social democratic and socialist parties and trade unions across Europe. Dufresne is correct when she emphasizes that many French and Italian unions greeted the 'German' inflation and productivity wage bargaining benchmark with scepticism.

'Certain syndicats – en particulier méditerranéen (de France, d'Espagne, et Italy) mais aussi a fortiori la grande confédération du Royaume-Uni – ont longtemps craint cette prédominance du système allemand, n'acceptant alors que formellement le processus de coordination, tout en le jugeant, en fait, inapproprié' (page 1955).

On the other hand, one should also note that the traditionally least Germanophile sections of the French and Italian trade union movement – namely the left-wing of FIOM-CGIL and the French CGT – were the most resolute supporters of the EMF and ETUC wage bargaining coordination benchmarks. This observation, however, would not be so surprising if one associates the promotion of the European wage bargaining coordination benchmark not with the German union movement per se but rather with its Euro-Keynesian left. Conversely, 'la dérive salariale allemande' that led to the demise of the European wage bargaining coordination benchmark should not be seen as an outcome of the German system or the late Franz Traxler's scholarly 'vision' of collective bargaining, but as the contingent result of the defeat of Oskar Lafontaine within the SPD and the Euro-Keynesian wing in the German IG Metall. A more political reading of the recent history of European collective bargaining coordination would also allow a more positive conclusion regarding its future. The 'dérive salariale allemande' not only created huge economic imbalances within the euro area but also impoverished German workers, especially in the domestic service sector. Therefore, it may still be possible to construct new transnational alliances to support European workers' wage claims in the future, as

political orientations can be changed more easily, by contrast to primordial national identities.

## **References**

Erne R (2008) *European Unions. Labor's Quest for a Transnational Democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.