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European collective action in times of crisis

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Summary

This introductory article to the special issue proposes a more encompassing view of transnational collective action in Europe, which goes beyond the classical, country-by-country oriented, comparative industrial relations approach. Instead, we propose an extension of focus to capture also other actors, action repertoires, places and levels. Specifically, we introduce and integrate the contributions to this issue, by extending our analytical perspectives from traditional forms of employment to precarious and posted workers; from national and European trade union structures to informal groups of workers and social movements; from unions' traditional strongholds in manufacturing multinationals to workers in the meat industry, health care or occupied factories; from national unions seen as coherent units to a perspective that emphasizes their internal contradictions; from the analysis of discrete actions to historically more encompassing perspectives; and from utilitarian views on collective action to a larger perspective that assesses the analysis of the importance of collective struggles for the making and unmaking of a new European working class.

Résumé

Zusammenfassung

Keywords

Trade unions, transnationalism, euro crisis, methodological nationalism, collective action, European working class

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Introduction

As shown in the recent issues of *Transfer* on ‘Labour markets and social policy after the crisis’ (1/2014) and ‘Austerity and public sector restructuring: local government in focus’ (3/2014), dealing also with the intensification of the European marketization project (Crouch, 2014), restructuring in response to the crisis represents an enormous challenge to the European labour movement. Even public sector workers, who hitherto had been less affected by the Europeanization of the economy, can hardly be depicted anymore as employees of a ‘sheltered’ sector (Leisink and Bach, 2014; Molina, 2014; Stan, 2014). And yet, workers and unions are not without weapons. Too often the structural constraints of the global and European economy are emphasized at the expense of the potential agency of labour. Importantly, transnational economic and political integration processes also provide new strategic possibilities for trade unions. Key here is how trade union action at local and national level may be connected across borders in moments of transnational solidarity.

Surely, even before the advent of the crisis, the transnationalization of production and the corresponding whipsawing practices of multinational firms, the social failures that followed EU enlargement and the pursuit of beggar-thy-neighbour wage bargaining strategies were putting European trade unions and workers ever more in competition with each other (Martin and Ross, 2004; Bieler, 2006; Greer and Hauptmeier, 2012; Meardi, 2012; Ó’Beacháin et al., 2012; Stan and Erne, 2014). Moreover, unlike the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), European business elites categorically rejected – until very recently – the idea of a European coordination of wage bargaining (Leonard et al., 2007). After all, French and German

bankers had already stated as far back as 1997 that unions would lose their role in wage negotiations (Erne, 2008: 54). European business leaders arguably thought that coordinated bargaining would lose its purpose, as further economic and monetary integration would automatically lead to the desired downward convergence of wages and labour standards. However, when the euro crisis demonstrated that markets in the real world generate disturbing imbalances rather than a spontaneous convergence, the neoliberal opponents of a political European Union changed their tune. Instead of laissez faire, they supported the adoption of a stringent new EU economic governance framework that empowers EU institutions to request significant policy changes from EU members, including in the area of wage and labour market policy (Erne, 2012).

The political solutions that have been implemented by EU leaders amid the crisis are therefore hardly comforting for supporters of an integrated, social and democratic Europe. The European Commission and the European Central Bank are using their new powers to impose by political fiat ‘structural adjustments’, which the real-world markets failed to deliver automatically (Bauer and Becker, 2014; Bieler and Erne, 2014; Marginson and Welz, 2014; Schulten und Müller, 2015; Trichet, 2010). The increasingly political nature of European economic governance, however, is also providing new opportunities for countervailing action. Whereas trade unions and social movements have recurrently found it very difficult to question abstract market forces, successful national and transnational mobilizations have often been triggered in opposition to tangible decisions by political or corporate leaders (Erne, 2008, 189). Yet, both historical accounts of previous counter-movements (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]) and recent election results also remind us that radical marketization processes favour not only progressive but also reactionary counter-movements (Kriesi, 2014). This special issue therefore critically analyses transnational collective labour action in times of crisis at local, national and supranational European level. Although more and more social struggles have a clear European dimension, most post-crisis labour protests nevertheless have taken place in a national framework. Some observers even note a growing North–South split in European trade union strategies. There have, however, also been some countervailing cases of labour’s transnational responses to the crisis, especially if one also includes more informal forms of collective action by workers understood in a broad sense. This suggests that the apparent ‘renationalization’ of European trade unions is not a foregone conclusion.

The studies included in this issue therefore not only re-examine the renationalization thesis of union action in the light of recent events, but also identify obstacles to transnational collective action and assess the conditions under which they can be overcome. All papers were initially presented in February 2014 at the Centre for Advanced Study workshop on 'Labour and Transnational Action in Times of Crisis: From Case Studies to Theory' in Oslo (Golden, 2014; see also Bieler et al., 2015).

Themes of the issue

The contributions to this issue cover strategies by trade unions ranging from the European strike mobilizations of 14 November 2012 to more informal episodes of workers' resistance such as factory occupations in Italy and Greece. Moreover, examples of alliances with migrant workers, new social movements and local support groups are also included in this special issue. These new alliances have, especially in Spain and Portugal, allowed a wider and more flexible repertoire of action expressed in terms of 'inclusive strike' (Cerillo Vidal, 2013), which includes new forms of contentious collective action. In short, the labour movement is understood as broadly including trade unions and more informal groups, resulting in a comprehensive assessment of labour's resistance to austerity in Europe.

Transnational class formations and counter-movements

The articles bring a variety of perspectives on transnational collective responses to globalization and austerity. These may be placed, at the most encompassing level, in the frame of uneven capitalist development in the EU (Hardy; Bieler and Erne, 2014), or, as Lehndorff puts it, of market competition between the eurozone economies and their subsequent drifting apart. The unevenness of capitalist development and its structuring around global supply chains lead to highlighting the importance of sector-level developments, many of which by now involve transnational elements (Bechter et al., 2012; Erne, 2013).

In this context, the making of transnational trade union solidarity can be seen, in a Marxist perspective, as taking part in a longer process of class formation in contemporary capitalist societies (Helle). As class solidarity is forged in social struggles (Bieler, 2014), this means taking into consideration both the micro-level of the agency of individual unions (Hardy) and the macro-level of historical cycles and waves of contention (Helle). Trade union solidarity can also be seen, in a

complementary Polanyian perspective, as taking part in processes aiming at decommodifying labour (Wagner). This movement is, however, limited, as the taking of wages out of competition is only achievable for a limited section of workers, during a limited period of time and in a limited geographical space (Dribbusch). Attempts to decommodify labour may therefore also introduce divisions and exclusive solidarities among workers. Although these divisions may be overcome by 'unity in difference' (Dribbusch), it is important to inquire into the immediate preconditions for union mobilization (Dribbusch), but also, more generally, into both old and new sources of trade union power (Lehndorff; Wagner). Hence, in addition to the micro-level of union actions and the macro-level of class development, we must also dwell on the meso-level of the link between institutional change and activism (Wagner).

Institutional legacies and radical change

In addition to the various levels at which we could grasp transnational solidarity in Europe, several articles in this issue offer also a larger contextual picture of the major developments affecting labour in Europe over recent decades. Thus, both Dribbusch and Lehndorff distinguish two phases of the most recent crisis: the first wave in 2008–2010, taking the form of financial crisis, and the second wave after 2011, largely seen as a debt crisis. Each has had its distinctive impact on industrial relations. In response to the financial crisis, which Lehndorff qualifies as the Great Recession, some trade unions were involved in consultations on emergency measures. As the financial crisis gave way to the debt crisis, however, trade unions came under attack during what Lehndorff calls the Great Aggression; arguably because many European unions have lost the capacity either to threaten governments with the stick of protest or to seduce policy-makers with the carrot of problem-solving (Culpepper and Regan, 2014).

These attacks on trade unions have, however, a longer history, and the way in which trade unions responded to the crisis can only be understood in relation to pre-crisis developments. In the 1990s, wage bargaining switched from productivity-oriented distributive bargaining to competitive concession bargaining almost everywhere in Europe (Dufresne). In this process, both southern European and German unions lost organizational power, but retained some institutional and political power, at least initially (Lehndorff), not least due to their linkages with their sister parties (Dribbusch). During the first wave of the crisis in 2008–2010, trade unions

across Europe predictably sought support from their traditional political allies. Nevertheless, whereas German policy-makers welcomed the works councils of large manufacturing firms and their unions as active participants in crisis corporatist arrangements, unions representing atypical workers and (public) service sector employees, as well as unions from countries at the European periphery, had to learn one-by-one that their consent was no longer needed. As a result, the crisis led not only to further divisions between EU economies but also to divisions between different parts of the workforce as well as between national labour movements (Dribbusch; Lehndorff; Hardy; Wagner).

After southern European trade unions had engaged in a series of compromises with governments in the first part of the crisis, the troika's interventions at the European periphery led to the effective dismantling of multi-employer collective bargaining in these countries. Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to depict German unions as relative crisis winners (Lehndorff). First, the 'Six-pack' package of six new EU laws on European economic governance is in effect generalizing the troika's unilateral approach to structural adjustment to the rest of the EU (Dufresne; Erne, 2012).

Secondly, 'the weakening and even dismantling of important trade union power resources which had been key pillars of the "German model" in earlier decades has turned into the single most important driver of economic imbalances in the monetary union' (Lehndorff). Hence, the position and power resources of unions in the 'core' economy of Germany thus become fundamental for understanding the specific imbalances proper to uneven capitalism in Europe (Dribbusch; Lehndorff; Bieler and Erne, 2014). This goes against the grain of the dominant wisdom that sees industrial relations in countries at the periphery of Europe as the source of social dumping on the continent. This also means that the uneven character of capitalist development in Europe has manifested itself not only in uneven investment and employment configurations, but also in uneven industrial relations configurations.

The scope for transnational action

Lehndorff stresses that trade unions will necessarily continue to fight austerity policies at national level; but, even if their national areas of conflict continue to drift apart, the mutual dependence of unions across borders implies that the success of union resistance 'will increasingly depend on their transnational cooperation'

(Lehndorff). Unions therefore face two pressing challenges: 1) the Europeanization of their national mobilizations and 2) the making of broader alliances with other social movements (Dufresne). Looking at union strategies at EU level, notably those aiming towards the European coordination of wage bargaining and the more promising campaign for the establishment of a European minimum wage norm, Dufresne assesses the manner in which European unions responded to the first challenge.

Other contributions to this issue deal with other crucial challenges to transnational collective action in Europe today, namely, those posed by migration and various forms of labour mobility, such as posted work. Hardy starts from an encompassing perspective that sees labour mobility as constitutive of uneven capitalism. This also means that the solidaristic role of unions finds itself in tension with the competition between workers inherent in capitalism. Hardy looks at how unions engage with migrants in both sending and receiving countries as well as cross-nationally. She shows that, although some unions have developed some forms of cross-border cooperation, this cooperation is hampered by several factors. Among the latter, she highlights potential competition between domestic and migrant workers, as well as the danger that a politically hostile climate is undermining union power and that right-wing extremism is exacerbating perceptions of competition among workers. Taking up the case of central and eastern European posted workers in the German meat industry, Wagner shows that their plight in terms of employment and working conditions forced unions to engage in new ways of organizing. This involved reaching out to other social actors on the ground.

The building of broader alliances that transcend the traditional confines of union organization also stands at the centre of Vogiatzoglou's study of different types of Italian and Greek inter-movement networks. The most successful network – i.e. a network between Greek and Italian occupied factories – was the one in which workers themselves had the most direct involvement; where there was mutual exchange rather than a unidirectional transfer of resources; and where its immediate goals were tangible and rooted in workers' real-life experiences. This latter aspect is also highlighted by Dribbusch when he contends that a transnational campaign against the neoliberal direction of European economic governance might be easier to develop through targeted campaigns that focus on tangible issues rather than general calls against austerity. This was demonstrated by the successful Right2Water campaign of the European Federation of Public Service Unions, the

campaign of European trade unions against Bolkestein's Services Directive, or the dockworkers' campaigns against the port liberalization directives.

Conversely however, Wagner's study shows that the 'moments of transnational action' in her case were short-lived, as the networks between unions, local community organizations and migrant workers later disintegrated. Although the migrants' working conditions improved, the unequal power relations in which the posted workers were caught are enduring. Yet, even in this case of a fleeting transnational union network, a more encompassing perspective helps uncover possibly deeper currents of change. Indeed, not only did the network involved in the movement lead to employers organizing themselves in turn – which is important for the purpose of collective bargaining – but the mobilization also forced the local government to become its interlocutor and to deal with the housing situation of posted workers.

The problem of sustaining transnational collective action is thus not only empirical, but also theoretical and methodological. Transnational collective action may be considered to be short-lived if looked at from a micro-level perspective attentive to the actual continuity of links between identified actors. The same action may also seem caught in a limited time horizon, as it seems unable to lead to immediate changes at the macro-level of class power configurations. Examining the meso-level of institutional changes, however, the analysis can highlight the potentially larger, mid-range time horizons of transnational collective actions.

The same multiplicity of perspectives can be put into play when one looks at the European Day of Action organized by the ETUC on 14 November 2012 (the 14N), an action with which several articles in the issue deal. Seeing the 14N as a response to austerity and starting from the cases of Greek and Italian unions' participation in it, Vogiatzoglou offers a rather pessimistic diagnosis of its outcomes. In his assessment, Greek and Italian union confederations responded rather weakly to the challenges posed by the radical policy shifts during the second phase of the crisis, mainly due to their traditional links to their (former) political party allies in government parties or to the very limited effectiveness of their protest actions. More specifically, the 14N passed almost unnoticed in Greece, due to a preceding, rather ineffective, 24-hour general strike some days earlier. In Italy, the 14N action was more visible, because of large demonstrations organized by the CGIL, which were, however, attended by students and social movement activists rather than large groups of unionized workers.

By contrast, Dufresne draws a much more optimistic picture of the 14N events, linking them to a longer-term sequence of European trade union protest actions. On 14 November 2012, an ETUC Day of Action was for the first time in its history transformed into a transnational strike on an inter-professional basis. Although Dufresne also acknowledges the unequal participation of national trade union movements in the 14N events, she argues that their contribution to the development of common transnational trade union identities should not be underestimated.

By setting the 14N in the even larger historical perspective of European labour movements in the last half century, and in the larger theoretical interrogation on class formation, Helle proposes an even more surprising evaluation of the 14N. Arguably, the 14N had as its epicentre the Iberian Peninsula, where the strike action repertoire came to include new forms of protest action that enabled the participation of largely non-unionized, young and precarious workers in the 14N events. The 14N actions would also hardly have been possible without the prior development of the M-15 Movement and other activist networks in southern Europe. Paraphrasing the labour historian EP Thompson (1963), Helle argues that the 14N events may even be conceived of as an important moment in the making of a new transnational working class.

Conclusion

The issue offers both empirical and theoretical impetuses for a more encompassing view of transnational collective action in Europe. It invites both trade union scholars and practitioners to go beyond a narrow perspective on industrial relations and trade union institutions, strategies and actors at national level and in discrete moments of time. We propose the extension of the focus to other collective actors, action repertoires, places and levels, as well as to other historical junctures. Specifically, all the contributions to this issue prompt us to extend our gaze from traditional forms of employment to precarious and posted workers; from national and European trade union structures to social movements; from unions' traditional strongholds in large manufacturing multinationals to workers in the meat industry, health care or occupied factories; from national- and European-level unions seen as discrete entities to sector-level developments seen in a transnational perspective; from seeing unions as coherent and monolithic units to regarding them as terrains of debate and internal contradictions; from the analysis of discrete actions and moments of time to

historically encompassing perspectives; from a union perspective on social movements to a social movement perspective on unions; and from a short-term utilitarian view on collective action to a larger perspective of class formation and the importance of symbolic struggles around definitions of inequality, the crisis and its causes.

By looking at new actors and new repertoires of action, the issue also brings to the fore new evaluations beyond the general fatalism permeating both the labour movement and labour studies in past decades. One reason behind the scant 'evidence' on resistance to the last decade's attacks on labour may be, at least in part, what we could call methodological blindness. As Vogiatzoglou contends, transnational solidarity and collaboration networks between labour organizations exist but 'one needs to know where to look for them'. We can, of course, question the effectiveness of transnational solidarity, given the overall strength of the attacks on labour, but with more inquisitive studies approaching ground-level developments we can no longer negate its existence.

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