

Globalization and the possibility of transnational actors - the case of trade unions: Final Report – Outcomes and Conclusions.

Globalization is a comprehensive process taking place on several societal levels, yet with an increasingly interwoven economy as prime mover. The process is driven by conscious actors, states and transnational corporations and characterized by huge differentials of power and distribution of goods. The problems cannot be handled within national state frames alone. This raises the question whether there are actors that may be a counteractive force, a 'historical subject'. The purpose of this project was to investigate the international labour movement, defined in a broad way, as a potential counteractive force.

While pressures on labour movements have increased as a result of globalisation in general and the current global economic crisis in particular, there is a qualitative shift of perspective and a new vigour in movements at the start of the new millennium. The current crisis provides the background for a variety of different potential future developments unfolding in front of our eyes. Understanding these developments requires a deeper analysis of the (historical) trajectory of global capitalism.

In order to address this problematic with our collective project on *Globalization and the possibility of transnational actors - the case of trade unions* we have adopted the historical method of 'post-holing'. Rather than attempting to analyse every aspect, which may result in gross over-generalisations, or focus individually on isolated instances, which may produce rich empirical detail at the expense of a broader understanding, post-holing has allowed us 'to depict the sweep of historical forces and at the same time some of the richness of detail which comes from delving into a specific moment' (Sennett 1977/2002: 42). Hence, the challenge was to provide detailed analyses of individual empirical cases, which are in turn linked up with broader considerations of overall development. In this short document, we are summarizing the key findings of our collective endeavours.

Conceptual findings

In order to link detailed empirical results to wider developments in line with the method of post-holing, a conceptual basis is absolutely essential. Hence, **Andreas Bieler**, as part of his sub-project, focused on how to conceptualise the wider dynamics of interaction between agency and structure within global capitalism. Globalisation has not only constrained labour movements, but it also provided them with new opportunities, new strategies. Hence, a focus on class agency, understood in a broad way, is absolutely crucial for understanding the possible ways ahead. At the same time, human beings do not make history in the circumstances of their own choosing. Hence, the structuring conditions of global capitalism around (1) the dynamics of competitiveness, (2) the tendency towards crisis, and (3) the outward expansion of capitalism along lines of uneven and combined development need to be taken into account when analysing class agency.

The analytical focus on class struggle, defined broadly to include struggles over issues such as gender, ethnicity as well as areas beyond the workplace and the direct employee/employer relationship, is crucial in combining agency and structure. Class struggle is the moment when agency meets structure, when labour meets the structuring conditions of the capitalist social

relations of production. Class struggle is the process in which labour identities are formed and transformed. It is the moment when structuring conditions are being confirmed or changed. Hence, it is through the prism of class struggle that we can best analyse labour's responses to global restructuring. Whether different labour movements engage in relations of transnational solidarity is not pre-determined by the structuring conditions of the capitalist social relations of production, but ultimately depends on the outcome of class struggle.

Importantly, the finding of an empirical analysis based on this approach cannot be generalised. The approach should be regarded as an analytical framework, which can be used for different empirical case studies. The class agents in play and the particular aspects of the structuring conditions of capitalism as well as the dynamics of class struggle need to be investigated for each case study separately, linking the empirical details to the general dynamics. Establishing general, law-like patterns in a positivist understanding of social science is not the objective.

See Andreas Bieler (2014) 'Transnational Labour Solidarity in (the) Crisis', *Global Labour Journal*, Vol.5/2: 114-33. Available at <http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1155&context=globallabour>

In his sub-project **Roland Erne** similarly follows a pluralist research strategy that challenges the positivist mainstream (Galtung 1999). Rather than attempting to distil some general factors of when transnational solidarity is likely and when unlikely through an extensive survey of already available case studies, he emphasizes the importance of analysing key patterns along which movements of transnational solidarity have been established in more detail. Hence, Erne is responding to the 'small-N problem' of qualitative research by a comparative research strategy that is based on the careful selection of critical cases that allows the drawing of meaningful inferences beyond the particular case.

Given the disruptive nature of capitalist relations of production and exchange, political structures were always needed to sustain their social reproduction, as acknowledged by both advocates and critics of very different regimes of capitalist accumulation and regulation: ranging from the authoritarian corporatism of the 1930s, over the mid-20th century class compromise, to the contemporary neo-liberal labour control regimes that impose the 'laws of the market' by political fiat, not only in the Global South but also within the European Union. Conversely, however, the intrinsic political nature of the capitalist 'political economy' also enabled the labour movement to shift the conflict between workers and employers from the market place to the political arena. It is therefore not surprising that successful transnational trade union campaigns regularly were 'political' in the sense that they focused on transforming a technical issue into an issue of public concern. For this reason, Erne decided to pay particular attention to the role politicization processes play in prompting transnational collective action.

Concretely, Erne analysed the case of the 'silent revolution' in the economic governance regime of the European Union, as potential events of politicization in an article for the forthcoming special issue of world leading journal *Labor History* that the CAS group is editing. The issue is specifically assessing the role 'politicisation' processes play in triggering transnational union action and is in addition featuring five selected contributions to the international CAS workshop the group organised in February 2014 from established scholars

from Harvard, Penn State, and Cardiff University as well as young scholars from the Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones Laborales in Buenos Aires and the University of Gent.

Furthermore, politicisation processes are also featuring prominently in Erne's five other CAS publications (see publication list) as well as in the special issue on "European collective action in Times of Crisis" of *Transfer, The European Journal for Labour and Research* which is published by the European Trade Union Institute in Brussels and edited by the CAS group.

Labour agency in transnational sectors

It is often assumed that transnational production sectors are the area of potential transnational solidarity. Nevertheless, transnational sectors can be established even in areas without production itself being directly organised across borders.

Sabina Stan in her sub-project focuses on the emergence of a transnational European health care sector, established by at least three processes taking place at a transnational level: healthcare privatisation; healthcare worker and healthcare seeker migration; and European healthcare governance. Her findings are relevant in two ways, (1) the understanding of the structure of this European health care system, as well as (2) the response by trade unions to this phenomenon. Indeed, in respect to the first aspect, she shows that the three above-mentioned processes lead to the emergence of an unequally developed European healthcare system where privatisation, inequalities of access to healthcare services, segmented labour markets in healthcare, and worker and patient mobility reinforce each other in a perverse spiral. On the other hand, in respect to the second aspect, transnational action in healthcare has the potential, albeit until now only partially realised, to become trans-sectorial as well as trans-national.

See Sabina Stan. "A European healthcare system? The challenge of labor force reproduction and transnational collective action", International workshop on *Labour and transnational action in times of crisis: from case studies to theory*, Centre for Advanced Study, Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, Oslo, 27-28 February 2014.

Construction too has become increasingly transnationalised, not however in that production itself is organised across borders, but in the way the workforce in individual countries as well as on individual construction sites has become increasingly international, often resulting in downward pressures on wages and working conditions as well as social dumping.

Knut Kjeldstadli in his sub-project has investigated the route that led the Norwegian construction workers' union faced with a huge influx of labour migrants from 2004, to adopt the strategy of 'being a union for workers in Norway, rather than being a union for only Norwegian workers'. While some explanatory structural traits should be mentioned – such as low unemployment in the formative phase of this inclusive policy – this contribution stresses agency. At the core was a broad learning process. In this case the moving subject was a particular active, discussant milieu of trade unionists, functioning as a 'collective intellectual'. They were able to analyse the situation and to formulate an effective program of action. The rationale behind this choice was 'enlightened self-interest', coupled with ideas of workers' international solidarity.

See Knut Kjeldstadli (forthcoming) ‘When do unions opt for including labour migrants? The example of the Oslo construction workers from the 1990s to 2014?’

In another empirical study in the project, **Idar Helle** also focuses on organized labour in Norway – more specifically *Norsk Arbeidsmandsforbund* (NAF), the general union workers’ federation in Norway. Helle analyses the position towards transnational labour migration in the EU and the European Economic Area (EEA) from around 1990 until present.

As an old and well established union federation (founded 1895), NAF has remained politically close to the strong LO union confederation leadership and the Labour party (Ap), traditionally the government party in Norway and still one of the strongest social democratic parties in Europe. The leadership of LO and Ap have for 20 years been the most important defenders of the EEA, which defines the national labour market as a part of the EU single market. In his research on NAF, however, Helle has observed how even this union as a close ally to the Labour party, has gradually distanced itself from the free labour market views of the party leadership and the Norwegian political elite. During the intense labour unions’ campaign against the temporary work agency directive from the EU, the president of NAF even participated as one of the speakers in a substantial union rally outside the parliament building against the government headed by the Labour party.

This change of position is closely linked to numerous EU directives and decisions of the European Court of Justice that appear to challenge union power and vital regulations of the Norwegian labour market. Over the last years the NAF union federation has to a substantial degree contested the liberalization of the labour market as one of the foundations of the EU single market. For NAF and the union movement in Norway, the situation on the ground in the labour market is getting out of control, and this in turn could put the status of the entire EEA agreement into serious doubts in the longer run.

See Idar Helle (forthcoming) *The history of Norsk Arbeidsmandsforbund 1975-2015*. Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2015.

A particular case study of social dumping and the dynamics around an international workforce in construction is provided by **Tiago Matos**’ sub-project on the COOP case in Norway, a case where posted workers, employed through various sub-contractors, became involved in a struggle against social dumping. The study primarily identifies the possibilities and constraints on agency, which presented itself to the unions who came to organize the posted workers. In doing so it was, in this case, inevitable to look at the particular role the media played in the struggle. Finally, the sub-project deals with the perversion of the commodification of labour: a state where not only labour is detached from workers, but even individual and collective rights will be left behind in the posting country while the subject is physically exerting his or her labour in a another country. This creates a particular set of constraints on national trade union agency. In this sense, the case is not only about a struggle against social dumping; it is a micro cosmos of unions’ struggle for effective strategies on a transnational arena.

See Tiago Matos (forthcoming) ‘A Pyrrhic Victory? A case of national unions and immigrant workers returned’, in Andreas Bieler, Roland Erne, Darragh Golden, Idar Helle, Knut Kjeldstadli, Tiago Matos and Sabina Stan (eds.) *Labour and transnational action in times of crisis*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Innovative forms of class agency

Based on a broad understanding of ‘class struggle’, the project has included a number of analyses of innovative class agency.

Knut Kjeldstadli in his subproject has closely followed the process that took place when the Oslo Construction workers’ union reached out to new labour migrants, predominantly of Polish origin. The contribution draws on the notion of different ‘unionisms’ (business, political and social movement unionism), each primarily based on a specific ‘power resource’ (structural, alliance based and associational). This union developed to a large degree a social movement unionism style. This was innovative both in the sense of reviving traditional grass root agitation, going from one construction site to another, and also innovative in the sense of taking up tasks usually associated with social work outside the work place. The project investigates the phases in this outreach effort – gaining a foothold, then the breakthrough and the phase of precarious stabilization, often experienced as a work of Sisyphus, due to the cross-draught among members. Nationality has some, but limited explanatory power on the propensity to unionize; by and by workers also from non-union backgrounds might be mobilized. The crucial issue seems to have been the degree of stability and predictability in the employment relationship, i.e. the kind of capital organization and practice in the firm.

See Knut Kjeldstadli (forthcoming) ‘How have Oslo construction workers reached out to migrant workers from 2004 to 2014?’

Sabina Stan has looked at the manner in which Romanian trade unions active in the healthcare sector responded to the out-migration of healthcare workers in the last decade. She shows that migration has been used extensively by the two most important of these trade unions as argument when pressing the government for increased wages in the Romanian healthcare sector. Paradoxically, however, the union which has been the most vocal in this respect is also the one to adopt a technocratic approach to unionism based on the production of expert knowledge. This approach went together with calls for an increased role for private actors in the Romanian healthcare system, as well as for a performance-based wage scheme for healthcare workers. By contrast, the most important Romanian trade union active in healthcare has relied on a more militant model of unionism, and managed to obtain in autumn 2013 the signing of the sole sectoral collective agreement of the year. Stan argues that these different uses of migration arguments serve to promote different approaches to wage distribution and social inequalities more general, and are ultimately rooted in the different positioning of trade unions in relations to political divides.

See Sabina Stan. ‘Opportunity for what? Trade unions, healthcare worker migration and wage politics in the Romanian healthcare system’. To be submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal.

Andreas Bieler in his sub-project analysed the Italian water movement, a broad alliance of trade unions, social movements and environmental NGOs, which successfully mobilized around a discourse of water as a human right and a commons to be jointly administered and enjoyed by all for a referendum against the privatization of water in June 2011. By including issues beyond the workplace in their strategies, trade unions provided the basis for co-operation with other social class forces, thereby enlarging the social basis for resistance against neo-liberal restructuring.

See Andreas Bieler (2014) ‘Sic Vos Non Vobis’ – ‘For You, But Not Yours’: The struggle for public water in Italy. To be submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal.

Another example of innovative labour strategies, analysed by **Andreas Bieler**, is the case of the *Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights* (SIGTUR). Based on a common history of colonialism and super-exploitation, trade unions from the Global South have established their own international network with a view to organising more radical strategies of resistance against the expansive dynamics of global capitalism.

See Andreas Bieler (2013) ‘Confronting Neo-liberal Capitalism: SIGTUR’s tenth Congress in Perth/Australia, 2 to 6 December 2013’; available at <http://andreasbieler.blogspot.no/2013/12/confronting-neo-liberal-capitalism.html>, accessed 12/06/2014.

Labour movements in Europe have come under increasing pressure not only due to global recession and the Eurozone crisis, but also as a result of a ‘silent revolution’ in the European economic governance regime (see below). On 14 November 2012 widespread calls of mobilization made possible a first transnational, one-day strike movement in Southern Europe. In an article based on his research sub-project **Idar Helle** brings the 14N events to the forefront. A main argument is developed in two steps. First, to what degree the 14N movement is reflecting a long term change in social class formations and the organization of labour in the Mediterranean countries and Europe in general. Subsequently, the article confronts the 14N experience with previous European mobilizations that have reached a transnational stage, in 1968 and 1995.

Transnational capital’s demand for easy available and low cost labour gradually became paramount in labour market policy-making. This has been the case at both national and EU level. Arguably, this development shows that the ability of European trade unions to shape policy-making was declining well before the current euro crisis. Already at the end of the 1960s the maintenance of full employment and high job security constituted the core of organized labour’s vision for a “social Europe”. After the sea change from Keynesianism to austerity politics in 1974-75, however, most attempts to impose stronger job security in Western Europe have been largely unsuccessful.

In the following historical period, transnational trade unionism in Europe expressed itself in different ways. One mode of action, which also engaged civil society beyond the ranks of organized labour, consists of outbursts and even cycles of contention in several European countries. Of those, the 14N movement represents, so far, the most visible sign of

transnational social class struggle, at least since the breakout of the European finance and debt crisis five years ago. Drawing on previous historical experiences, Helle discusses whether the Mediterranean based 14N events can be seen in the broader perspective of a recomposed European proletariat in the making.

See Idar Helle (2014) ‘The 14N and its predecessors: A new European proletariat in the making?’, submitted to *Transfer* for publication.

New international governance structure

The Eurozone crisis has been used by capital to enforce austerity and restructuring on countries in Europe’s periphery. Bailout packages were only granted in exchange for large budget and public sector cuts as well as wide-ranging measures of labour market restructuring. Nevertheless, it is not only countries subject to Troika conditionality programmes, but also other EU member states, which have become subject of pressure by Brussels for further cuts and restructuring. In his sub-project, **Roland Erne** investigates in detail the so-called silent revolution in the European economic governance regime, which has increasingly undermined national sovereignty, democracy and the possibilities of alternatives to austerity.

The interaction between the changing architecture of European integration and trade unions is the core of **Darragh Golden’s** sub-project on the Italian and Irish labour movements, linking directly to issues of agency and structure in questions of exploitation and resistance in Europe. Importantly, when addressing trade union responses to increasing austerity pressures, he focuses on the construction sector, linking up with Knut Kjeldstadli’s sub-project mentioned above. Golden’s PhD research considers what he terms as trade unions’ ‘coping mechanisms’. These ‘coping mechanisms’ encompass traditional trade union strategies, such as organizing etc., but also the role of institutionalized industrial relations systems in offsetting negative characteristics associated with the free movement of labour and services. Focusing on Italian and Irish unions, Golden analyses the dynamic interaction between intra-EU labour mobility and service provision, through the prism of a) industrial relations, and b) traditional organizing strategies. As production cannot be moved elsewhere, the competitive dynamic is on labour costs. This can place downward pressure on wage-bargaining mechanisms, or as was seen in the Irish case, have their legitimacy challenged in the courts. Thus, the construction sector is seen as a ‘critical context’ which has, more recently, been exposed to increased cross-border forces. The eastward expansion of the European Union has brought the competitive dynamics of the construction sector into sharp focus.

Furthermore, classic trade union anti-dumping strategies have been deemed illegal by the ECJ for inhibiting economic freedoms. This is a worrisome development for trade unions. The objective of this research, however, is not limited to the construction sector. Instead, the construction sector is considered a microcosm of the wider European integration process. Golden argues that, through ‘contextual comparisons’ where there is a degree of ‘functional equivalence’, we can identify direct feedback loops between a union’s direct experience with European integration, through the free movement of labour and services, and the position that this union adopts on the European integration project.

See Darragh Golden (2014) *To what extent is the changing nature of European integration undermining the pro-European consensus of Italian and Irish trade unions? And what coping mechanisms are Irish and Italian construction sector unions deploying to offset the side-effect of European integration, and particularly the free movement of labour?* Ph.D. thesis submitted to the Department of HRM and Industrial Relations, University College Dublin.

See also Darragh Golden (forthcoming) 'The role of trade union internationalism in explaining the position of Italian and Irish trade unions on European integration', in Andreas Bieler, Roland Erne, Darragh Golden, Idar Helle, Knut Kjeldstadli, Tiago Matos and Sabina Stan (eds.) *Labour and transnational action in times of crisis*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

In sum, through the method of post-holing, the collective project has come up with a general understanding of the current dynamics within global capitalism as well as a multitude of empirical cases about innovative responses by labour movements to pressures of restructuring. The theoretical framework with its focus on class agency and struggle has thereby provided the conceptual tools to combine detailed empirical findings with wider general observations.

References

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