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**European integration and the transnational restructuring of social relations: the  
emergence of labour as a regional actor?\***

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**Abstract**

Informed by a neo-Gramscian perspective able to conceptualise transnational class formation, this article assesses whether European trade union organisations have developed into independent supranational actors or whether they are merely secretariats in charge of organising co-operation of their national member

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associations. The first hypothesis is that those trade unions, which organise workers in transnational production sectors, are likely to co-operate at the European level, because they have lost control over capital at the national level. Trade unions, organising workers in domestic production sectors, may be more reluctant, because their sectors still depend on national protection. The second hypothesis is that trade unions are more likely to co-operate at the European level, if they perceive such an engagement as furthering their influence on policy-making in comparison with their structural possibilities at the national level. Additionally, in line with the critical dimension of neo-Gramscian perspectives, it will be assessed whether European co-operation implies acceptance of neo-liberal economics or whether unions continue to resist restructuring.

## **Introduction**

It is frequently argued that due to common pressures such as Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), trade unions need to work together more closely at the European level. However, while there has been an increasing literature on the role of transnational capital within the European Union (EU) (e.g. van Apeldoorn, 2002; Balanyá, et al 2000), less work has been carried out on the potential role of labour as a supranational actor. Especially comparative political economy (CPE) literature continues to regard unions as exclusively domestic actors (see below). This article intends to help filling this gap. It will be asked what are the factors pushing labour towards developing an international role, what are the chances of making an impact on policy-making at the European level and what is the social purpose underlying unions' activities? It will be argued that this has to be analysed against the background of globalisation and the

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way European integration has been linked to processes of transnational restructuring. At the European level, the main union is the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which has as its members 76 national confederations from 34 European countries. Importantly, there are also 11 European industry federations (EIFs), which are sectoral trade union organisations at the European level (<http://www.etuc.org>; 26/10/2004). The question is whether these European organisations are simply secretariats with the task to organise intergovernmental co-operation of their national members, or whether they have developed into supranational actors in their own right.

Traditionally, trade unions have been regarded as domestic actors. Hence, the first task of this article is to conceptualise the potential role of labour as a supranational actor. In the next section, after reviewing neo-realist and liberal International Relations (IR) approaches, I will introduce a historical materialist, neo-Gramscian perspective on labour, able to conceptualise labour as a potential international actor within the historical specificity of capitalism. Moreover, the EU has developed a complex institutional structure over the years. While it cannot be equated to a state, there are clearly state-like features and scholars have started to speak about the EU as a political system in its own right (e.g. Hix, 1999). Consequently, if one considers trade unions as a potential actor at the European level, the institutional set-up at this level also needs to be taken into account. This is the task of the third section. The fourth section will link the conceptual considerations with an empirical analysis of whether trade unions have actually increasingly co-operated at the European level. The main focus here will be on several EIFs. Finally, it will also be asked what type of European integration unions work for at the European level. The conclusion will come back to this issue and investigate the social purpose underlying unions' activities at the European level.

### **The conceptualisation of trade unions as an international actor**

The conceptualisation of trade unions as a potential actor at the international level is closely linked to the way globalisation itself is understood. According to neo-realist IR theory, globalisation is nothing more than a drastic increase in cross-border flows of trade and finance. States are considered to remain the only important international actors in a system characterised by anarchy (Gilpin 2001: 18). 'Challenges at home and abroad test the mettle of states. In modern times, enough states have always passed the test to keep the international system functioning as a system of states. The challenges vary but states endure. They have proved to be hardy survivors' (Waltz 2000: 51). As a result of this state-centric view of international relations, trade unions can only be understood as operating at the domestic level.

Similar to neo-realist IR theories, CPE approaches identify increasing levels of trade and capital mobility as the two core characteristics of globalisation. Hence, globalisation is simply understood as some kind of external challenge for states (Hall and Soskice 2001: 55-6; Iversen and Pontusson 2000: 23). While Kitschelt et al, for example, focus on how the various different national institutional set-ups mediate these pressures (Kitschelt et al 1999: 440-1), others concentrate on domestic actors such as trade unions, employers' associations and central banks and their interaction in response to common external pressures, when explaining national divergence. The implicit understanding of the international system and, thus, globalisation by CPE approaches is state-centric and, by default, these approaches treat companies and employers' associations, but especially also trade unions as purely domestic level actors. In Josselin's analysis of the position of British, German and French trade

unions on EMU, for example, unions are only understood as domestic actors, which adjust to external pressures be it EMU, or be it globalisation (Josselin 2001: 55). They are not understood as being part of a wider restructuring changing the international state system. They are, therefore, not considered to be potential international actors. What CPE approaches and neo-realist IR theory overlook in their analysis is that globalisation is foremost characterised by the partial transnationalisation of production, not merely by increasing levels of economic interdependence (see below). Transnational corporations (TNCs) clearly differ from domestic companies. While the latter manoeuvre predominantly in one specific domestic context, capital and labour related to TNCs are potential international actors, which may operate simultaneously within several different domestic arenas as well as at the international level. By overlooking the changing social relations of production, which underpin national institutional set-ups (Coates 2000: 176-7), CPE approaches are unable to explain change emanating from changes in the production structure.

Liberal IR approaches, on the other hand, define globalisation as a structural change, characterised by the transnationalisation of production and finance, which goes beyond the international state system (e.g. Scholte, 2000a, pp.51-2, 111-31; Strange, 1996, pp.44-65). As a result of these processes of transnational restructuring, additional non-state actors such as TNCs and non-governmental organisations have emerged. These new actors compete for authority with states in the global political economy (Higgott et al, 2000). Labour from a liberal perspective can be conceptualised as an international actor, next to a range of other actors in a pluralist understanding of policy-making (e.g. O'Brien et al, 2000, pp.67-108; Scholte, 2000b; Smythe, 2000). Nevertheless, the fundamental role of labour and trade unions stemming from the capitalist social relations of production, and thus the very nature of

the structural changes related to globalisation, is still overlooked. As Coates makes clear, this neglect is mainly the result of an undue focus on capital mobility as the core feature of globalisation. Capital is regarded in a fetishised form as a ‘thing’ instead of a ‘social relationship’. Thereby, it is overlooked that capital can only realise itself on a global scale to the extent that real production processes are created on this scale. ‘Capital is more geographically mobile than it was in the past because it now has more proletariats on which to land’ (Coates, 2000, p.255). Theoretically, this shortcoming of neo-realist, CPE and liberal approaches alike results from taking ‘state’ and ‘market’ in the form of two separate entities as the starting-point of investigation. It is overlooked that this apparent separation of state and market is due to capitalism and the way the social relations of production are organised around private property (Burnham, 1995). By not recognising the historical specificity of capitalism, these analyses remain within the given and cannot analyse the underlying social purpose of actors. In this instance, the question of what kind of EU trade unions aspire to in relation to neo-liberal restructuring, one of the core tasks of this article, remains untouched.

*A historical materialist, neo-Gramscian approach to labour*

A neo-Gramscian perspective is able to overcome these limits.<sup>1</sup> The separation of state and market is avoided through concentrating on the sphere of production as the starting-point of investigation, thereby realising that both are different expressions of the same configuration of social forces (Cox, 1987, p.1; Cox, 1989, p.39). Social forces, as engendered by the production process, are identified as core collective

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<sup>1</sup> Initially introduced in International Political Economy by Robert Cox (1981 and 1983), neo-Gramscian perspectives have increasingly been applied to European integration (e.g. van Apeldoorn, 2002; Bieler, 2000; Bieler and Morton, 2001a; Bieling and Steinhilber, 2000; Cafruny and Ryner, 2003). For an overview of neo-Gramscian perspectives, see Bieler and Morton (2004a).

actors. Capital, the owners of the means of production, is opposed by labour, which is forced to sell its labour-power. There are, however, further differences within the capitalist mode of production. Due to the transnationalisation of production and finance in times of global restructuring, new, transnational social forces of capital and labour have emerged as significant actors. A basic distinction can, therefore, be drawn between transnational social forces of capital and labour, engendered by those production sectors, which are organised on a transnational scale, and national capital and labour stemming from national production sectors (van Apeldoorn, 2002, pp.26-34; Bieler, 2000, pp.9-14). In general, transnational social forces are likely to support regional integration and, by extension, more co-operation at this regional level. Since the production of their sectors is organised across borders, any kind of border barriers are unwelcome. National social-forces on the other hand, where production may still depend on subsidies and protection by the state, are probably unlikely to support regional integration, because it undermines national autonomy and sovereignty. In relation to trade union co-operation at the European level, the following hypothesis can be formulated: those trade unions, which have experienced globalisation for a longer and more intense time in that their production sectors have been transnationalised, are likely to support co-operation at the regional international level. Partly, because they rely on the well-being of the companies in their sector, which benefit from a borderless area, partly because they have realised that they have lost control over capital at the national level. National production sector unions, the sectors of which still depend on the support by their country, are probably opposed to further regional integration including the establishment of an industrial relations system at the European level.

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Nevertheless, to analyse the production structure only serves to identify the social forces as core actors and allows us to formulate hypotheses about their behaviour. The production structure itself does not determine social forces' strategies, it only shapes their activities. The actual strategies and outcomes depend on open-ended struggle. As Rupert notes, 'class-based relations of production under capitalism create the possibility of particular kinds of agency, but this potential can only be realised through the political practices of concretely situated social actors' (Rupert, 2000, p.14). A neo-Gramscian perspective, thus, implies a dialectical analysis of structure and agency, where there are always several possible courses of class struggle within a given structural framework (Bieler and Morton, 2001b). This struggle is then not only reduced to the material sphere, but also conducted within the realm of ideas. As Gramsci points out, 'it is on the level of ideologies that men become conscious of conflicts in the world of the economy' (Gramsci, 1971, p.162). Thus, neo-Gramscians add an ideological dimension to their definition of globalisation (Bieler, 2001). In addition to the transnationalisation of production and finance, a turn from Keynesian to neo-liberal policies and their focus on deregulation, liberalisation and price stability has been identified behind global restructuring (Cox, 1993, pp.266-7; Rupert, 2000, p.54).

Nevertheless, hegemony is never constant but always contested. It is this notion of open-ended struggle and the focus on the conflict at the level of ideas, which adds a critical dimension to neo-Gramscian perspectives and allows us to analyse the underlying purpose of European integration as well as actors' strategies (van Apeldoorn, 2002, pp.11-13, 34-49; Bieler, 2000, p.8). Thus, whatever the position on regional co-operation, the issue of what type of European integration unions support has to be analysed separately. Support for further European integration does not imply

by default that trade unions have accepted neo-liberal economics. The reality of operating within a transnational production structure does not automatically determine these unions' ideological outlook. The empirical analysis to follow and the conclusion will, therefore, also include an investigation of the social purpose of trade unions' activities in line with the critical dimension of neo-Gramscian perspectives.

Before we look at the empirical case studies, however, there is one further issue to explore. New institutionalist literature, and here especially the literature on different models of capitalism, has stressed the importance of the institutional set-up for the particular policies adopted vis-à-vis globalisation (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Schmidt, 2002). While these approaches overlook the importance of the underlying social relations of production and the related configuration of class forces (see above), they are able to highlight the importance of the institutional set-up for policy-making. In other words, social forces do not operate in a vacuum, but within specific institutional set-ups. While the EU is not a fully-fledged state, its elaborate institutional set-up does show state-like features, and this structural environment has to be kept in mind. The next section will investigate firstly how the neo-Gramscian perspective can be complemented with an emphasis on institutional structures and secondly, in what way the EU institutional set-up may influence trade unions' attitude towards co-operation at the European level.

### **Trade unions within the European Union form of state**

In principle, a neo-Gramscian perspective is open to a problematisation of national institutional set-ups. While it does not regard these factors as independent variables, a neo-Gramscian perspective accepts that social forces operate within and through different forms of state. The concept of form of state is concerned with the

relationship between civil society and the state and is defined in terms of the apparatus of administration and the historical bloc or class configuration that defines the *raison d'état* for that form (Cox, 1989, p.41). What is generally lacking, however, is a conceptualisation of the structural impact these institutions have on social forces. In relation to the analysis of European integration, what is missing more specifically is a theory of form and function of intermediary, supranational institutions (Ziltener, 2000, p.73). To overcome this shortcoming, the neo-Gramscian perspective proposed in this article is extended with a 'strategic-relational' approach to the state. According to Jessop, 'as an institutional ensemble the state constitutes a terrain upon which different political forces attempt to impart a specific strategic direction to the individual or collective activities of its different branches' (Jessop, 1990, p.268). Thus, the form of the state is the framework, within which various different strategies are possible. The state in this sense 'can never be considered as neutral. It has a necessary structural selectivity' (Jessop, 1990, p.268), favouring certain strategies over others. The different impact of the form of state on social forces 'is not inscribed in the state system as such but in the relation between state structures and the strategies which different forces adopt towards it' (Jessop, 1990, p.260). Institutions select behaviour, but they do not fully determine it. Hence, within a given institutional, structural setting, there are always different possible strategies, from which actors can choose. Moreover, the state is a generator of strategies in the sense that the political forces in the state, i.e. state managers, can develop strategies to achieve unitary action of the state (Jessop, 1990, p.261). Thus, 'we must also consider the "state projects" which bond these blocks together with the result that the state gains a certain organizational unity and cohesiveness of purpose' (Jessop, 1990, p.353; see also p.358). Finally, institutions 'have histories. They are path-dependent,

emergent phenomena, recursively reproduced through specific forms of action' (Jessop, 2001, p.1230). Hence, we have to see a given state structure in its historical context and have to acknowledge that this particular structure constrains present actors, on the one hand, which, however, might be able to change this structure via new strategies, on the other (Jessop, 1990, p.353).

As Ziltener outlines, understood as a system of multi-level governance, the EU institutional set-up constitutes a complex area for strategic-relational decision-making, a form of state with its own inherent strategic selectivity (Ziltener, 2000, pp.78, 81). Clearly, trade unions' willingness to co-operate at the European level will also depend on their possibilities to influence policy-making within the EU institutional set-up. This leads to a second hypothesis: that trade unions are more likely to co-operate at the European level, if they perceive such an engagement as furthering their influence on policy-making. According to Greenwood, increasing EU competencies since the 1980s have made lobbying and working at the European level more attractive to interest groups (Greenwood, 2003, p.33). In other words, those trade unions where there are more EU competencies and more decisions taken in their particular sector, are more likely to favour a European industrial relations system, even if their production structure is not transnational. The next section will assess the general strategic selectivity of the EU institutional set-up from the perspective of trade unions.

#### *The strategic selectivity of the European Union*

When analysing the European form of state, in accordance with Jessop's strategic-relational approach, the focus has to be first on the current 'state project'. Since the mid-1980s, European integration has been revived around neo-liberal economics,

embedded in the four freedoms and overall rationale of the Internal Market as well as the neo-liberal convergence criteria of EMU and the related focus on price stability and low inflation by the independent European Central Bank (ECB). The transnationalisation of finance has been part of the Internal Market and the transnationalisation of European production partly drove the Internal Market project, but was also partly driven by it. Finally, the neo-liberal rationale was also behind the 1995 and 2004 EU enlargements (Bieler, 2000; 2002 and 2003a; Bieler, and Morton 2001a). The new, neo-liberal form of state has been institutionally protected by removing monetary and economic policy-making from the wider influence of actors. Firstly, in a move labelled ‘new constitutionalism’ by Gill (2001), monetary policy-making with a focus on low inflation has been handed over to the ECB, made up of ‘impartial’ technocrats. Secondly, the core macroeconomic decisions are taken by the European Council, the meeting of heads of government and heads of state within the EU, which is largely outside lobbying pressure. In June of each year, the European Council passes the so-called broad economic policy guidelines, which must support the low inflation policy of the ECB, as well as the employment policy guidelines. While full employment has been made a goal by the Lisbon Council in 2000, employment policy itself remains subordinated to the objective of price stability and, therefore, concentrates on supply-side measures such as life-long learning and labour market deregulation. In other words, ‘European employment policy was made to fit the existing integration project and thus became one of the pillars of supply-side-oriented neo-liberal restructuring’ (Tidow, 2003, p.78).

The multi-level nature of governance in the EU provides trade unions as other interest groups with easy access to supranational decision-makers, but with a related much lower chance of making an impact on the outcome of policy-making

(Greenwood, 2003, pp.29, 73). 'The Commission's role in drafting legislation, together with its interdependencies with outside interests, make it the foremost venue for outside interests' (Greenwood, 2003, p.30). This is also the case in relation to trade unions, which have a particularly close contact to the Directorate General (DG) for Employment and Social Affairs, formerly DG V. Overall, however, the Commission has 23 DGs, and not all DGs are equally important. The DG for Competition and the DG for Economic and Financial Affairs are more decisive within the EU. Together with the DG Internal Market and DG Trade they are the hard core of the Commission (Interview No.3), driving the neo-liberal project through the discourse of competitiveness (Rosamond, 2002). Trade unions' focus on the DG for Employment and Social Affairs has often marginalised them within the Commission internal decision-making process. On the one hand, other DGs do not feel responsible for social policy. On the other, 'DG V has little voice in other DG's measures ... and cannot require them to take their social implications into account, so there is no forum where that must be done' (Martin and Ross, 1999, p.333). In short, trade unions have been too reliant on the DG for Employment and Social Affairs without receiving enough in return (Greenwood, 2003, pp.47, 151, 170).

The European Parliament (EP) has become a focus of interest groups, since it can amend and co-decide legislation. For the ETUC, a monthly meeting with the trade union intergroup of the EP is the most crucial contact point. There are also close links between the Socialist Party and the European trade union leaders. 'ETUC has been able to table amendments in the Parliament through this route' (Greenwood, 2003, p.159). The overall position of the EP within the EU decision-making process remains, however, weak.

Multi-sector social dialogue is one of the core avenues for the ETUC to influence policy-making in the EU. Since the Treaty of Maastricht in 1991, which extended the EU competencies to social policy issues and introduced QMV for decision-making in this area, the Commission has had the possibility to give a negotiation mandate to the ETUC and their employers' counterpart UNICE. Should they agree on a particular issue, this agreement is then passed to the Council of Ministers, which transfers it into a directive without further discussion. First successes include the Parental Leave Directive in 1996 (Falkner, 1998). Overall, however, the significance of the social dialogue should not be exaggerated. To date, it has concluded only few agreements establishing minimum standards (Greenwood, 2003, p.68). The agreement on telework in 2002 is merely voluntary, the implementation of which is not via an EU directive, but remains the task of the social partners themselves (Eironline, 23 July 2002, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/2002/07/Feature/EU0207204F.html>; 14/02/2003). The same is the case in relation to the latest agreement on work-related stress (Eironline, 20 October 2004, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2004/10/feature/eu0410206f.html>; 27/10/2004). Moreover, the areas covered by the social dialogue are compartmentalised and do not include issues of the general macroeconomic direction of the EU. More fundamental issues such as the right to strike, the right to association and wage bargaining have been excluded from European competencies (Greenwood, 2003, p.150). In other words, the social dialogue is in no position to effect fundamental change of the current neo-liberal drive in the EU.

Some social dialogue has also been started at the sectoral level between EIFs and their employers' counterparts. This, however, has often been limited to the exchange of information and the formulation of common positions and joint

statements. Hardly any substantial agreements have resulted from it, also because employers' associations do not want to engage in negotiations. Partly, because they benefit from the competition in an unregulated area and a related further decentralisation of bargaining, partly because they are too weak vis-à-vis their national members (Keller and Sörries, 1999, pp.335-6; Martin and Ross, 1999, pp.331-2). Finally, there are currently about 650 European Works Councils, which had to be established by European transnational corporations (TNCs) since 1994. Some regard them as the main building block of a future European industrial relations system (e.g. Marginson and Sisson, 1998). They could, however, be a double-edged sword in that they drive a wedge between privileged core workers of TNCs and workers in the periphery of the labour market on atypical, temporary contracts, supplying TNCs (Martin and Ross, 1999, pp.343-4).

In sum, there are limited structural possibilities for trade unions within the EU institutional set-up. The EU is characterised by a neo-liberal 'state project' and the actual institutional set-up structurally disadvantages trade unions. Nonetheless, the strategic-relational approach to the form of state does not only focus on the structural environment. It also concentrates on the rational choice of strategies by agency within specific structural conditions. The next section will analyse trade unions' concrete activities at the European level and investigate whether, and if so, how they overcome these structural limitations.

## **Trade union co-operation at the European level<sup>2</sup>**

In this section, I will mainly look at several EIFs, which represent workers in industrial sectors across the EU. In accordance with the main hypothesis introduced in section 2, the emphasis will be on transnational sector unions on the one hand, and national sector unions on the other.

### *Transnational sector unions*

The European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF) organises workers in one of the most transnationalised sectors in Europe, including many TNCs in consumer electronics, car manufacturing and machinery production. In response to transnationalisation, it is argued that the EMF had to follow and internationalise its structure and activities. The crucial turning-point were the early 1990s. 'Under the influence of the opening-up of the European borders, growing international competition, complete Europeanisation of the economy and massive unemployment in Europe, [the EMF] had noticed a distinct tendency towards a competition-driven collective bargaining policy' (EMF, 2001, p.1). Plans for EMU further implied the danger of social dumping through the undercutting of wage and working conditions between several national collective bargaining rounds (EMF, 1998b, pp.1-2). The EMF realised that wage bargaining was no longer a national issue in its sector, characterised by an increasing transnationalisation of production. In response, the EMF started restructuring itself

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<sup>2</sup> Empirical material for this article has partly been collected through semi-structured elite interviews with trade union representatives in January 2003. Interviews have the advantage of providing an insight into the internal decision-making process of a union in contrast to policy documents, which only state the outcome of a debate. In order not to inhibit the interviewees, the interviews were not taped, but extensive notes made throughout and written up immediately afterwards. Hence, instead of direct quotes, a reference to a specific interview is added in the text, where points of the respective interview have been paraphrased. The validity of information was cross-checked through the information from other interviews as well as the consultation of further primary sources, including official trade union documents and material by the European industrial relations observatory on-line (Eironline, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/>) as well as secondary material investigating European trade unions.

and began to discuss the potential of co-ordinating wage bargaining (Interview No.6). The EMF co-ordination strategy has three main pillars (EMF, 2001, p.1): Firstly, a sophisticated system for the exchange of information about national collective bargaining rounds has been established, the so-called European Collective Bargaining Information Network (EUCOB@) (Schulten, 2001, p.315). Secondly, this exchange of information is further supported through the establishment of cross-border collective bargaining networks including the exchange of observers for collective bargaining rounds (Gollbach and Schulten, 2000, pp.166-76; Schulten, 2001, pp.316-19). While EUCOB@ is generally considered to be a success, the performance of the cross-border networks differs from network to network. Notably, the Nordrhein Westfalen-Belgium-Netherlands network has not only exchanged observers, but also obtained speaking rights for the visiting observers (Interview No.6).

The third area of co-operation deals with the adoption of common minimum standards and guidelines. Wage bargaining co-ordination is an important aspect of it, but only one of several. In 1998, the EMF adopted the 1750 hours working time per year charter (EMF, 1998a). This led to the reduction of the working time in four countries and there are only few EU members left, where metal workers are still working more hours. A vocational training charter was adopted in 2001 – there has been a limited success in this area, because not all member unions regard this as a core issue – and the EMF currently works on a social charter of minimum standards in the areas of pensions and sick pay. The co-ordination of national wage bargaining was approved in 1998 and the EMF tries to ensure that national unions pursue a common strategy of asking for wage increases along the formula of productivity increase plus inflation rate (EMF, 1998b, p.3; Schulten, 2001, pp.304-7). As far as data is concerned, although national negotiators did not refer to the EMF guidelines, the

actual bargaining results were pretty much within the formula until 2001. The current results of bargaining are more out of line with the formula, but importantly the guidelines are increasingly used as a political bargaining tool. When there was a strike in Germany during the 2002 bargaining round, 17 presidents of metal workers' unions went to Frankfurt during the strike and defended the IG Metall claims through reference to the EMF co-ordination formula (Interview No.6). The main goal of the co-ordination of collective bargaining is to avoid the downward competition between different national bargaining rounds and to protect workers against the related reduction in wages and working conditions. Thus, 'a coordinated European collective bargaining policy will play a major role in intensifying and reinforcing the social dimension of European unity' (EMF, 1998b, p.1).

In order to implement this strategy of collective bargaining co-ordination, the EMF has restructured its institutional set-up. Most important here is the re-orientation of the Collective Bargaining Committee in the early 1990s from a forum, which met twice a year and where unions could report the results of national collective bargaining, into an institution, where common collective bargaining objectives are debated. Additionally, a Select Working Party (SWP) was created, responsible for the preparation of Collective Bargaining Committee meetings including the formulation of new initiatives within the area of collective bargaining (Schulzen, 2001, p.314). Moreover, the EMF changed its statute in 1999, giving itself a proper negotiating role. Finally, the institutional changes have gone hand in hand with an expansion of members of staff. In 1989, the EMF had four full time members of staff, now it employs 13 (Interview No.6). At the second EMF congress in Prague on 13 and 14 June 2003, internal decision-making was further facilitated. The statutes of the EMF were changed to allow the Executive Committee to delegate decision-making power

to the EMF policy committees including the Collective Bargaining Committee. In turn, the Executive Committee can adopt recommendations from the policy committees by a two-thirds majority. At the same time, the affiliated unions agreed on an increase of membership fees to allow for the employment of six more permanent staff.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the EMF has clearly developed into an independent actor at the European level in accordance with the hypothesis that transnational sector unions are more likely to engage in co-operation at the European level. The focus on union-internal co-ordination does not mean that the EMF is not interested in sectoral social dialogue. It had demanded European framework agreements, although not on wages, since 1996. For years, employers have generally been reluctant to engage with the EMF (Interview No.6; see also Martin and Ross, 1999, p.332). It is only now that social dialogue is forthcoming in the shipbuilding sector (Eironline, 11 November 2003, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/2003/11/inbrief/eu0311203n.html>; 27/01/2004). In short, the example of the EMF highlights that trade unions are structurally disadvantaged within the EU form of state. Sectoral social dialogue has had almost no substance and the impact on EU institutions is limited. Nevertheless, when assessing the possibilities of labour within the EU form of state, a strategic-relational analysis also focuses on the strategies of labour. The co-ordination of bargaining provided a good, alternative way forward in this situation, characterised by the following three advantages: (1) it does not rely on an employers' counterpart, which has not been willing to engage in meaningful social dialogue; (2) the disadvantaged position within the EU institutional framework is of no consequence, since inter-union co-ordination does not rely on the compliance of EU or national institutions; and (3) this strategy

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<sup>3</sup> E-mail message by the EMF Deputy General Secretary on 23/06/2003.

allows to take national differences into account, often cited as the core reason of why European-wide union co-operation is impossible. If productivity is lower in one country than another, then the wage increase demands in the former country will be lower than in the latter accordingly.

Nevertheless, in line with the neo-Gramscian perspective, the production structure itself only creates the possibility of action, it does not determine it. There is no automatic correlation between a transnational production structure and intensive European level co-operation. The European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers' Federation (EMCEF) is a good counter-example. After a period of extensive restructuring including increasing productivity rates as well as job losses during the 1990s, the chemical industry is the most transnationalised sector in the EU (Le Queux and Fajertag, 2001, pp.123-4). In 1997, EMCEF formed a Euro Working Group, which became responsible for the exploration of the possibility of European collective bargaining. The results were guidelines for collective bargaining in the Euro-zone adopted by the EMCEF conference in November 1999. 'These include the common objective to safeguard workers' purchasing power, the convergence of working time within a European corridor and the limitation of overtime, and a sector-based control of variable pay schemes introduced by MNCs' (Le Queux and Fajertag, 2001, p.129). Nevertheless, these guidelines are not supposed to lead to a harmonisation of national bargaining claims and, thus, fall short of the EMF's ambitions. This is considered to be wishful thinking. Only the exchange of information on the different ways of bargaining in individual countries, including the exchange of bargaining observers, is deemed a realistic possibility. Nevertheless, even EMCEF recognises that globalisation puts stronger pressure on Europe-wide co-ordination. It is also in the process of establishing a new internal structure reflecting and adapting to specific

European themes, moving beyond a simple, co-ordinating role (Interview No.4). Thus, the 3rd EMCEF Congress in Stockholm from 8 to 10 June 2004 adopted a new structure with four committees, dedicated to (1) Industrial Policy, Health, Safety and Environment, (2) European Works Councils, (3) Collective Bargaining and (4) Social Dialogue (EMCEF, 2004). Additionally, Commission initiatives push EMCEF towards joint responses with the employers at the European level. In November 2003, EMCEF and the European Chemical Employers' Group (ECEG) signed a joint statement on the future of the chemical sector in response to a new draft EU regulation for this sector (e.g. Eironline, 9 December 2003, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/2003/12/inbrief/eu0312202n.html>; 27/01/2004). In September one year later then, EMCEF and ECEG declared their willingness to propose to the Commission the establishment of a formal social dialogue committee for the chemical industry and a new joint position paper on 'Education, Vocational Training and Lifelong Learning' was adopted (ECEG-EMCEF, 2004). It will be interesting to see, whether EMCEF develops into a more independent European actor.

#### *National sector unions*

Education is an example for a domestic production sector. There are no common EU positions or competencies in this area. Social dialogue took place between the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUC-E) and employers' associations on the lack of teachers in the EU. Progress has, however, been hampered by the fact that the employers' side, state level and local government, are either not interested or not organised at the European level. The co-ordination of national collective bargaining at the European level is deemed to be unfeasible (Interview No.5; see also Schulten, 2002, p.19). In 2002, the Chief Negotiators' Electronic

Network was launched to improve the exchange of information (ETUC, 2002, p.37). Overall, however, the case of the ETUC-E confirms the main hypothesis that trade unions in national production sectors are unlikely to develop strong co-operation initiatives at the European level. There were some concerns over the draft European Constitution including education as part of the competencies within the Common Commercial Policy and, thus, subject to possible privatisation under a future General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (ETUC-E, 2003). In its defence of education as part of the public sector, however, the ETUC-E's main focus was on ensuring that education policy remained subject to unanimity voting within the Council, preserving education as a national level competency (ETUC-E, 2004, p.2). A European level defence of education as a public sector was not attempted.

The European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), however, provides an interesting contrast. It organises workers in the civil service from local to European government as well as in the health sector and general utilities such as energy and water. Thus, it organises workers in all those sectors, which were traditionally part of the public sector with a clear national production structure. Nonetheless, EPSU has become increasingly active as an independent actor at the European level since the 1990s. Confronted with intensified neo-liberal restructuring, it has struggled to preserve a system of integrated public services within EU members. In order to explain EPSU's increased activity, one needs to refer to the second hypothesis and especially the amount of decisions taken at the European level. EMU in general, it is pointed out by EPSU, has intensified the need for closer co-ordination of national bargaining. It provides a common European framework for the public sector, even if the production structures remain largely national. The EU co-ordination of economic policy is alleged to have led to wage moderation in 1992 and

1993 and the same would now happen again. Only co-ordination would be able to protect the interests of public sector workers (Interview No.3). Moreover, deregulation and liberalisation of traditionally domestic production sectors such as energy and public procurement has been driven by EU directives and has, therefore, made the international, European level more relevant for trade union activity. In a letter to EPSU's affiliated unions, the General Secretary Carola Fischbach-Pyttel herself pointed to the decisions in relation to public services to be taken at the European level in 2003. This included the Commission's position on GATS negotiations, the report by the working group on Social Europe within the Convention on the Future of Europe, the discussion by the EP of draft directives on public procurement and a further opening of the electricity and gas markets, a Green Paper by the Commission on Services of General Interest (see Commission, 2003) as well as a general push by the DG Internal Market towards more deregulation of services of general economic interest (EPSU, 2003a). According to EPSU, the 'liberalisation policies of the European Commission with the majority support of the European Council are undermining public services' (EPSU, 2002b). EPSU attempts to stop these moves towards further deregulation, privatisation and the related dangers of undermining the guaranteed access for everybody to services of general interest.

In response to neo-liberal restructuring, EPSU has engaged to some extent in sectoral social dialogue in the electricity industry, now the most transnationalised sector within the remit of EPSU (Eironline, 8 November 2002, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/2002/11/inbrief/eu0211203n.html>; 27/01/2004; and Eironline, 6 July 2004, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2004/07/inbrief/eu0407201n.html>; 27/10/2004). Moreover, a new social dialogue committee in the local and regional government

sector was established in January 2004, adopting a joint statement on telework as its first measure (Eironline, 23 March 2004, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2004/03/feature/eu0403203f.html>; 27/10/2004). Social dialogue may follow in the gas industry. In general, however, results have remained below the ones in the multi-sector social dialogue, also because public sector employers' associations at the European level either do not exist or emphasise national differences (Interview No.3). First attempts have also been made at European-level co-ordination of national bargaining. At its congress in 2000, 'EPSU adopted a declaration of principles regarding collective bargaining in public services' (Schulten, 2002, p.18). In 2002, the executive committee of EPSU adopted a bargaining information exchange system similar to the EMF and appropriately called it EPSUCOB@ and there is now an annual collective bargaining conference. Overall, however, collective bargaining co-ordination is far less developed than by the transnational sector union EMF (Interview No.3). A third strategy employed by EPSU has been the lobbying of EU institutions. GATS highlights the importance of the European level in international trade agreements, because the Commission is here the EU's main negotiator. EPSU is concerned that EU public services have become bargaining chips for the Commission in its attempt to open up other countries for European services exporters (EPSU, 2003a). Reservations were expressed by EPSU in a meeting with the Commissioner Pascal Lamy of DG Trade on 17 February 2003 in relation to the tightness of GATS safety clauses, allowing countries to maintain their own regulations, the secrecy of the current negotiations, the pressure applied by institutions such as the World Bank on developing countries to move towards liberalisation in these areas, as well as the rights of foreign citizens carrying out contract work within the EU (EPSU, 2003b). In a letter to Lamy, summing up the

results of the meeting, the EU's role in pressuring developing countries towards deregulation was criticised and it was demanded that Lamy seeks 'withdrawal of the requests to developing countries to open public services such as waste water treatment, postal services and others by the European Union' (EPSU, 2003c, p.2).

The most innovative strategy is, however, EPSU's increasing co-operation with other social movements. In relation to GATS, additionally to its direct lobbying of the Commission, EPSU has participated in demonstrations organised by Belgian unions and ATTAC on 9 February 2003 to keep public services out of GATS. Furthermore, it took part in the European day of national action on GATS and public services organised by the European Social Forum on 13 March as well as the ETUC European day of national action for a Social Europe on 21 March 2003 (EPSU, 2003a). Finally, via its international federation Public Services International, EPSU has signed up to the campaigns 'Stop the GATS Attack' and 'Shrink or Sink' (Interview No.3). The link with other social movements is also visible in relation to public procurement. EPSU and several other EIFs co-operated with a range of environmental and other social movements such as Greenpeace Europe and the Social Platform, itself a network of European NGOs promoting the Social Dimension of the EU, in lobbying the EU Council of Ministers to amend the Draft Directive on Public Procurement towards the inclusion of social, ecological and fair trade criteria in the award of public procurement contracts (Coalition for Green and Social Procurement's Amendment, 2002; Interview No.3). Finally, the drafting and debating of the Convention on the Future of Europe including a working group on 'Social Europe' inspired EPSU, as part of a broad public service coalition including unions and social movements, to demand that 'the social and economic value of services of general economic interest are protected and formally enshrined in any new constitutional

framework in Europe' (EPSU, 2002a; see also EPSU, 2002b). Co-operation with social movements is supported through research of the Public Services International Research Unit (<http://www.psiru.org>), which is widely used by the NGO community in their own publications.

In sum, the increasing involvement by the EU in general and the Commission in particular in moves of actual or potential future deregulation and liberalisation of national public services has intensified EPSU's engagement at the European level with the aim to counter these measures. The case of EPSU demonstrates again that trade unions are structurally disadvantaged at the European level, but also that there are strategies available, which may help to overcome these disadvantages. EPSU has been engaged in sectoral social dialogue. It has started developing the co-ordination strategy following the lead of the EMF and lobbied directly EU institutions. Additionally, however, in all its activities against the further privatisation of public services, EPSU has formed close alliances not only with other trade unions, but also wider social movements. These alliances present 'an agreement between trade unions, NGOs and employers, that social Europe is the bridge that connects Europe to the citizen' (EPSU, 2002b). Hence, a separate 'social discourse' has emerged in the EU and trade unions have successfully used it to broaden their social basis of the struggle against neo-liberal restructuring of the public sector, thereby increasing their impact on EU policy-making (Greenwood, 2003, pp.150, 155-8).

## **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that a neo-Gramscian perspective successfully conceptualises labour as a potential international actor through its focus on production without falling into the trap of economic determinism. In accordance with the first

hypothesis, those trade unions with a more transnationalised production structure are more likely to engage in intensive European level co-operation with some EIFs emerging as independent actors. The EMF and its co-ordination of collective bargaining strategy demonstrates this. National sector unions, on the other hand, see less a need in European-level activities. The ETUC-E serves as an example here. Nevertheless, the production structure does not determine unions' behaviour. It only creates the possibility for particular actions. EMCEF, a transnational sector union, has developed the European level much less, while EPSU, representing national public sector workers, has increasingly intensified its independent activities within the EU. Following the second hypothesis, the latter can be explained by the European form of state and specifically the increasing amount of decisions taken at the European level, which affect the delivery of services of general interest. As it was also shown, the EU form of state structurally disadvantages unions. Nevertheless, what is important is the strategic selectivity of a form of state. Inter-union co-ordination of collective bargaining – see here the EMF – and the wider co-operation with other social movements – see here especially EPSU – are good ways forward within the EU form of state. Following the critical theory dimension of the neo-Gramscian perspective, the analysis of the social purpose underlying trade unions' activities has made clear that these activities are mainly directed against neo-liberal restructuring. For EPSU, it is the defence of public services against further liberalisation, which is at the top of its agenda. For the EMF, the fight against a downward competition between different national bargaining rounds including further liberalisation of the labour market is the main goal.

Importantly, the successful strategies by the EMF and EPSU have been taken up by the ETUC itself. Firstly, in summer 1999, the ETUC adopted the co-ordination

of collective bargaining as one of its four main tasks and established an ETUC Collective Bargaining Committee (Schulden, 2002, pp.21-2). In December 2000, the ETUC then adopted a recommendation on the co-ordination of collective bargaining at the European level, which has as its main component the formula of inflation rate plus productivity increase plus some extra factors, if appropriate. The main goal is to stop the fall of wages as a percentage of GDP based on the understanding that a further fall of workers' real income would damage domestic demand levels across the EU (Mermet, 2001, pp.52-61 and 181-2). As the ETUC makes clear in its most recent resolution on the co-ordination of collective bargaining, in the face of rising unemployment, the continuing restructuring in all European sectors and pressure by employers to decentralise bargaining, European-level co-ordination is the only guarantee to avoid competitive wage dumping (Eironline, 1 June 2004, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2004/05/feature/eu0405205f.html>, 27/10/2004). The ETUC's main task to date has been the compilation of an annual collective bargaining report, in which it compares national bargaining results with the ETUC co-ordination formula (see ETUC, 2002). This is judged to be a success (Interview No.1), also because some national confederations made reference to the ETUC formula in recent national bargaining rounds in France, Portugal and Spain (Interview No.2). Nevertheless, while the co-ordination of collective bargaining has led to first positive developments, this needs to be linked to a wider economic-political discourse in order to counter current restructuring successfully. As Schulden argues, 'a more offensive and politicised strategy would finally require an embedding of the coordination approach in the context of a broader trade union concept for a European economic policy which sharply criticises the still dominant neoliberal approach to European integration in favour of a more social Europe' (Schulden, 2002, p.27). In many

respects, this links to the second ETUC change in strategy. It too has increasingly engaged in co-operation with other social movements and was well presented at the European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence in November 2002. Clearly, there are still problems as far as the co-operation between social movements and unions is concerned, but the ESF has been an important step forward in that participating organisations identified neo-liberal economics as the main target of their activities (Bieler and Morton, 2004b). The ETUC's commitment to wider action is also expressed in its organisation of large-scale demonstrations at EU summits such as Nice in 2000 and Barcelona in 2002, as well as its co-ordination of action days on 2 and 3 April 2004 in support of a stronger social Europe (Eironline, 5 April 2004, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2004/04/inbrief/eu0404203n.html>; 27/10/2004). Only if these strategies are pursued further, circumventing the structural disadvantage of the EU institutions, will the ETUC be able to develop a position of strength, from which it can make effective use of tripartite discussions offered by the macroeconomic dialogue, established by the European Council summit in Cologne in 1999, and the more recently institutionalised tripartite social summit for growth and employment, bringing together the social partners and EU institutions on the eve of the annual spring Economic and Social Council (Eironline, 8 April 2003, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/2003/04/inbrief/eu0304201n.html>; 27/01/2004).

Finally, an analysis of European-level union organisations should not overlook that there are also differences along national lines in relation to how much support for European co-operation is forthcoming. It is not only the EU but also national forms of state, which are relevant here. Those unions, which still enjoy considerable access to decision-making at the national level, are less likely to support the establishment of a European industrial relations system, even if they represent transnational sector

workers, than those unions which have lost out at the national level. Swedish transnational and peak association unions, for example, have been less enthusiastic about European co-operation, since a new system of sectoral collective bargaining has been established in Sweden in 1997 (Bieler, 2003c). British unions, on the other hand, especially under Conservative governments, but increasingly also now due to a disappointment with New Labour, have been more vocal in their support for a European-level macroeconomic system (Bieler, 2003b; Strange, 2002). In general, a combination of national with European level efforts against neo-liberal restructuring will be necessary in the future, if there is any hope for success.

## **Interviews**

Interview No.1: Political Officer, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC); Brussels, 21 January 2003.

Interview No.2: Economist - Research Officer, European Trade Union Institute (ETUI); Brussels, 21 January 2003.

Interview No.3: Deputy General Secretary, European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU); Brussels, 22 January 2003.

Interview No.4: General Secretary, European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers' Federation (EMCEF); Brussels, 22 January 2003.

Interview No.5: General Secretary, European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUC-E); Brussels, 22 January 2003.

Interview No.6: Deputy General Secretary, European Metalworker's Federation (EMF); Brussels, 23 January 2003.

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