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# Unions in Germany: Searching to regain the initiative

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# **Unions in Germany: Searching to Regain the Initiative<sup>1</sup>**

**Project Report for the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung  
Projekt-Nr. 2000-250-2**

**Martin Behrens, Michael Fichter and Carola M. Frege**

***WSI-Diskussionspapier Nr. 97***

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# **Unions in Germany: Searching to Regain the Initiative**

**Martin Behrens, Michael Fichter and Carola M. Frege**

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## I. Introduction

Without a doubt: The existence of a strong, united, capable and cooperative labor movement was a substantial contribution to the post-1945 success story of the Federal Republic in its rise from the destruction wrought by National Socialism and war to a model of democratic and economic stability. Indeed, from the very outset in the immediate postwar era, the labor movement was staunchly committed to the goal of democratization. Its programmatic demands for a reconstruction of the economy (*Neuordnung der Wirtschaft*) were formulated in the interest of promoting both economic and social democracy. Subsequently, the realization of co-determination became the permanent *leitmotiv* for the goal of participatory democratic rights for employees. Politically, the trade unions mobilized time and again to warn against non-democratic and anti-democratic developments. And in the context of constitutionally guaranteed collective bargaining rights (*Tarifautonomie*), the trade unions<sup>2</sup> have made a substantial contribution to the development of the German Model of labor relations, i.e. that comprehensive web of institutions and organizations regulating conflicts between the interests of labor and capital<sup>3</sup>. The Model has been a source of stability and growth in the Federal Republic, and in this capacity it has certainly been a key enabling factor of Germany's democratization success story.

The economic and political successes of the German Model are indicative of the strategic capacity of the unions to act (*Handlungsfähigkeit*). Organizationally, this capacity has been defined by the encompassing and dominating importance of unity. Concepts such as "united union federation", "one workplace - one union", "sectoral instead of company contracts" or "comprehensive interest representation of all employees by the works council" are representative of the importance attached to unity as a measure of achieving solidarity.

Programmatically, the unions have understood the need to create and define goals for themselves, for the general public, and for the opponent camp of employers as a social and political project. In fulfilling their task as the organization of employee interest representation, the unions have been able, in the words of Ilse Brusis, to rely "above all on the collective action of their members, on the values and norms of solidarity in interest representation, and on the strong backing within traditional working class milieus." (Brusis 1990: 12) At the same time, the German unions have historically oriented themselves toward being a broadly defined social and political movement in the defense of justice.

Over the last decade, this normative depiction of German unions and the German Model has grown out of focus with the reality. In their expertise of 1990 entitled "*Beyond the Status of Resolutions*", academic observers sympathetic to the union cause expressed their concern that in the face of new challenges resulting from German unification, the unions were in danger of losing their strategic ability to act and define the options of their politics. They saw the DGB "retreating into a purely

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<sup>2</sup> Our presentation deals solely with the German Trade Union Federation (*Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* - DGB) and its member unions, which are sectoral or multi-branch organizations. The German Salaried Employees Union (*Deutsche Angestellten-Gewerkschaft* - DAG) has merged with 4 DGB-unions to found the new service sector union *Ver.di* within the DGB. Another major employee organization, the Federation of German Civil Servants (*Deutscher Beamtenbund* - DBB) does not have the capability to strike and its collective bargaining activities are very restricted.

<sup>3</sup> The term *German Model* first came to mean what it does today in West Germany in the 1980s. (Dufour, 1998; Müller-Jentsch, 1995)

defensive position with the intent of protecting existing standards for its core members."(Hoffmann/Hoffmann/Mückenberger/Lange 1990: 17) In the same year, historians of the union movement met to discuss the consequences of German unification for the unions, concluding that the unions were missing many opportunities to define the issues and shape their strategy to meet new demands. "Indeed, it appears to us that the unions are in need of recalling the basic values and convictions which they have evolved over time."(Hans-Böckler-Kreis 1990: 589)

And today? Who are the trade unions? How do they define themselves on the threshold to the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What are their goals, what are their topics and issues? And what strategy will they pursue, whose interests will they defend, who are their opponents? Have the German trade unions over the past decade lost their capacity to find answers to such questions? What meaning does the concept of unity have today and how do the trade unions conceptualize solidarity?

Over the past decade, a continuously high level of unemployment, globalizing financial and product markets, new forms of employment and new demands on work (especially in the service sector and network structures), and not the least of all massive restructuring processes in the context of German and European unification have undercut the overall economic and political context and weakened the specific institutional structures of the German Model of labor relations.

The German unions have not been able to prevent this process from continuously eroding their political and organizational foundation. Nor have they developed the kind of input necessary to be able to substantially shape the changes in their environment to the benefit of their constituencies. Although they can show some partial successes, their activities have been overwhelmingly oriented toward defending the past, i.e. the structures, institutions and positions which they have built upon and made viable since the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949. Such a defensive strategy is problematical in the context of the current flux of changes because it is exclusively oriented toward the past and thus fails to generate new perspectives from old strengths.

Today, the situation of the German unions has to be described as extremely complicated and full of contradictions. Within the unions it is difficult to mark the existence of clearly defined political positions and programs. In any case, the ideological camps which set the tone of controversy between the various unions in the past are hardly discernable in the political sphere of today's unions. The complexity of new political and socio-economic demands is part of the explanation of this phenomenon but certainly not the whole reason. Of equal importance is the fact that the politics of German unions have become dominated by pragmatism. This may have to do with the realism which has always characterized successful union policy. But a policy based solely on realism and pragmatism lacks direction and strength. Union policy needs vision as well to motivate and mobilize for its goals.

To be sure, the adherents of neo-liberalism have no use for visions of solidarity. But the unions, as Richard Hyman has pointed out, are destined to fight the "battle over ideas" and should never relinquish their visions or allow others to define them (Hyman 1999: 4). For unions, retaining and using political and economic power is at once dependent on the strength which is rooted in a powerful organization and on a political vision which extends beyond the demands of everyday politics. The culmination of this power is then the ability to be able to integrate these two elements with each other. In

other words: "Trade unions have always had two faces, sword of justice and vested interest." (Flanders, 1970:15. Quoted in Hyman 1999: 1).

How unions can regain the initiative in the struggle to realize their own goals and rebuff the neo-liberal scenario is surely a question for which there are no easy answers or patent prescriptions. Nevertheless, we regard the combination of an engaged and realistic policy of interest representation with the formulation of an encompassing programmatic vision as imaginable and possible.

Are the German unions showing signs of embarking along such a path? In part. The problem today for the unions is not that they are not searching for answers to the pressing problems they are facing. That is, for example, exactly what the IG Metall is seeking to do with the campaign "Debate on the Future" which it recently launched<sup>4</sup>. Likewise, the merger project *Ver.di* is conceived as a big step toward consolidating and strengthening union representation in the rapidly growing service sector<sup>5</sup>. DGB headquarters and all of the other unions in the federation also have their "revitalization projects" which focus on a wide variety of union organization and politics.

As such, the problem lies elsewhere. It seems that the experiences which unions are making with many of their innovative activities and special projects are not being evaluated with respect to their applicability for the organization as a whole. This is a weakness of the unions resulting from the fact that they are incapable of generalizing the lessons of such projects, whether this be within a single union organization or from one union to another. Equally detrimental for a union revitalization strategy is the fact that the potential of the DGB as an umbrella organization to play an active role in evaluating and spreading "best practices" at the regional and local level is not being used.

But then, diversity and grass-roots politics were spurned in a union movement in which unity was the exclusive principle of organization, historically justified and successful in coping with a particular economic and political environment. Especially in Germany, mass production capitalism as it grew in the post-World War II era brought forth a highly centralized model of union representation: Union responsibility for the political and sectoral arenas, works councils responsible for the workplace. Reform policies, which are initiated and controlled from the top down within the unions are in danger of overlooking and even ignoring initiatives and independent developments at the regional and local levels of the organization. This can be especially the case when such initiatives challenge the existing distribution of resources.

## **II. Arenas of Union Revitalization Strategies**

The aims of this paper are twofold. First, we want to open an broad discussion of union revitalization strategies in the German unions as they are contemporarily manifested in the six areas of strategy which seem to be most significant:

- *organizing* the unorganized;
- *mergers* and *internal restructuring*;
- *social partnership* (from firm to industry to the national level);

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.IG-Metall.de/themen/zukunft/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.verdi-net.de>

- *political action;*
- *coalition building;*
- *cross-border trade union collaboration.*

Secondly, we will present an assessment of current developments in each of these areas with the aim of pointing to both selected, existing revitalization strategies and to strategy deficits where new accents are lacking, but conceivable. Our paper will sum up with a critical review.

## **1. Organizing the Unorganized**

Despite encouraging signals such as the public announcement of the IG Metall to spend 12 Million DM for membership organizing in 2001, organizing is still the stepchild of German unions. In contrast to American or British unions which are traditionally more dependent on their membership strength, German unions used to rely mainly on their institutional resources (labour laws, industry level bargaining). In addition, since German unions act mostly at the industry level, organizing is the primary responsibility of the works council. However, the current transformation of the German industrial relations system (e.g. Europeanization/globalization, decentralization of collective bargaining) weakens the institutional power resources and there is clearly the need for unions to re-emphasize their organizational resources.

Our fieldwork<sup>6</sup> revealed that most unions have not yet succeeded in radically rethinking their strategies of organizing. In most cases organizing is still reduced to classical advertisement campaigns and public relations (image campaigns, posters). For example, the DGB spent 4.2 million DM on an image campaign<sup>7</sup> for the EXPO 2000 in Hannover. There is also a DGB initiative to create a new image campaign for the millennium which is aimed to last for two years (and designed by an internationally acclaimed advertisement agency) and includes various topics on why unions are necessary in the new millennium. The aim is to improve the old-fashioned image of unions. As one DGB official (DGB workshop 1999) put it “in the 90s unions became to be seen as ‘dinosaurs’ because they are not ‘innovators’ anymore but ‘conservators’ of the vanishing industrial society. Employers on the other hand turned to become innovators. During the 80s unions were publicly more present and supported in the

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<sup>6</sup> The empirical research is based on semi-structured interviews (in average 3 h) conducted with the chief official of the recruitment/ advertisement/ public relations department of six German unions (out of 12 unions) in summer 1999: HBV (banking, insurance, retailing), IGM (metal), IG BCE (chemical, energy, mining), DPG (post/telecom/ postal banking), GEW (education, higher education) and NGG (food processing, hotels and restaurants). The six unions were selected in order to obtain a mixture of large and small unions (e.g. IGM - the largest union in Germany and DPG - one of the smallest), a mixture of traditional industrial unions and service sector unions (e.g. IGM vs HBV, GEW), a mixture between so-called more militant unions (IGM) and more moderate unions (IG BCE), and a mixture of public sector (GEW) and private sector unions. This sample should provide a representative picture of German unions.

Three unions (IGM, DPG, IG BCE) which had recent organizing campaigns were further selected as intensive case studies (including the study of documentary material of each union). We also participated at various workshops of the DGB on advertisement (“DGB Werbeausschuss”) which included the chief advertisement officials of several DGB unions and the DAG (white-collar union).

<sup>7</sup> This included billboards with a statement about the corporatist committee for the reform of the welfare state and labour market (Bündnis für Arbeit). The message was “unions want to secure the German apprenticeship system and want a fair distribution of work”. In detail this meant “a guarantee of a apprenticeship for each young person entering the labour market, retirement from 60, more jobs instead of overtime, attractive part-time work”.

famous 35h working time dispute. So far, unions did not manage to create a new identifiable public topic in the succession of the 35h campaign.”

The perception of organizing as advertising was also evident from observing the discussions of the DGB workshop “advertisement, communication and public relations” which we attended regularly over a year. The participants of these workshops consist of union officials responsible for advertising campaigns of individual DGB unions who meet regularly to discuss union specific advertisement campaigns and to facilitate learning among each other. The focus of their discussion is how to best publicize union values and goals as a means to recruiting new members.

The fact that all unions have an advertisement/marketing department which is responsible for membership organizing also indicates this particular view on organizing. Moreover, union advertisement is conducted in a highly professional manner. As the organizer of this DGB workshop explained “in former times our field was called “membership recruitment” (Anwerbung), then “membership soliciting” and now it is “advertisement, communication and public relations”. Communication is defined as ‘information’ but also as ‘integration’ and ‘identification’ and is directed towards members, officials, public, other unions and the non-organized. Unions frequently employ advertisement agencies to develop advertisement and recruitment campaigns, something which is not common in the US or British labor movement. The aim is to sell the product “union” to the public and to potentially new members and to establish an identifiable role of unions in the public debate. The current problematic public image of unions is seen as a major hindrance for organizing.

One obvious reason for the emphasis on marketing and public relations of unions is the fact that the political and public role of unions in Germany is traditionally much stronger than in Anglo-Saxon countries. On the other hand it indicates that most German unions still have a rather classic understanding of member organizing through advertisement tools and are far away from an approach which radically redefines organizing as a new relationship between members and union organization as it has been developed in recent years in several US and British unions.

The argument of this new organizing approach is that classical advertisement is not sufficient to organize non-members and to keep existing members in our modern, “post-industrial” society. Members should not be treated as passive customers but should be constantly involved in the union organization. Organizing has to be defined as an encompassing concept which recruits new members and continuously activates the existing ones. This requires a thorough organizational restructuring process. The union organization needs to become more decentralized, the individual members need to get more competences and responsibilities, there is a need to train professional organizers, and a need to have more financial resources for organizing campaigns. In addition, unions need to understand themselves less as service providers (organizations which serve their members) and more as social movements which encourage members to become active and identify with a common cause. Traditional bread-and-butter issues should be combined with values of social justice and solidarity. Members should feel that they belong not only to an interest organization which bargains wages but also to a community which represents certain values. In the US this is frequently interpreted as a stronger emphasis on union militancy.

The intention is to transform large union bureaucracies into more flexible organizations with empowered union members who can solve certain problems on their own without



approaching the union officials. This seems a promising strategy to respond to the new management practices such as teamworking and decentralization.

As mentioned above, this US-style organizing model (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998) has not yet created much interest within the German labor movement. However, some unions however have managed to implement new, innovative concepts of organizing. The most prominent examples are the DPG (post/ telecom/ postal bank) and IG BCE (chemical/ mining/ energy/ leather) (others such as the IG BAU or IG Metall have innovative practices as well but these are not yet embedded into a coherent organizing strategy). Both unions introduced for different reasons (privatisation in the case of DPG, merger in the case of IG BCE) a comprehensive organizational reform which included as a core strategy organizing. In the following we will provide a brief overview of their innovative strategies.

#### **a. DPG**

The watershed for the DPG was 1992. The union lost more than 100.000 members between 1992 and 2000 (546,906 to 445,390). This was mainly caused by the tremendous changes in their industry. The DPG was a traditional, very powerful "company union" in the public sector and acted as a closed shop. "If you became an employee for the Deutsche Post you had to join the union" (quote head of advertisement, March 99). The union had good relations to management and was traditionally known for their social partnership approach.

Yet privatization and restructuring of various parts of the Deutsche Post (e.g. Deutsche Postbank), the privatisation of the Deutsche Telekom and the entrance of private companies and in particular of greenfield sites in the transportation and telecom sector (UPS, mobile phone companies, etc.) meant job losses and the necessity for the DPG to adapt to dramatically changing conditions in order to survive.

In 1993 the DPG introduced a comprehensive organizational reform program. For example, the four original departments responsible for communication, advertisement, public relations, in-house journals and recruitment were merged into two. The department "membership journal, advertisement and publications" is now responsible for organizing. The term 'advertisement' is preferred to 'recruitment'. "It's not an army which recruits people but an organization which promotes itself." ("geworben um sie zu gewinnen" - quote head of advertisement, 03/99).

Moreover, in 1994 the executive committee decided to implement a comprehensive reform to promote organizing throughout the entire organization. The main message was "membership organizing is the job of everybody". It is no surprise that this created various forms of resistance among full-time officials which is still not entirely overcome.

The program goals included first of all the intension to communicate to all officials that organizing is a top priority of the DPG. For example, no speech of the union president is without a statement about the organizing efforts of the DPG. Second, it included an image campaign (new logo, new information brochures for members) and new advertisement materials to support new organizing methods at shop floor level. Third, several organizing campaigns were developed to increase membership in core companies and in greenfield sites. Fourth and most importantly, it included a thorough structural reform of the union organization to support organizing. Each of the 17 union districts were asked to designate one of their board members to supervise organizing,

the appointment being for a minimum of 4 years). The head office helped by producing a list with essential personal characteristics of organizers. "There is no financial incentive to become an organizer, motivation is all what counts" (quote, head official advertisement). They were responsible to get their local branches to select one organizer who was then responsible for the workplace branches to select an organizer themselves. This network of organizers at each level of the union hierarchy is supposed to establish a firm 'backbone' for the union's organizing efforts. All organizers meet regularly and receive professional training in organizing.

There are five explicit aims of organizing at the DPG: (i) to keep members in the union and to service them well, (ii) to recruit new employees and the youth, (iii) to recruit employees who are not yet members, (iv) to keep retired members, (v) to prevent members who want to leave the organization from it (DPG brochure June 98).

The emphasis is on systematic planning of the organizing initiative: analysis of membership potential, realistic goal setting, continuing motivation and training of organizers (to prevent fatigue and stress), and the monitoring and evaluation of individual campaigns.

So far the union's efforts seemed to have paid off. Although membership numbers are still declining, the number of new entrances are increasing. Since 1994 each year around 12.700 new members are recruited. This is more than the IGM achieves the head of the advertisement dept. announced proudly. He knows that it will be difficult to reach a positive membership balance within the next couple of years but in the long run he thinks it is possible.

A new initiative started in 1999 ("Offensive 1999") which has the declared aim to double the annual number of new members compared to last year. This initiative includes "members-recruiting-members" programs (financial incentives). It also addresses the local organizers to initiate organizing campaigns and to compete with other workplace in their recruitment success (financial incentives). The explicit aim is to get the local organizers "to mobilise the entire workplace". This includes the development of organizer teams at local level which obtain professional training on team work. So far the emphasis has been to train individual organizers, now the idea is to get them to create teams which discuss individual organizing problems but also develop campaigns together. They are supported with various literature and seminars are hold to explain the concept. The initiative will be evaluated at the end of this year with the help of a survey of the local branches.

In sum, the success rate of the past organizing efforts is relatively high and the head officials are enthusiastic about this development. However, they acknowledge that there is still a huge need to further enhance organizing. A recent DPG survey (1998) revealed that only a third of local union officials thought of themselves as active organizers. Yet, the DPG seems to be on the right way. They managed successfully to make "organizing" a top priority and introduced structural reforms to support those efforts.

## **b. IG BCE**

The former chemical union (IG Chemie, Papier, Keramik) was aware of its membership problems since the 1980s but German unification and its merger in 1997 with the

mining (IG Bergbau und Energie) and leather (IG Leder) unions diverted attention from this topic for a while.

Soon after the merger the new union started its first systematic organizing initiative ("Offensive 2000") which lasted for three years (until the end of 1999) and which was accompanied by major organizational changes. The initiative was introduced by a participative approach and thus was openly discussed throughout the organization rather than just implemented from above. The structural reform comprised the creation of three subdivisions of the department 'organization and advertisement' which are responsible to organize campaigns locally. Group A is responsible for already organized companies where the aim is to increase union density. There are two full-time officials responsible for the campaigns and they get help from 10 additional officials each week to implement the individual campaigns. All union officials of the IG BCE are required to spend four weeks each year in organizing. Last year they organized campaigns in 112 companies.

Group E is responsible for non-unionised companies. The group is lead by one full-time official who works with officials of selected districts for three months to organize campaigns in their area (the regional officials are required to spend their time in this project). Last year they approached 139 companies and initiated 40 new works council elections.

The third group "members recruit members", has two full-time officials as trainers who travel from workplace to workplace to train workplace activists in individual and collective organizing.

There are various additional projects. For example, each shop steward (Vertauensleute) receives a membership joining declaration each month from the headquarters to remind him/her to recruit at least one new member each month. Moreover, each district official has to visit two companies each month and recruit members (without goal setting). The results are sent to the district chief official and to the head advertisement department.

At this stage the project is regarded as worth the effort despite the membership losses during this period (the union comprised 1,010,555 members in 1997 and 922,783 in 1999). The three groups managed to recruit around 9000 new members each year. The long-term aim is to consolidate the 1 million membership figure.

There are of course differences between the organizing models of both unions. A difference to the DPG is that the organizing project of the IG BCE is more centrally planned and controlled. For example, all union officials are forced to do 'organizing' for an entire month each year. The DPG on the other hand pursues a slightly more voluntaristic and decentralised approach and tries to empower their organizers at each level to pursue organizing efforts. The DPG headquarters introduce new campaigns which can be taken on board by the local branches but they are not forced to do so. But what both unions have in common is a coherent, planned approach to organizing. For sure all German unions have organizing campaigns but what distinguishes the two unions from the rest is exactly the strategic approach to organizing. It is not just a message of how important members are, it also includes a financial and organizational investment in organizing.

The above description of the initiatives of both unions is further reinforced by a representative survey of works councillors in both unions which Frege conducted in

2000 (table 1).<sup>8</sup> Although the works councillors of both unions mostly used traditional organizing tools such as distributing advertisement materials, focusing on a successful works council work and talking to non members at shopfloor level, they have positive attitudes towards the importance of organizing. A large majority (72%) for example disagrees that serving members is more important than organizing or that there are more important problems than organizing for the works council. They are also convinced that unions still have a major role to play in today's society (87%) and half of the works councillors think that they can sell union successes to their workforce.

In short, these findings suggest that the two unions have successfully managed to raise the awareness of their shopfloor activists, i.e. works councillors about the importance of union organizing. This is particularly interesting with regard to the current debate of the German union movement on works councillors' assumed tendency to become more independent from unions and more workplace focused (e.g. Bosch et al. 1998).

Table 1:

***Which organizing methods were used in your workplace last year? in %***

	yes	no
special organizing team	28	72
benchmarking (figures how many new members should be organized)	14	86
explicit effort to talk to non members at shopfloor level	83	17
planning who addresses which unorganized worker	46	54
distribution of advertisement material	74	26
union sponsored leisure activities for non members and members	28	72
home visits by non members	03	97
financial incentives for members who recruit new members	39	62
practising good works council work	96	04
union advertisement on the black board	62	38
workplace organizing campaigns during collective bargaining/ strikes	34	66
special information campaigns for potential new members of special groups (women, youth, foreign workers)	29	71

<sup>8</sup> The survey comprises 485 returned questionnaires with a return rate of 39%. The questionnaire comprised 113 variables on workplace relations and works council - union relations. For more information please contact Carola Frege.

*What do you think about the following statements? in %*

	strongly disagree	disagree	no view	agree	strongly agree
Organizing campaigns are not worth their money; you only get new members through good works council work	07	42	12	33	06
There are more important problems at this workplace than member organizing	16	42	09	30	04
Successes in member organizing are ultimately not important for the bargaining strength of the works council	19	44	04	29	05
Management intimidates potential members	33	48	07	09	02
Overall, employees do not need unions as much anymore as in former times	50	37	04	08	02
Our union has an old-fashioned image	16	45	14	22	3
We cannot sell union successes anymore	07	46	09	34	05
Union officials of our union are not sufficiently engaged in membership organizing	05	35	16	38	06
In the end it is more important to serve existing members than to organize new members	14	60	11	13	02

There are three conclusions. First, our preliminary findings suggest that although there is an increasing awareness of the importance of the issue and efforts among all unions to improve their recruitment campaigns, an US style organizing model is not widespread within the German labour movement. Only two unions, DPG and IG BCE, out of twelve have properly implemented an “organizing approach”.

Second, the outlined organizing campaigns of the two unions reveal that typical “social partnership” unions as are the DPG and IG BCE are capable to introduce an organizing model which is similar to the US model, however without a militant, mobilising ideology. This “paradox” might challenge the hypothesis of the US literature that social partnership unions cannot adapt an organizing model.

Third, another difference between the organizing approach of the two German unions and the US style model is that the former did not propagate a shift from servicing into organizing. The German unions practice what can be called “managerial organizing” in opposite to “grass roots organizing” or participative unionism as the US model suggests. In other words, German unions’ relationship to their members continues to be heavily focused on servicing. Members are to be attracted and retained by well-designed and attractive services. Members are primarily seen as instrumental in their orientation towards unions. In difference to Anglo-Saxon managerial unionism (see Heery and Kelly 1994) collective interests are not displaced by a concern with individual members’ interests. The attempt is rather to “sell” collective interests as individual interests. Thus, organizing is seen as a strategy to advertise union’s services rather than as substituting it (as the US model suggests).

A final question is whether participative unionism is easily practicable in the German context. We are sceptical. There were fierce debates in the German union movement during the 1980s how to transform unions into participative or discourse organizations (e.g. Zoll 1990). Today these debates have practically disappeared. One but clearly not the only explanation might be that participative or social movement unionism is only “affordable” in times of economic growth and basically directed towards a well paid, educated and articulate middle-class segment of the union membership. German political unification and its current economic restructuring (“globalisation”) have put unions back to deal with simple bread and butter issues. Unemployment is clearly the concern number one. Thus, maybe a social movement unionism is appropriate in an US context with a growing economy and tight labour market supply but much more difficult to introduce in the current German context.

To conclude, an US-style organizing model is not practiced in Germany. However there are indicators that the two social partnership unions (DPG, IG BCE) are quite successful with their newly established organizing approach. This provokes the question to what extent a militant ideology and social movement unionism are really necessary for a successful organizing model or whether this only applies to an Anglo-Saxon setting. Our preliminary findings suggest the latter. To use Turner’s (1998:38) words, “the high road of European style labour-management co-operation” might be as equally successful as the US-style organizing activities which take the “low road of grass-roots mobilization”.

## **2. *Mergers and Internal Restructuring***

Measures of internal union restructuring are far from being novel within the German trade union federation, DGB. As for example Streeck pointed out in his seminal study about labour’s organizational development in the post WW II era (Streeck 1981), several unions turned to procedures of “administrative rationalisation” and sought to mobilise additional resources. Such strategies in particular concerned the organization’s dues revenue and included the formalisation of membership status. Thus, several unions introduced computerised record keeping as well as direct deposit as means to put the union on a more solid financial footing. While earlier practices required union representatives to get in touch with each and every member just to collect monthly contributions, automatic money transfer eliminated this necessity. These earlier initiatives, however, almost exclusively focused on increasing the amount of resources at the union’s disposal. In contrast we found more recent strategies to focus on a much broader range of measures for restructuring and in particular to switch from a strategy which seeks to extract even more resources from its membership, to a more efficient use money, staff and voluntary work. Mostly initiated during the second half of the 1990s unions pursued various forms of internal restructuring, ranging from changing the organizations’ formal structure, to the introduction of more sophisticated human resource management practices and to the implementation of comprehensive and long-lasting programmes of “organizational development”. While throughout the 1990s, restructuring strategies based on the introduction of state-of the-art computer technology were still widespread, unions in particular turned to “soft” strategies in part even based on management practices (Müller 2001).

In several cases programmes for restructuring were introduced in the context of union mergers. As will be shown later in this section, unions either had to adjust their organizational structure just to enable the integration of a second union or used this

window of opportunity to break resistance within the own organization and to introduce structures which were on the agenda even prior to the merger.

Surprisingly, there was no union in our sample which did not restructure at all. Although somewhat sheltered from market competition as well as protected from rapid membership loss the Police Union (GdP) initiated internal restructuring as did the Public Services, Transport and Traffic Union ÖTV. We also found incidents of internal restructuring by industrial unions such as the construction workers (Industriegewerkschaft Bauen, Agrar, Umwelt, IG BAU), the metal workers (IG Metall), and the chemical and mineworkers (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, Chemie, Energie, IG BCE) which are strongly exposed to market competition.<sup>9</sup> Although we could not find a uniform pattern of restructuring there are several measures which appeared to be very popular among several unions. Such measures included new techniques to spread goals throughout the organization and to commit union bodies at all levels of the organization to them. So called *Zielvereinbarungen* (target agreements), as kind of a watered down version of management by objectives, were introduced by several state level union bodies within the GdP, by the national miners and chemical workers union and in part by the national headquarters of the construction workers. The general philosophy behind *Zielvereinbarungen* is that organizations can be only successful when goals are laid out in a transparent and clear fashion to provide all actors with definite guidelines for their action. Goals are to be defined in negotiations between actors at different stages of the hierarchy and can concern targets for outcomes, for output, use of resources or efficiency. In practice, *Zielvereinbarungen* prove to be a rather hybrid form of control. On the one hand, they are different from simple orders because they are based on negotiations, on the other hand they are not egalitarian because of the uneven distribution of power between the parties involved. In addition, there are usually no serious sanctions for non-compliance because the concept target agreements are based on two assumptions, first, that actors strive to provide good work and second, that they are goal oriented.

In practice, such goals concern different aspects of unionism. In 1998 and as part of a comprehensive programme for organizational development<sup>10</sup> the chemical and mineworkers started to experiment with *Zielvereinbarungen*. The union negotiated targets for dues revenue and membership development but also considered criteria like union's success at elections for works councils and supervisory boards.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the Police Union such agreements had been negotiated between state-level union bodies and locals and concerned primarily issues of membership activation and participation<sup>12</sup> while the construction workers are considering using *Zielvereinbarungen* as a tool to improve organizing activities by local unions.<sup>13</sup> Because the definition of some of those targets is still causing the unions headaches there is a growing debate about controlling. According to a statement by the director of the union owned legal service corporation:

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<sup>9</sup> While the German metal and chemical industries are traditionally operating on international product markets, the construction workers union is strongly affected by labour mobility and in particular by the influx of foreign labour.

<sup>10</sup> The programme was titled „GEO, Gemeinsame Entwicklung der Organization“.

<sup>11</sup> Interview IG BCE, 11.28.2000

<sup>12</sup> Interview GdP, 12.08.1999

<sup>13</sup> Interview IG BAU, 12.09.1999

“In a truly efficient steering system controlling is supporting political leadership within the organization, is leading to more transparency inside the union, to the professionalisation of economic leadership as well as to cost reduction and to the concentration on the most important tasks while also being able to better serve the needs of membership.” (Westermann, 1998, p. 313)

Most unions, however, are still in the beginning of more comprehensive restructuring and still a far cry from Westermann’s vision. But recent efforts should not be underestimated. It is notable that certain measures of restructuring seem to spread even beyond class boundaries.

In addition to initiatives which seek to improve union governance some unions also turned to more sophisticated human resource management practices. While measures to improve union government structures through means of target agreements and controlling seek to pursue a strategy of more coherent union policies, human resource management strategies first made their way into the union as a means to consolidate union budgets and in particular to keep personnel costs under control. The ÖTV was among the first unions to introduce a official policy on this matter. At its extraordinary congress in 1994, a majority of delegates passed a regulation which prohibits the organization to spend more than 45 percent of its budget for payroll. Once this key parameter was defined, the ÖTV, as well as other unions, faced the difficult task to adjust its staff to declining membership levels as well as dues revenue without even firing union employees.<sup>14</sup>

While the public sector and transport workers as well as other unions predominantly used job turnover and generous early retirement plans to adjust their payroll to declining financial resources, they later increasingly emphasised human resource development as a means to use the full potential of its staff. At a more general level this type of internal restructuring leads to revised mission statements which require unions to treat their members as quasi customers rather than as passive owners.<sup>15</sup> For a while it seemed to be that “customer-orientation” remained in the state of lip-service but in the second half of the 1990s an increasing number of unions took important steps to follow up on this concept. In paraphrasing the proponents’ language: To treat members as customers unions first need to know what customers want and second, need to enable service representatives to deliver exactly these goods. In this sense, “customer orientation” was not just a tool for raising membership commitment and satisfaction but, even more important, it could also contribute to make the union more appealing for those employees who are not yet members of the organization (see section 1, organizing the unorganized).

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<sup>14</sup> There is an unspoken and unwritten law within the German union movement, that labour shall treat its employees better than its counterparts within the corporate world. While unions occasionally dismiss staff for misconduct, the rule precludes them to fire union representatives and clerical staff for economic reasons. There was, however, a notable exception of this rule when the Banking and Retail Union HBV faced such a severe budget crisis that it was forced to dismiss several union representatives in its East German offices.

<sup>15</sup> Right from the beginning this „customer-orientation“ view sparked conflict within the organization. Strong forces within the labour movement maintained that unions are still substantially different from a mere service agency or, to take a frequently used point of reference, from the ADAC, the leading German automobile club. In contrast, reformers insisted that „customer orientation“ would better fit members’ needs and also make the union organization more accessible for the rank and file. (See Simon 1997).



In particular measures to survey the membership were widespread within the German union movement. To take only a few examples, the metalworkers asked the POLIS-Institute<sup>16</sup> to survey its membership. The institute found that 84 percent of its West German and 76 percent of its East German members were satisfied with the unions core services such as collective bargaining, legal support and political interest representation but there was also substantial criticism which in particular concerned the organization's lack of flexibility. The Police Union surveyed its membership twice. In the first survey the GdP commissioned the Institut für empirische Forschung to find out about how members value their own organization. A more recent survey conducted by Zimbel und Partner (Heidelberg) analyses why former members have left the union. Similar membership surveys were conducted by the construction workers<sup>17</sup> while the chemical workers commissioned the Fraunhofer Institute to measure the accessibility of the union office for the membership.<sup>18</sup>

While opinion polls and membership surveys are frequently used instruments in the unions' toolbox a few organizations have taken the following step and turned to a more professional management of human resources. Increasingly unions realise that full-time union representatives are a driving factor for the organization's success. Although union activists in works councils, union workplace representatives (*Vertrauensleute*) and a limited number of activists are important to keep the union running it is in the responsibility of local union representatives to connect the different fields of union activity. Thus paid union representatives are crucial to the union organization because they strike a balance between the interests of works councillors and the union locals. In addition, they provide important membership services such as legal counselling, and are crucial to maintain close ties to political actors as well as to social movements.

In particular the construction workers union IG BAU, but to a smaller degree also the IG BCE and the IG Metall recently turned their attention to improve the performance of those paid representatives. While plans to introduce performance based pay structures are still in the state of preliminary considerations<sup>19</sup> all three organizations increased their efforts to improve hiring procedures and training of union staff. In particular the IG BAU raised the standards for union representatives. While during the 1960s and 1970s a majority of union officials came from the ranks of the work force and received only a limited amount of training, newly hired representatives are now required to graduate from a demanding 23 month training programme. This programme contains a 11 month quasi-academic education, one year on-the-job training in a local specialised on training, and trainees need to pass a national examination administered by the union's headquarters. To raise the level of qualification within the ranks of the union's staff, the IG BAU introduced a generous early retirement plan and replaced part of the retiring generation of union officials by representatives trained according to the new standards.

All these initiatives, be it the introduction of human resource management or target agreements, were implemented by the national union headquarters or by state level union bodies but rarely actively involved union locals or union activists at the local

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<sup>16</sup> „Gesellschaft für Politik und Sozialforschung“

<sup>17</sup> By the Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschungsgruppe (SALSS) in 1993 (IG BSE 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Interview IG BCE, 11.28.2000

<sup>19</sup> Plans for performance based pay have been presented by the union federation DGB. Behind the screens, the construction workers as well as the DGB owned legal service corporation (DGB Rechtsschutz GmbH) are considering to introduce new pay structures for union staff.

level. Some unions, however, discovered that just by doing restructuring top-down, the organization is in danger of ignoring existing potential at other parts of the union organization. Thus, several unions set up more comprehensive programmes for organizational development (*Organisationsentwicklung, OE*) which frequently seek to involve local and regional union bodies and in several cases even bring outside consultants into the union organization. Despite substantial differences such OE projects are usually long term oriented, they target units from all parts of the organization, and seek to encourage active participation.

Probably the most ambitious programme was the “Projekt OrganisationsEntwicklung” by the metal workers union which started in November 1993 and lasted for almost six years. In terms of subjects for union restructuring and development the project covered a lot of ground. It included, among others, rather technical issues such as the distribution of competencies between different units with the organization but also visionary themes such as future fields of union activity. In total 8 areas for restructuring were defined and union locals as well as regional districts were invited to submit applications for co-funding by the national union. A special committee, comprised of IG Metall officials from the headquarters, representatives from all of the 7 districts and some selected locals, evaluate the project and visit the local to check if the proposed project is realistic and sound. Besides this aspect of quality control the steering committee would also make sure that a full range of topics for restructuring are covered and would also help union bodies to implement and improve their programmes. In total the union funded some 70 local, 8 multi-level and 5 district-level projects.

In 1997 and at a much smaller scale the IG BCE initiated its so called *GEO Projekt* which is supposed to initiate a long-term modernisation process within the union and which first included 10 different project teams. In March 1998 the construction workers followed the lead. The IG BAU created a special department for organizational development within the national headquarters and commissioned a national steering committee to initiate a number of different projects. Such projects sought to improve the quality of union services as well as to enable the organization to use financial and personnel resources more efficiently. Once staff is freed from old responsibilities as an effect of organizational improvements, the union now puts these resources to a different use. Besides upgrading the range of membership services the organization also seeks to extend its organizing activities. This is crucial for the IG BAU given that the recent crisis in the construction industry not only reduces the union’s membership in line with the total workforce, but also absorbs substantial personnel resources for legal services<sup>20</sup>. Without comprehensive organizational restructuring, many of our interviewees feared, the union would change its focus of activity from the construction site to the court room.

While the IG BAU maintained a balance between national leadership and guidance and local involvement, an earlier project by the public sector union ÖTV designed the process of restructuring much more top down. At their national union convention in 1988 the ÖTV set up the campaign for organizational reform titled *Zukunft des*

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<sup>20</sup> As part of their membership with the union, employees are entitled to legal representation and advice. While under normal circumstances the workload in legal counselling can be handled quite well by the union office, the caseload tends to expand enormously under the condition of economic downturns. First of all the crisis leads to an increase in dismissals, which boosts the number of „dismissal protection cases“. Second, cut throat competition is being intensified which leads many contractors to break the standards of the collective agreement by pressuring individual workers to accept wages, benefits, and working time arrangements below the collectively agreed standard.

*öffentlichen Dienstes* (ZöD) which was later, in 1994 amended by a more participatory component (Frey, 1998). In contrast to the OE programmes of the IG Metall and the IG BCE, the ÖTV approach was initially much more focused on the need to consolidate the budget and to streamline its operations. Thus, it could be hardly surprising that by 1994 the outcomes of organizational reform had lead to a revision of the ÖTV's formal structure. Budget guideline had been introduced, the union had shrunk the size of executive boards and committees. In addition the number of separate occupational departments had been cut from 40 to 6.

But savings programmes are not the privilege of public sector unionism. In part caused by membership decline, many unions found themselves in a situation where organizational restructuring seemed to be inevitable just to keep the union running. In several cases it is difficult to judge whether a certain measure of restructuring is just the result of unions' re-action to budget constraints or rather an attempt to pro-actively develop their own organization.<sup>21</sup> However, in all cases under review internal restructuring occurred to be more than just a technical adjustment because it always affected vital interests of actors within the union. Beyond the aspect of saving money or developing organizational structures reform is also political because it frequently changes the distribution of resources and power within the union. For example, when the construction workers planned to use their personnel resources in a more flexible manner by way of allowing the union's headquarters to transfer paid union representatives between locals this sparked substantial conflict within the organization. Because hiring and work assignments were for a long time considered to be the prerogative of each local, parts of the local leadership considered this proposal for a revision of the IG BAU's constitution to be a challenge for their power as well as for local union autonomy. It took the union substantial effort to change the rules for resource allocation and finally the constitutional amendment was passed by a narrow margin only.

In several cases union mergers provided an opportunity for internal restructuring and even accelerated the decision taking process<sup>22</sup>. As our research indicates, however, there is no standard pattern of union merger and the final outcomes in terms of internal restructuring strongly depend on the key characteristic of the union involved as well as on the power relations between them. As table 2 indicates, merger activity is largely a more recent phenomenon. While the number of independent affiliates of the German Trade Union Federation DGB remained stable at 17 for most of the post WWII period, this time of stability was followed by massive merger activity which brought the number of affiliates down to 8.

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<sup>21</sup> The most clear cut case of re-active adjustment is probably the restructuring of the German Trade Union Federation DGB, which almost completely depends on financial contributions by its member unions. As a consequence of membership loss and declining dues revenue the DGB had to merge large numbers of local offices and also cut the staff of its research institute to half.

<sup>22</sup> According to Müller (2001, p. 110) union mergers are just tools which help unions to by time for restructuring.

**Table 2: Union Mergers 1950-2001**

Union	Merged with	New Name	Membership (as of 2000)	Year of Merger
IG Druck und Papier	Gewerkschaft Kunst	IG Medien	175,044	1989
IG Bau-Steine-Erden (IG BSE)	Gewerkschaft Gartenbau, Landwirtschaft, Forsten	IG Bauen, Agrar, Umwelt (IG BAU)	539,744	1995
IG Chemie, Papier, Keramik (IG CPK)	IG Bergbau und Energie Gewerkschaft Leder	IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie (IG BCE)	891,587	1997
IG Metall	Gewerkschaft Textil- und Bekleidung (GTB)	IG Metall	2,630,620*	1999
IG Metall	Gewerkschaft Holz und Kunststoff	IG Metall	2,763,485	2000
Gewerkschaft Öffentliche Dienste, Transport und Verkehr (ÖTV)	IG Medien  Deutsche Postgewerkschaft (DPG)  Gewerkschaft Handel, Banken, Versicherungen (HBV)  Deutsche Angestellten-gewerkschaft (DAG)	Vereinigte Dienstleistungs- gewerkschaft (ver.di)	2,888,482**	2001

\*Excluding the membership of the Gewerkschaft Holz und Kunststoff

\*\* As of March 2001

But when merger is labour's answer to a problem, what actually is the problem? In a number of cases mergers were considered to be the appropriate answer to membership decline<sup>23</sup>. During the time of low merger activity DGB affiliates faced a split development of membership. While in absolute numbers unions gained strength because membership increased from 5.450 million (1950) to 7.938 million (1990), relative strength was constantly on decline and unionisation rates came down from 35.7 (1950) to 29.0 (1990). Only when, in the aftermath of the German unification, absolute membership too started to dip, the process of union mergers picked up speed. In particular smaller unions such as the artists union (29,613 members in 1988) leather workers (21,929 members in 1996), the garden and forestry workers (82,725 members in 1995) but also the timber and plastics workers (132,865 members in 1999) and the textile workers (183,349 members in 1997) faced increasing problems to maintain union offices in all regions of the country and to provide basic services for its membership. While the financial situation of those smaller unions was very heterogeneous<sup>24</sup>, all unions expected that it would be for the benefit of its members to be part of a larger and potentially more powerful organization. From the perspective of the larger "host" union, a unified and larger union could benefit from administrative

<sup>23</sup> According to Streeck and Visser (1998) union officials pay little regard to sector and politics but are driven by the search for „organizational viability“.

<sup>24</sup> The leather workers were considered to be rather wealthy while in particular the textile workers and the timber and wood workers faced severe budget constraints.

economies of scale and also increase its power relative to the employers as well as within the DGB. A similar rationale could be attributed to the merger between the chemical workers union (IG CPK) and the mineworkers (IG Bergbau und Energie). Although at time of the merger the mineworkers were comparatively strong<sup>25</sup> and wealthy, the union could expect to continue losing members because the German mining industry is scheduled to reduce the number and work force of the coal mines it operates. Thus, the mineworkers acted proactively but did so in the expectation of ongoing decline.

But even in the case of quasi take-overs of a small and weakened union by a comparatively large and powerful organization we frequently found negotiated forms of the integration and all kinds of unintended side-effects. For example the entire process to merge the chemical workers union with the mine workers and the leather union took four years to prepare and in several areas it was not clear who was calling the shots. The entire process was accompanied and supervised by an external union-friendly research institute (Martens, 1998, Martens and Klatt, 1994) and started with a non-binding "cooperation agreement" which allowed participating unions to withdraw from the project at any time if they disagree with the results of negotiations. Finally all three unions decided to dissolve their old organizations and allowed each and every member to revoke the transfer of their membership status to the new IG BCE.<sup>26</sup> In other cases, such as the merger between the gardeners union GGLF and the construction workers members were transferred automatically.

In both cases, successor organizations inherited more than just members. The IG BCE, for example, was faced with an almost ancient tradition of the mineworkers who do not exclusively service and involve their members at the company level but maintain a strong community based structure at the level of workers living quarters. The new union discovered that in times of increasing worker mobility and fading ability of unions to reach their members at the shop-floor such a structure increases labours' ability to stay in touch with a rising share of the union's membership. The construction workers made a different experience. While the organization was for decades dominated by male workers, all of a sudden the merger with the GGLF brought large numbers of women into the organization<sup>27</sup> and – at least at the level of the union hall – forced the union to reconsider part of its culture.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to these mergers among non-equals, in predominantly motivated by membership decline, the most recent merger among five public sector unions took place in a much different context and thus represents a second type of merger activity. According to a mission statement by the participating unions, *Vereinigte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft* (ver.di) was first initiated as an answer to technical, economic and social change within the economy, state and society (Gründungsorganisation Ver.di 2000). In particular, the union seeks to end jurisdictional disputes within the growing service economy and thus make labour a stronger actor at the bargaining table. Whereas prior to the foundation of ver.di, three

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<sup>25</sup> In 1996 the IG Bergbau und Energie still had 335,317 members which were mostly concentrated in the few German mining regions. In addition, the union could also benefit from extensive codetermination rights in the coal, iron and steel industry.

<sup>26</sup> Interview IG BCE 28.11.2000

<sup>27</sup> In 1995 28.3% of GGLF members were women; in contrast, the construction workers union IG BSE had only 9.7% female workers in their ranks. (Müller-Jentsch/Ittermann, 2000, tables C 30, C 32)

<sup>28</sup> Interview IG BAU 06.30.1997

different unions organized employees in banking, ver.di will now have exclusive jurisdiction. Particularly important is the participation of the *Deutsche Angestellten Gewerkschaft* (DAG) in the new union because the DAG for decades was standing outside the German Trade Union Federation DGB and thus considered to be a competitor for service sector unions such as the ÖTV and HBV but also for the metal workers union.<sup>29</sup> Besides this important aspect of reducing inter-union competition the participating unions also plan to benefit from economies of scale by pooling their resources. Below the level of more general goals the ver.di case also shows the difficulties union face to create a new organization with is both, efficient and legitimate (Keller, 1999, p. 622). To provide equal representation for all occupations represented by ver.di, participating unions decided on the introduction of a “matrix structure”. In this matrix, workers’ interests will be represented by 13 different branch level units, which are covering more than 1,000 different occupations in some 30 industries. In addition, the new union also maintains a hierarchical structure composed of local unions, regional/state level union bodies and the national headquarters. In particular the smaller participants in the merger insisted that all 13 branch level units are to be represented by full time union officials at all three hierarchical levels within the organization. While such a matrix structure is considered to support the active integration of participating actors as well as to improve equality there is also the danger of unclear responsibilities, high transaction costs and conflict. Thus, it can be hardly surprising that companies only rarely decide in favour of the introduction of a matrix structure. In the case of ver.di, the matrix was appealing to participating unions because it promised a rather clear-cut, technical solution to a political problem. In particular the small unions feared to be disenfranchised by the large and powerful ÖTV and thus insisted in this kind of guarantee to save their identity.

While it is still too early to predict how the unique experiment with the ver.di merger might end, it seems to be fair to argue that the entire process of creating the world's largest single union is a product of the unions’ tremendous courage to take a high risk as well as their rather eclectic way to design the new organization. While labour’s experience with both internal restructuring as well as union mergers is rather recent and limited, there is only slowly a set of routines emerging which helps unions to select promising strategies for restructuring.

### **3. Social Partnership**

For a long time industry wide patterned collective bargaining has been considered to be the backbone of German industrial relations. At the national or regional level strong and centralised unions and comprehensive employers associations negotiated collective agreements and thus removed potential sources of conflict from company level management and works councils. From this perspective it was the strength and unity of key actors along with the limited exercise of militancy which provided the basis for social partnership. During the last decade, however, there have been growing concerns that this so called “dual system” is being eroded and certainly facing demands for restructuring (see for example Thelen 2000; Hassel, 1999; Jacoby, 2000). Although it is not all clear what exactly the new system will look like, we can find

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<sup>29</sup> Unions affiliated with the DGB usually organize along branch boundaries and also obey to the concept of „one company one union“. The DAG, in contrast, organizes exclusively white collar workers but was doing so in all sectors of the German economy. These two competing concepts of unionism caused substantial strain within the labour movement.

some important signs that organized labour is facing an uphill battle in the field of collective bargaining. In general, there are three major areas for concern. First, there is a growing number of companies who chose not to join an employers association and thus to be covered by an industry wide collective agreement. As tables 3 and 4 indicate, in 1999 52 % of companies in the West and 72 % of the companies in East Germany have chosen to do without industry wide agreements. However, those West German companies who live by the standards set by industry wide bargaining are still employing the majority of the workforce.

**Table 3. Collective Bargaining Coverage in *West* Germany**

	Companies (1997)	Employees (1997)	Companies (1999)	Employees (1999)
Industry wide agreements	49 %	65 %	44 %	65 %
Company agreements	9 %	N/A.	3 %	8 %
Without collective agreements	42 %	N/A.	52 %	27 %

Source: IAB Betriebspanel

The situation in the East looks comparatively worse (see table 4). But before ringing the alarm bell we should also take into consideration that although not legally covered by those industry level agreements, a substantial number of companies without collective agreements are using wages and hours as determined by the industry agreement as a point of reference.

**Table 4: Collective Bargaining Coverage in *East* Germany**

	Companies (1997)	Employees (1997)	Companies (1999)	Employees (1999)
Industry wide agreements	26 %	44 %	21 %	46 %
Company level agreements	14 %	N/A.	5 %	11 %
Without collective agreements	60 %	N/A.	74 %	43 %

Source: IAB Betriebspanel

A second challenge to social partnership concerns so called opening or hardship clauses. Faced by substantial pressures to adjust one-size-fits-all standards for wages and working times to diverging conditions at the company level almost all German unions negotiated clauses into their industry wide agreement which allow for limited deviations. According to the WSI Works Council Survey (Bispinck, 2001; Dorsch-Schweizer/Schulten, 2001), 22 % of all works councils reported the use of opening clauses at the company level. Most frequently, works councils or unions agreed to the extension or reduction of working time, lower entry-level wages or the reduction of the annual bonus. Finally, there is a growing number of cases where individual employers lower pay or change working time in violation of collective agreement. According to the

WSI-survey, 15 percent of all works councils reported that establishments sometimes or frequently violate collective agreements. Given that this survey is based on self-reported data by the works councils, the actual numbers might be even higher.

#### **a. Differences between Industries**

Within this more general picture, we can find significant differences among those sectors, which are strongly exposed to international market competition. Examples are to be found in the following. Collective bargaining in the metal industry traditionally takes place at the regional level but agreements are usually quite uniform throughout the country. Part of the reason for this homogeneous structure of bargaining outcomes is the union itself which, after having lost a bitter strike in 1954, had transferred the authority for collective bargaining to the national union headquarters. Although the IG Metall still negotiates pattern agreements which cover a large share of the union's jurisdiction it increasingly allows single companies to deviate from the terms and conditions of regional agreements. Although the union did not formally agree to an opening clause, it included a declaration into the industry wide agreements which signals flexibility to employers.<sup>30</sup> Because such deviant terms and conditions were usually negotiated at the level of the IG Metall's district union bodies, this new practice signalled a remarkable decentralisation of labour's bargaining power<sup>31</sup>. In contrast, collective bargaining in the chemical industry remained largely focused on national level social partnership. Although the IG BCE agreed to various opening clauses which allowed for firm level exceptions from the national agreement, the union did not permit subordinate union bodies to grant more favourable conditions to single companies. National level social partnership between the chemical workers union and the BAVC, the highly centralised national employers association, remained largely intact and so far the adjustment of key terms and conditions of the national agreement to changing business environment had gone smoothly.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the construction workers are operating within the most unfortunate bargaining environment because they are faced with the massive influx of foreign labour, the deregulation of labour friendly laws in the field of bad-weather allowances, and a growing number of contractors who are violating collective agreements. In a situation where the two peak level employers associations for the construction industry, HDB and ZDB, lost their power to commit even many of their own members to the standards set by the industry wide agreement<sup>33</sup>, the IG BAU was looking for alternative strategies to define and enforce minimum standards and turned to the state for help. With its massive lobbying for kind

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<sup>30</sup> So called „Erklärungen zum Tarifvertrag“ usually provide that „the parties to the agreement will continue the prevailing practice and strive to find special solutions that help companies prevent bankruptcy and thus will contribute to saving companies as well as jobs.“

<sup>31</sup> Interview IG Metall, Frankfurt May 1999; Interview Gesamtmetall Hanover, March 1999 and Cologne, June 1999

<sup>32</sup> Interview, Hanover, March 1999; Interview, Hanover, March 1999 #2

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that both associations pursue slightly different strategies. While the *Hauptverband der Deutschen Bauindustrie (HDB)* preferably organizes larger companies, in particular general contractors, the *Zentralverband der Bauindustrie (ZDB)*, represents preferably small and medium sized firms. Member companies of the HDB often find it easier to obey collectively agreed standards because they are able to shift parts of the costs of high-wages and decent working conditions to subcontractors. In contrast, ZDB's small firm members face direct cut-throat competition from those foreign contractors, who are able to employ low wage labour and thus often find it difficult to pay the going rate as set by the industry wide agreement.



of a national minimum wage, which is based on the European level Posted Workers Directive, the union sought to introduce a new and comparatively lower bottom line<sup>34</sup>. Thus, social partners in the construction industry not only faced a shift in the level at which bargaining took place, but increasingly, they simply lost much of their power to collectively determine wages, hours and working conditions.

In several respects collective bargaining is facing severe pressures for decentralisation. First, decentralisation occurs against the law by way of breaking the minimum standards of the industry wide agreement. Second, deliberate decentralisation was introduced by clauses within industry wide agreements, which empower works councils and management to flexibly set standards at the company level. Finally, there also emerged decentralisation of structures and institutions of collective bargaining which affect the level at which collective agreements are being negotiated. Again, the extent and direction of change is different between industries. While in the metal industry the union and single employers are shifting part of the bargaining powers to the district level, the construction workers union has little control over the process of decentralisation. In the metal industry, this process of unbalanced decentralisation threatens to weaken social partnership because national and regional employers are being partially cut out of the picture. While collective bargaining structures in the chemical industry seems to be rather unchanged, the construction workers union IG BAU seeks to replace weakened national employers associations by the state, who seems to be a more powerful actor. As far as strategies for union revitalisation are concerned, there seems to be little unions can do to maintain peak level social partnership. As long as employers associations are not able to commit all their members to standards set by industry wide collective bargaining there is always a pressure towards decentralisation. At least in theory, unions could shift their focus from the industry to the company level and thus put pressure on those employers who chose to stand at the sidelines. In a limited number of cases unions actually have pursued such a strategy<sup>35</sup> but firm level pressure tactics in general prove to be rather costly and in addition potentially change the fragile balance between works councils and industry wide unions.

A second union strategy, however, seeks to adjust the content of collective agreements to the changing needs of workers and companies. Such agreements target new groups of workers who previously did not stand in the centre of the union's attention. In addition, they also include new subjects of bargaining which gained importance either because of economic restructuring and the changing needs of companies which came along with it or because union seek to compensate workers for new risks not covered by the welfare state. Most of these new and innovative agreements were first negotiated at the company level and it still needs to be seen whether these provisions can be spread throughout the industry or not. As far as Volkswagen is concerned, a case we will come back to later, there occurred several

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<sup>34</sup> This minimum wage within the construction industry was originally intended to limit wage competition by requiring domestic and foreign contractors to pay their workers minimum wages for the time they are working on German construction sites. Even if work contracts of those foreign workers or collective agreements in their home countries provide for lower standards the „*jus loci laboris*“ entitles them to German minimum wages. Despite the original intention of the law to lift wages of posted workers the law also provides a wage floor for German workers. According to own calculations by the IG BAU in particular workers in East Germany do not make more than minimum wage.

<sup>35</sup> Probably the most impressive case occurred in the construction industry where the IG BAU sought to bring rebellious companies back into the national employers association.

incidents in the recent past where union and company level management included new and innovative provisions into the firm level agreement which later were extended to the entire industry. In this sense, Volkswagen is something like a laboratory for industry wide collective bargaining in the metal industry. But there are other laboratories as well.

#### **b. debis**

Debis, the service subsidiary of DaimlerChrysler, operates within a business environment which is completely different from Daimler's blue collar culture. Most of debis employees are high skilled and are used to representing their interests on their own. Consequently, most of them never came in contact with the IG Metall before the union initiated the election of a general works council in 1990. The union, however, still had to learn how to develop a collective agreement which fits the needs of this special group of employees. In the traditional blue collar sectors it was the union's job to provide decent working conditions and job security at a given workplace. In the case of debis it had to provide an institutional framework which encourages employees to be flexible and to take personal risk. Finally, in 1998 IG Metall and the company's management agreed on an additional collective bargaining agreement. Legally considered to be a side letter to the industry wide agreement for the metal industry, the new *Ergänzungstarifvertrag* provided for special regulations in the fields of pay, working time and training. The new wage scale is based on two major elements. First, debis employees receive a fixed monthly pay which accounts for approx. 85 percent of their annual income. The remaining 15 percent are a composite determined by individual performance and company profit. In the field of working time regulation the union sought to find a compromise between employees' desire to fit working times to their personal needs and the company's need for more flexibility. Finally, the parties agreed on a schedule which allows the weekly working time to vary.

Depending on factors such as age, shift work, individual entitlements individual working time now varies between 35 and 40 hours. To increase the level of flexibility the new collective agreement now allows for working time accounts. Employees negotiate targets with their superiors individually and are free to collect up to 550 hours of overtime (within a time period of not more than 5 years) in their working time accounts. Later, they can cash in these hours for purposes of training, sabbaticals but they are also entitled to transfer their time credit to a lifetime working time account. In general, this model allows employees to choose freely between several options. The new agreement also provides for a range of measures in the field of training. Once a year every employee meets his or her superior to talk about further qualifications. If both agree that a certain training is desirable debis pays for the tuition and related expenses. Training is usually conducted during working time and debis still keeps paying for at least 50 percent of the time off during the training.

Most of these provisions recognise the special conditions within the high tech and service industries and in addition give employees much leeway to shape their own working conditions. While management was mostly happy with this new agreement (Donay, 1998) there was also some resistance within the ranks of the metal workers union. Some union officials feared that shifting autonomy back to the employees would make them vulnerable to pressure by the company's management (Drinkuth, 1999). While the new innovative agreement made the union more appealing to the workforce and helped to grow union membership, there are also reports about difficulties in

applying the agreement. In particular line management only reluctantly negotiates individual working time accounts and training plans but plant management and the local union are optimistic to improve this situation.<sup>36</sup>

### **c. Volkswagen: Time is Money**

Taking force in January 1998, VW's management and works council agreed on a works agreement which offers VW employees multiple ways to flexibly convert part of their income, bonuses, overtime pay, vacation time and other entitlements into so called „time assets“ (*Zeitwerte*). Such time assets can later be converted into time off for purpose of early retirement or into additional retirement benefits. Because time assets are taxable at the time of retirement and in addition freed from mandatory contributions to the social insurance system, they provide employees with an attractive investment opportunity. In the first two years of the time assets-agreement, workers already had invested time and wages worth 335 million DM and received a return on assets of 10 percent. Because the works agreement requires management to guarantee at least the net worth of workers assets and in addition to insure workers assets against insolvency, the company is bearing the lion's share of risk. However, during its first years the VW time asset model prove to be so appealing that approx. 150 companies showed their interest to copy this concept. In collaboration with the *Hypo-Vereinsbank*, a major German bank, VW also started to sell the concept to others.<sup>37</sup>

Based on the original time asset idea, Volkswagen is now considering introducing an additional company level pension which supplements the German pay-as-you-go pension system. This new pension plan, administered by the VW-Pension Trust e.V., will enable the company to invest pension money in stock and bond markets but will also protect employees from the risk of losing even small amounts of their assets in the event of a market downturn. VW intends to spread the risk of investment across different segments of the capital market and also guarantees employees a minimum annual revenue increase of 3 percent. While the company's traditional company-level pension plan was administered by management, the VW-Pension Trust e.V. will be jointly run by management and employee representatives. The company works council succeeded in negotiating the introduction of terms into the agreement which provide workers' representatives with a strong say in the administration of the pension funds. While representation at the level of the board of directors has not yet been determined, workers' representatives will have equal representation at the general meeting of the trust's membership<sup>38</sup> as well as on the supervisory board.

### **d. Equal Pay for Men and Women**

Although national as well as European level law already prohibits wage discrimination based on gender, there seems to be (slowly) growing consciousness within the ranks of several unions about the discriminatory effects of standard patterns of wage classifications as included into industry wide patterned collective agreements. Wage classifications, so many studies commissioned by public sector unions found out, which

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<sup>36</sup> According to Handelsblatt 02.23/24. 2001, („Die Umsetzung des Debis-Tarifwerks fällt noch schwer“)

<sup>37</sup> See Financial Times Deutschland, 05.29.2000 („Anlagetipp der Zukunft“) ; Financial Times Deutschland, 05.29.2000 („Mit dem VW Zeitwertpapier für die private Rente sparen“)

<sup>38</sup> Each party has 14 votes.

are based on more general standards instead of on a more detailed and thorough analysis of work, tend to undervalue jobs usually occupied by women. In their recent upgrading campaign the public sector union ÖTV now seeks to change the criteria for work evaluation by demanding more transparent standards. Important dimensions of such a future evaluation system concern skills requirements, stress at work, leadership requirements and environmental conditions. In addition, the union also wants to include criteria originally developed by a team of Swiss specialists on work classification. This new classification scheme titled ABAKABA<sup>39</sup> recognises physical, mental as well as emotional stress and thus seeks to be a more appropriate method to evaluate in particular work in service occupations.

The ÖTV took a first step to change work classification schemes and in collaboration with the municipal government in the city of Hanover the union initiated a joint project which seeks to compare pay structures in 8 major occupations, four of them each dominated by men and women. While the union is awaiting to discuss the results of the project the union made some progress at the margins of the public sector. Although the public sector master agreement (*Bundesangestelltentarifvertrag*, BAT) is still including the old rather discriminatory contract language the ÖTV gained more favourable contract language in agreements which are just oriented towards the BAT.<sup>40</sup> In 1998 and to raise awareness for gender issues in the field of collective bargaining, the ÖTV created the position of a “gender mainstreaming representative” within the national union headquarters. While this new position is a symbol for the reorientation of union policy, it seems to be that the new representatives has only limited powers. After the ÖTV merged with several other unions to create ver.di, the united service sector union (for details see section 2 “Mergers and Internal Restructuring”), the new union decided to extend the gender mainstreaming concept and even included this task into the union’s new constitution. At the level of the national union headquarters ver.di created a “gender mainstreaming department” and also commissioned its state-level union bodies to follow its lead. By May 2001, three state-level union bodies had already appointed gender mainstreaming representatives<sup>41</sup>.

Beyond the public sector in particular the IG Metall is showing some effort to abolish pay discrimination. In their Berlin-Brandenburg-Saxony district the metal workers first adjusted the ABAKABA concept to the special conditions of manufacturing and tested this new pay classification system (Medea) in some 30 companies. This test proved that Medea raises pay of those jobs which are typically occupied by women (without lowering the wages in male occupations)<sup>42</sup>. Employers, however, resisted the general introduction of Medea into the collective agreement on grounds that the new classification system makes labour more costly.

#### **e. Training as a Subject for Collective Bargaining**

Although German unions traditionally negotiated collective agreements which include more than just provisions for pay and working time, provisions on training and qualification were patchy at best (Bispinck/WSI Tarifarchiv, 2000). In a situation where low skilled jobs are getting fewer and fewer and where unskilled or semi-skilled

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<sup>39</sup> „Analytische Bewertung von Arbeitstätigkeiten nach Katz und Baitsch“

<sup>40</sup> Interview ÖTV, 02.27.2001 (by Eva Katharina Sarter)

<sup>41</sup> See Einblick 11/2001, p. 5

<sup>42</sup> Interview IG Metall March 2001 (by Eva Katharina Sarter)

workers face a increasing risk of getting unemployed some unions put training on their bargaining agenda. In particular the IG Metall district in the state of Baden-Württemberg is pursuing a revised strategy which is combining quality of work life issues with individual training entitlements for workers (IG Metall Baden-Württemberg, 2001a). In a recent resolution of the union's collective bargaining commission the district laid out its demands for the coming collective bargaining round in Spring 2002. Among other things the metalworkers demand:

- for each worker there should be an individual training plan to determine future training measures
- at age 40 and 50 workers should be entitled to 3 months off the job training to brush up their general knowledge
- after working for 7 years or more at a workplace with cycle times of 5 minutes or less employees should be entitled to skill upgrading
- management and works council should be required to develop special training programs for those workers who do not have any formal qualification
- employees should be allowed to switch to part time work or to take a leave of absence for purposes of further training (IG Metall Baden Württemberg, 2001b).

In the course of three months of intense negotiations, the union was forced to drop some of its initial demands in particular concerning the pace of work, but the final settlement was still widely considered to be a landmark in the field of collective bargaining. Among other things the new agreement entitles employees to have regular consultations with their employers to determine their needs for future training, it also provides that training is to be paid for by employers and is to be conducted during regular working hours. In addition, union and employers agreed to found a new training agency which will assist companies and employees to improve the maintenance, adaptation and upgrading of skills<sup>43</sup>. At this point it is still open whether this regional agreement will be extended to the national level, but it seems to be remarkable that after decades of strongly pushing for pay raises and different types of working time reduction<sup>44</sup> qualitative bargaining demands are back on the agenda again. At a larger scale, the new training agreement somewhat mirrors important aspects of the Debis case. By including new institutions and procedures for skill adjustment the unions seeks to advance employees long-term employment perspectives instead of just defining standards for wages, hours and working conditions.

Taken together the four examples for new and innovative agreements and programs show that organized labour has the potential to adjust its collective bargaining strategy and goals to the changing needs of the union's constituency as well as to company's desire for more flexibility. While for a long time unions just complained about the weak representation of women and white collar employees within the ranks of their organization, the debis agreement as well as the ÖTV's and IG Metall's anti-wage discrimination efforts may show a way to make unions more appealing to those groups of employees. In several cases, which is in particular true for issues such as training,

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<sup>43</sup> For details see, <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/2001/07/inbrief/de0107233n.html>

<sup>44</sup> While in the 1980s the IG Metall focused on the reduction of weekly working time, in late 1990s the union shifted its attention to issues of early and partial retirement.

education and working time flexibility, there is even some common ground for joint solutions with employers and employers association.

At this point in time, the cases presented above are nothing more than promising experiments which apply to only a limited arena. Such a strategy of limited innovation serves unions as a vehicle for running calculated risks it also provides a “firewall” that prevents failed innovations from spreading throughout the entire bargaining unit. According to our research, this “experimentation” part works quite well. However, where unions seem to have a problem is to find strategies which help them to diffuse successful experiments to other parts of the industry. Such a strategy of diffusion not only requires the ability on part of both social partners, to adjust collective agreements to the specific conditions of branches and even companies but also to organize a new consensus within the union organization. As long as provisions within collective agreements were rather standardised, the process of decision taking within the union’s bargaining commissions and executive boards was rather transparent. This might change in the future when the number of issues to be covered by the agreement increases and the interests of groups of workers within the union diverge. Thus, unions will be forced to find new procedures and channels through which they speed up the process of information distribution and democratic decision taking, as well as improve their ability for a targeted mobilisation of their membership and the exercise of collective power.

#### **4. Political Action**

The German Model of labor relations is rightly characterized as representing the very opposite of "bread and butter" unionism. From the very outset, labor participated in the political and economic reconstruction of the Federal Republic (West Germany). Its economic fundament of success, the *soziale Marktwirtschaft*, spurned exclusion and propagated consensus. To counter labor's bid for a potentially dominating role, employers, tainted by their support of National Socialism, offered extended recognition and a share of responsibility and decision-making power. Thus the constraints of historical legacy on the employers' side and the desire for participation on the unions' side intertwined and grew into a mutually accepted and beneficial arrangement. Under the aegis of a "reconstruction pact" (Niethammer, 1975: 317) labor and capital in what amounted to an historical compromise created a system of negotiated interest regulation that was institutionalized and consolidated during the first three decades of the West German state.

Politically, this labor-capital pact has been marked by an intensive relationship of the unions (and the employers) to the political parties. Although DGB officials are predominantly social democratic, the federation’s credo has been “party neutrality, but not political neutrality”. Since the SPD embarked on a path to becoming a “people’s party” in 1959, DGB-SPD ties have steadily weakened, and today, despite the union’s influence, there is little evidence that the SPD is the party of the unions. (Mahnkopf 2000; Zeuner 2000)

The participatory, regulatory, and negotiated settlement culture of the close-knit web of institutions and organized interests thrived in the post-war Keynesian world of economic policy, giving rise not only to the label "*Modell Deutschland*" – or German Model – but also in more general terms contributing to the neo-corporatist theorem for explaining economic adjustment and crisis management (Schmitter, 1981, Cameron,

1984). Despite recurring class conflicts as well as disputes as to how to regulate the balance of power, there was an overriding understanding that interest articulation on the part of one side or the other should not escalate and rupture the high level of consensus which had been attained. Moreover, this was possible not in the least because the boundaries of the model's application - the West German state and its *soziale Marktwirtschaft* - were clearly defined and accepted.

The most visible expression of this institutionalized consensus structure of Keynesian economic policy is the "Concertated Action" (*Konzertierte Aktion*) during the late 1960's and early 1970's. Here the government brought together the relevant organized economic interests to steer the economy out of an impending crisis. Under the guidance of the social democratic Minister of Economics, Karl Schiller, it was the aim of the Concertated Action to control inflation and reduce unemployment by committing the trade unions to a policy of wage moderation. For their part, the unions regarded the Concertated Action as a political instrument for the realization of a fundamental policy change. Through their participation they would help stabilize the first post-war government led by the SPD, move forward toward realizing a more just distribution of goods and attain a new quality of recognition for themselves as a partner in formulating social and economic policy. Their only condition for participating was that the Concertated Action would not infringe on the constitutionally guaranteed bargaining sphere (*Tarifautonomie*) by dictating wage guidelines (Schroeder/Esner 1999: 4).

While the Concertated Action helped to polish the unions' image and contributed to a noticeable increase in membership, there was a strong phalanx of critical voices within the unions which pointed to the detrimental effects on wage bargaining. And their arguments seemed to be confirmed as the economy improved while wages remained locked into multi-year contract agreements<sup>45</sup>. The resulting "September strikes" of 1969 broke out of this corset and set the stage for a series of considerably better wage increases in the years 1970 to 1973 which were above the level recommended by the Concertated Action (Schroeder/Esner 1999: 5). Although this tripartite institution officially continued to exist until 1977, it had expended its political relevance for all participants.

Neo-corporatist interest aggregation in the Federal Republic did of course not die with the end of this particular modus as both informal cooperative arrangements and numerous formal institutions remained the hallmark of the political bargaining process (Alemann 1989). The German unions continued to exercise influence, but by the 1980's, the political parameters of this system had altered. The demise of Keynesian economic policy in general and the advent of a new conservative-liberal coalition government under Helmut Kohl in 1983 weakened the political position of the unions noticeably. Over the next several years, the German unions were dealt repeated political setbacks which only abated in the cooperative atmosphere of the immediate post-unification period of the early 1990's.

It was perhaps this experience which helped pave the way for the first union initiative for a new form of organized political bargaining in the interest of reducing unemployment. At a convention in November, 1995, IG Metall leader Klaus Zwickel unveiled a proposal for an "Alliance for Jobs" (*Bündnis für Arbeit*). This programmatic initiative was directed firstly at the employers in the metalworking and electrical industries. If they would agree to create a total of 300,000 new jobs over a three year

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<sup>45</sup> The unions had succumbed to government pressure and their own fear of recession in signing these contracts. See Schmidt 1971: 109.

period, his union was prepared to forego wage increases beyond the level of inflation during the next rounds of contract negotiations. (Zwickel 1995) This was an attempt to take the momentum generated by the "Volkswagen model" - a highly respected agreement which went into effect in January 1994 and saved some 30,000 jobs by reducing the average number of weekly hours to 27.5 - and disseminate its structure throughout the industry. (Hartz 1994) The government tried to get substantive tripartite negotiations started on the basis of Zwickel's proposal, hoping that this would improve its dismal record on reducing unemployment. The employers' associations went along with this at first, but basically they demurred from direct negotiations with the union on the grounds that they could not negotiate such a pact since the prerogative for job creation lay with their members. Instead, they propagated company-level job coalitions. Those which were initiated turned into something different from what the IG Metall intended. (Zeuner 1996) Instead of giving up a pay increase to create new jobs, works councils found themselves negotiating pay cuts (within the limits of the sectoral contract) to secure existing employment and prevent further dismissals.<sup>46</sup> (Rosdücher/Stehle 1996: 319, 325)

#### **a. The "Alliance for Jobs, Training and Competitiveness" since 1998**

Against this backdrop, the German unions mounted a full-scale effort to bring about a change in government in the federal elections of 1998 - and with the victory of the SPD and the Greens they were successful. But the real goal, as Klaus Lang of the IG Metall has said, was to effect a substantial "change in politics", i.e. to improve the political climate and the legal framework of union politics, to put union topics on the political agenda and to put the unions back into the political arena. Throughout the election campaign, IG Metall leader Zwickel repeated his call to revive the Alliance, and Gerhard Schröder, once nominated as SPD chancellor candidate, announced his support (Müller/Wilke 1999: 109). Once elected, Schröder put his own stamp on the project, giving it a name (Alliance for Jobs, Training and Competitiveness), a structure and a direction of his own, much different from the original IG Metall proposal (Arlt/Nehls 1999).

In December 1998, the government met with employee and employer representatives to hash out the organizational and programmatic dimensions of the Alliance. A full-blown apparatus was set up with eight working groups and a steering committee under the aegis of the Chancellor, his ministers and the leaders of the most important employers organizations and trade unions (see: <http://www.buendnis.de>). As originally formulated, the main goals of the Alliance were as follows:

- lower payroll taxes and a structural reform of the social insurance system;
- more working time flexibility and a reduction of overtime;
- lower corporate taxes;
- "employment supportive wage policies";
- new fields of employment and training opportunities for lesser qualified persons;

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<sup>46</sup> In their comparison of concession bargaining in the U.S. and "employment securing" collective bargaining in Germany, Rosdücher und Stehle point out that in regard to the extent and intensity of the agreements analyzed in both countries, the German unions and works councils had to make less concessions than their American counterparts.



- programs to combat youth and long-term unemployment; (Gemeinsame Erklärung - 07.12.98)

Since that first meeting, the Alliance has produced a number of research papers, action catalogues and statements. Among the most important of these for our topic is the declaration published by the Federation of German Employers' Associations (*Bundesvereinigung der deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände* - BDA) and the DGB on July 6, 1999 and supplemented on January 9, 2000. The key passages of both of these statements call for "a medium- and long-term reliable wage policy. Increases in productivity should be used primarily to promote employment." (Gemeinsame Erklärung - 06.07.1999) In the context of the preceding and indeed, ongoing conflicts in Germany and Europe over trade union wage policies, this statement represented a clear readiness to forego demands for large percentage increases in favor of so-called "qualitative arrangements" such as early retirement, flexible hours, part time employment, and pension schemes.

The political and academic discussion of the Alliance has largely turned on two issues. The general one is that of its relevance and effectiveness as a whole for finding ways to drastically reduce the high level of unemployment. A more focused debate has been over whether the unions have achieved any substantial political and/or socio-economic goals via the Alliance and - in the same vein - whether participation in the Alliance has done the unions any good? Up to the present, the Alliance has certainly not produced any spectacular results, nor has it initiated a comprehensive set of basic reforms in the system. Union supporters of continued participation in the Alliance, such as DGB national headquarters, the former DAG, and the IG BCE (mining and chemicals union), argue however, that they have been able to better the institutional and legal framework for union activities and bring union influence to bear on government economic policy. Indeed, according to one union official, much of what has come out of the Alliance and been turned into official policy has been authored by the unions<sup>47</sup>.

Further, the Alliance has bound employers to find a common ground of agreement, preventing them from continuing an uninhibited opt-out from the German model. Another union official pointed to the impulse the national Alliance has had on the spread of tripartite structures to the regional (Bundesland) and local (Stadt/Bezirk) level<sup>48</sup>. Not only in Bavaria, where government financing of labor market programs funneled through the Bavarian Alliance has buoyed cooperation, but also in other regions as well, government, employers and unions are cooperating to match investments with labor markets (for Northrhine-Westfalia see Nettelstroth/Hülsmann 2000).

Nevertheless, there is a broad current of criticism within the unions toward the Alliance, ranging from a majority in the former<sup>49</sup> HBV (retail, banking and insurance union) and IG Medien (mass media, publishing and communications) calling for a withdrawal from the Alliance to those such as ver.di leader Frank Bsirske, who want to remain in the Alliance but want to make union positions more discernable and the Alliance more productive. They argue that the government is not really siding with the unions and is taking the role of moderator, which makes the argument obsolete that union

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<sup>47</sup> Expert discussion, March 14, 2001

<sup>48</sup> Expert discussion, March 15, 2001

<sup>49</sup> On March 19-21, 2001, the HBV, the IG Medien, the DPG (postal union), the ÖTV (public services and transport union) and the DAG (German salaried employees union) merged to form ver.di with nearly 3 million members.

moderation is essential to prevent the employers from withdrawing. Moreover, the critics point to the meager - if any - achievements of the Alliance in reducing unemployment. As Bsirske remarked in his acceptance speech at the founding congress, the drop in unemployment is not only minimal, it is more attributable to economic growth than to the Alliance, which means that the Alliance has done "damn little" in solving the problem.

This ongoing debate will presumably extend into the federal election campaign of next year, in the context of which it may have some import for the strength of union support for a continuation of the red-green coalition. In our context, the main issue is whether the Alliance policy of the unions has been an instrument of innovative development or of union revitalization, and if so in what way? From the material we have gathered and the discussions we have had with union officials, the assessment of the Alliance as a source of revitalization is quite limited.

One view was that the Alliance provides the federation headquarters (DGB) with a key political role. The DGB is the official representative of the unions in the political sphere, charged with developing a common position among the individual unions within the federation and conveying this position to the government, the employers and the general public. To be sure, union negotiations with the government and the employers over political issues are not dependent on the existence of such an Alliance. But as the DGB has argued, its existence represents a democratization of interest representation by making these negotiations more transparent and comprehensible. And, according to the DGB, the Alliance focuses attention on the federation as the primary representative of the unions.

In light of the merger process among the DGB unions, the question has been raised as to the role of the federation in the future. Many observers are hard pressed to define the place of a weak and financially dependent federation vis-à-vis three to five powerful member unions capable of independently negotiating with government and employers on behalf of their own particular interests. By pulling those negotiations into a formalized and institutionalized structure, the DGB has gained a bargaining role which it would otherwise not have.

The consequence of that line of argumentation is however that the DGB becomes dependent on the existence of such an institution as the Alliance and can hardly afford to have it fall apart. Nor can it watch passively were its most influential member unions (IG Metall, ver.di, IG BCE) decide to withdraw. The Alliance may have given the DGB federation headquarters an impetus in maintaining or expanding its policy role, but this would seem to be a fragile case of revitalization with no long-term perspective.

Another view with a positive assessment of the Alliance and the opportunities it presents for innovative developments in union political activity emphasizes the spread of Alliance-politics to the regional and local levels. Again, this is an argument that came from the federation and not from one of the member unions. But its reference point is rooted in very straightforward, regional development strategies which may at once be more concrete and limited than the range of problems being addressed by the Alliance at the national level. In this sense and at this level, the role of the DGB could be enhanced through such tripartite mechanisms.

A final reference to possible innovative strategies in regard to political action should be made at this point. The unions could develop more profile and use the Alliance to promote women's interests through gender mainstreaming policies. In recognition of the fact that women's interests were being ignored in the male-dominated world of

Alliance politics, women from the union-supported Hans-Böckler-Foundation published a call to set up an "Equality Group - Women's Interests in the Alliance for Jobs" to monitor the Alliance regarding women's issues and to publicize policy recommendations. Over 250 women responded and are now involved in the eight working committees analogous to those of the Alliance. As an example of their work, the Equality-committee on social security and pension reform raised the gender issue in regard to pension reform, challenging the bill submitted to parliament by the federal government after consultations in the Alliance (Kerschbaumer/Veil 2001: 11). Another committee dealing with finance and tax policy recently published a paper calling on the government to introduce "gender sensitive budgeting". In regard to the Alliance the paper recommended "that the qualitative and quantitative advancement of employment of women should be an essential part of the work of all working committees and special topical groups." (Knapp/Milde/Buchholz-Will 2001: 109)

To be sure, support for gender mainstreaming is still marginal in many parts of the German unions. But as a result of the persistent activities of the Equality Group, the Alliance leadership meeting on March 4, 2001 agreed that the advancement of women's interests and employment for women is a goal of the Alliance which transverses all topical divisions and working committees. Moreover, the federal government committed itself to the presentation of a status report on activities to improve on equal opportunity for women and men. (Gemeinsame Erklärung, 04.03.2001)

In sum, the Alliance has provided an ongoing forum for exchanging views and ventilating proposals for reform. But as an instrument of policy it has only produced meager results. Some of these may be characterized as being quite respectable, but their overall impact seems to be quite limited. Moreover, the question is still open to debate as to whether such results might just as well have been achieved through "normal" political channels without the Alliance.

For the unions, the Alliance has certainly not brought about the kind of reforms which they imagined to be possible at the outset. Nor have the unions been able to wring significant concessions from the employers regarding employment policies. And finally, the unions have found themselves caught in a potential dilemma between accepting the demands of national competitiveness and the pursuit of supra-national union solidarity.

## **b. Works Constitution Reform Act**

Without going into details, mention should be made of the largely successful campaign of the unions in favor of a reform of the Works Constitution Act<sup>50</sup>. This Act is the legal basis of works councils in Germany. Since its last revision in the mid-1970s, the law has lost a considerable measure of its regulatory impact. In a growing number of instances, the act's definition of a "normal" workplace is no longer applicable (Wendeling-Schröder 1999). Moreover, for a variety of reasons, less than 50% of those enterprises which legally could have works councils, do not.

While employers have been urging the unions to accept their goals of less-regulating sectoral contracts in favor of an empowerment of enterprise level actors, the unions have been faced with an erosion of their action radius and effectiveness at the workplace. As such, since early 1998, the DGB campaigned for a substantial reform of

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<sup>50</sup> For a good synopsis of the controversy surrounding the government's drafting of the bill, see <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/2001/03/inbrief/DE0103221N.html> (23.03.01)

the Act. Its goal was to rebuild the legal framework of interest representation at the workplace. This is an essential for the unions, which rely on the existence of works councils both as quasi-representatives of the unions and as active recruiters of new members.

The red-green coalition government drafted a reform bill which largely met with union approval, although they continued to lobby for more extensive changes to the very end<sup>51</sup>. After a heated public debate over the merits of the bill (the employers' association attacked its provisions vehemently, threatening to challenge its constitutionality), it was passed by parliament and has now become law.

Much has been at stake for the unions in this controversy. The dual system of interest representation in Germany has turned on having strong unions to negotiate sectoral contracts with a very high degree of coverage and legally-based enterprise-level interest representation (works councils), which are union-oriented and have a close working arrangement with the unions. Works councils are dependent on a legal basis for securing their bargaining position vis-à-vis employers. To be sure, the legal framework alone is insufficient. Both unions and works councils need to develop interest representation strategies which go beyond the protective mechanisms of the law. As several cases in recent years have shown (Duschek/Wirth 1999; Wirth 1999), there is an acute danger that even an improved legal framework will prove ineffective wherever work organization workplace structures become "networked" and "virtualized" (Sydow/Wirth 1999). Successful representation then depends ever more on cross-enterprise cooperation and collective bargaining as well as on carrying conflicts to the public. Mixing the dual spheres of interest representation in Germany will be an essential for German union revitalization.

## **5. Coalition Building**

We argue that unions should foster coalitions with new social movements (NSM) (e.g. women, peace, gay, anti-nuclear, environment, third-world, anti-fascism, anti-globalization, unemployed) for three main reasons. First, to express their social responsibility into new societal problems (i.e. to enlarge the topics unions and to attract new membership constituencies); second to tap additional resources for common goals (e.g. joint campaigns; learning from NSM mobilizing tools); and third to recruit potential activists from different organizations.

A cooperation with NSM is of particular importance for German unions because NSM take a leading position in Germany compared to other industrial countries and hence are strong competitors for members (Brand 1985; Dalton and Küchler 1990; Kriesi et al. 1995). Moreover, a possible alliance between old and new social movements seems critical to combat the declining attraction (Bindungskraft) of unions in a post-industrial world (e.g. decline of working class constituencies; feminization and individualization of the labor market) (Touraine et al. 1987). It is an open secret that unions have finally realized that class conflict and social partnership do not have the cohesive power among its members and the public anymore (Marßolek 1999). Subsequently, unions need to modernize themselves by incorporating new issues which keeps existing members and attracts a wider (more heterogeneous, and younger) constituency.

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<sup>51</sup> Union arguments are documented at <http://www.boeckler.de/service/mbf/betrv/gewerkpos.htm> (23.03.01)

Another reason is that membership in groups becomes increasingly fragmented and flexible (group identities are less stable in people's biographies than they were in the past) and unions increasingly compete for members with NSM especially among the youth. In contrary to unions NSM do not mobilise on the basis of narrowly defined socio-economic group interests but "they signify a shift from group-based political or economic cleavages to value- and issue-based cleavages that identify only communities of like-minded people" (Dalton and Kuechler 1990:12).

Finally, unions might learn from new, innovative forms of communication, organization, decision-making and strategy formulation which seem to characterise NSMs (Krüger 2000:12). NSM do not produce "exclusive, cohesive, clientilistic associations" (Dalton and Kuechler 1990:13) which are typical for the centralistic, hierarchically organized unions. Rather, whereas unions perform within a corporatistic elitist model of bargaining with other interest groups, NSM have a complex, fluid basis-democratic decision-making process in open, non-hierarchical networks and have unconventional ways of political lobbying and mobilizing the public (Krüger 2000:13).

The question is to what extent German unions open themselves to NSM topics and use coalition building as a strategy of revitalization and what are its possible problems and opportunities. New social movements and old social movements (unions) have quite different cultures, different political styles (Politikstil), organizational structures, action forms, socio-structural membership bases, interests and values which might impede their cooperation (Dalton et al. 1990; Jahn 1996; Krüger 1986; Offe 1985). Touraine et al. (1987) even argue that they are incompatible organizations and hence that cooperation is not possible.

There are hardly any empirical studies on the relationship between NSM and unions in Germany (Krüger 2000:31) and we provide a first attempt to address these issues. We selected four new social movements which have a particular importance in the current German context: environment, anti-rightwing radicalism, anti-globalization, and the movement of the unemployed. The green movement was selected because of its continuing overwhelming importance in the German political culture; the anti-fascism movement is of particular relevance with regard to the significant increase of right-wing organizations, violence and public culture in Germany; the anti-globalization movement was selected because of its growing international importance (especially in the US); and the unemployed movement was chosen because of its relevance in terms of the high unemployment in Germany.

Overall, we analyse unions' awareness and utilisation of these topics for their movement (e.g. are there special union departments dealing with environmental issues; do unions debate these issues internally and externally), and their desire to build coalitions with the new social movements and to learn from them.

Interviews<sup>52</sup> were conducted with officials at headquarters and regional/local level of the DGB and a representative sample of the German union movement in 2000/2001, nine unions which differ in size, sector, and ownership (IGM, IG BCE, ÖTV, HBV, NGG, IG BAU, Transnet, GdP, GEW).

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<sup>52</sup> We wish to thank our students, Nina Wichmann and Kevin Dewald for conducting these interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted in average one hour.

## **a. Green movement**

Compared to the other NSMs the green (environmental, ecological) movement provides the strongest challenge for the German labour movement. It is not only the oldest, largest<sup>53</sup> and most institutionalised NSM in Germany (originating from the early 70s) but it has at its core a radical transformation of the existing industrial society, the very backbone of unions. The concept of “sustainable growth” (which became the core leitbild of the green movement after Rio) argues for “a development which satisfies current societal needs without risking that future generations cannot fulfill their needs” (Brundtland report 1987:46). Thus, the transformed industrial model would need to fulfill material needs and at the same time has to guarantee that the negative consequences of production, distribution and consumption for humans and nature are minimised (Krüger 2000:2). This vision challenges the current concept of the industrial society and the leitmotivs and values of its actors such as unions. It favours a “post-industrial” society with an emphasis on the quality of life which is not quantifiable in pure material terms (income growth etc.). In particular, it challenges unions’ core assumption that economic growth is necessary for a better working people’s life, e.g. for a larger distribution scope (Verteilungsspielraum) and more welfare. One should not forget that the basic compromise between labour and capital is based on the productivity pact (the distribution of increasing profits between the bargaining parties). The question is really whether social and ecological interests can be compatible.

From a historical perspective the relationship between unions and the green movement has dramatically changed over the last thirty years. Unions had a rather hostile relationship to the green movement when it developed during the 1970s (e.g. unions were strongly in favour of nuclear energy) (see for example the DGB Grundsatzprogramm 1972 “qualitative development”). Distrust, ignorance, conflicts and incompatible demands characterized their communication. During the 1980s the dialogue became more reasonable, partly because of increasing ecological catastrophes (Seveso, Sandoz, Tschernobyl; dying forests) and greater sensitivity and interest in the German public sphere, and partly because environmental friendly production was increasingly seen as a potential niche for the German industry which could create new jobs.

In particular, the UNCED conference in Rio de Janeiro 1992 became a threshold for an increasing dialogue between unions and environmental organizations. However, union interest was limited as increasing economic problems forced them refocus on bread and butter issues (consequences of unification, recession etc.). Indeed, it took a major study “The future of Germany” by two well-known NGOs, BUND and Misereor in 1996 to rekindle the dialogue between the two sides.

In short, during the 1990s the DGB developed various ecological projects: e.g. DGB commission “protection of humans and the environment” (1992); a large research project “work and ecology” which incorporated various research institutes (1998); the “Alliance for work and environment” between DGB, government, employer associations and environmental organizations, one product of which is a government-subsidized project to renovate old buildings in an environmentally friendly way.

Moreover, the DGB has been increasingly engaged in building coalitions with the environmental movement. For example, in 1991 the DGB and the green organization “Deutscher Natur Ring” announced a continuing cooperation (e.g. workshops,

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<sup>53</sup> 2 million members in the early 90s (Meyer 1992:10).

conferences, joint programmes) which includes officials of various individual unions and of different green movements. Both organizations were also the organizers of the public event, the "German environment day" (Deutscher Umwelttag) in 1992.

In addition there are various initiatives between individual unions and green organizations (see Krüger 2000:37). To give just a few examples: environmental traffic reform (IG Metall with DNR 1990; IGM youth and BUND youth 1992, 94, 95; IG Metall, DGB, BUND 1995); "climate conservation (CO<sub>2</sub> reduction) and workplaces" (IG BAU and Greenpeace 1999); "ecological products and health and safety regulations as eco politics (Umweltschutz)" (IG Medien and Greenpeace 1992; DGB and BUND 1994).

Individual unions differ in their approaches to environmental issues. The decisive factor is not the union's political leaning but rather the relative importance of the environment for the specific sector. The IG BCE for example is heavily involved with environmental issues since they organize members in the chemical, mining and energy sector (including employees of the nuclear power stations). The IG BCE was strongly opposed to the growing green movement during the 1970s, but since the mid 1980s, environmental policies have become a key policy area directly represented on the union board (Vorstandsbereich I). However, the IG BCE's main priority is still to pursue a cooperative industrial policy together with the employers and to foster environmental concepts only if they do not endanger the industry (see Kädtler/Hertle 1997). The IG BCE maintains no formal cooperation with environmental organizations.

Other unions which potentially benefit from a job growth in ecological friendly sectors are more innovative. The IG BAU (Bauen, Agrar, Umwelt) for example is probably the most innovative union in this regard, partly because it sees the eco-friendly construction industry as a growing job creator (Wiesehügel 1996). They cooperate with Greenpeace for an ecologically sound renovation of buildings (e.g. they initiated an official mark of quality for building companies which includes ecological and social criteria (e.g. health and safety, keeping to the bargaining agreements)).

To a lesser extent the IGM currently works on a joint declaration for the restructuring of the industrial society (Umbau der Industriegesellschaft) with two environmental groups, BUND and NABU. The railway union, Transnet, initiated a long-term project, "the alliance for trains (and against lorries)" (Allianz pro Schiene) in 1991 which includes 17 environmental organizations and is now a registered body (eingetragener Verein). However, such an initiative is the exception. In most cases involvement with green organizations is sporadic, short-term and informal, leading at most to joint declarations or mutual invitations to workshops and congresses.

Finally, to what extent did the union movement incorporate the aims and values of the green movement into their own agenda? The term "sustainable development" has entered various union statements and agendas of the DGB and individual unions (e.g. umweltpolitische Grundsatzserklärungen of IG BAU, IG BCE, IGM). For example, the DGB programme (Grundsatzprogramm) (1996:16) describes sustainable growth as one aim of the union movement. It is interpreted as a "new quality of growth", an "ecological definition of the competitive advantage of German industry" (Standortpolitik), and a "just order of the world economy". Today, unions are explicitly in favour of the end of nuclear power, alternative energy, the transformation of the traffic/transport system, social and ecological criteria for the global economy (Der Grosse Ratschlag 2000:15).

Moreover, it should be noted that in the area of health and safety at workplaces environmental demands have been widely implemented.

However, the conceptualization of sustainable growth does not question the dominant industrial model, unions aim for a socio-ecological reform of the market economy but not its transformation (Zahrnt 1996). The pillars of expanding production, consumption and traditional paid labor are not challenged. For example, the mission statement of the IGM includes sustainable growth as one aim of the union but this does not influence its collective bargaining, industrial or economic policies (Krüger 1998:102). Even its such macro-political initiatives as the “Alliance for Jobs” do not press for sustainable growth. On the other hand, the IG BAU took the link between work and ecology as an outspoken strategic aim of their merger between GGLF and IG BSE (Krüger 1998:103). According to Krüger IG BAU tries concretely to integrate social and ecological aims into their political strategies and actions.

These differences among unions can be traced back to their sector’s possibility to gain from eco-friendly, alternative production and services.

To conclude, today the fierce antagonism of the 1970s is over and both sides see it as advantageous to communicate. However, although both sides support the socio-ecological reform of the economy it is not clear how reliable unions will be in the future and how strongly they are dependent on economic developments. Thus, during the recession in the early 1990s unions focused much stronger on bread and butter issues than on green topics. Moreover, many unions are still avoiding a debate about the potential conflicts between the industrial model and the concept of sustainable growth. Most unions (except IG BCE and IG BAU) also lack personnel and financial resources to sufficiently engage in ecological issues within and outside of their organization (Krüger 2000:45). And frequently, the officials for green issues are also in charge of the youth, women and education.

## **b. Anti – ‘rightwing radicalism’**

Anti-rightwing extremism has a long history in the German labor movement since the 1930s, however after WW II the topic gradually lost its importance until a sudden re-emergence in the late 1990s. In particular, 1998 signaled a turning point. This is when the DGB initiated a special commission to analyse rightwing radicalism (including neo-fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, nationalism, anti-immigration etc.) in Germany and its relevance for unions and to suggest strategies as to how unions should react. The specific peg was a planned demonstration of neo-Nazis in May 1997 in Leipzig which caused the DGB Saxony office to petition for a formal ‘commission’ at the 16th national DGB congress. Moreover, the DGB and its unions were increasingly confronted with a growing neo-fascist movement in east and west Germany after the political unification and felt they were obliged to react. In addition, a nation-wide survey of employees in 1998 (WDR2 infratest/dimap) found that union members are disproportionately more rightwing radical than non-union members (which was supported by earlier smaller studies, e.g. Horn et al. 1995). Unsurprisingly this result found considerable media attention and served to activate the labor movement.

The challenge for unions today is thus not just a political mandate to participate in a democratic response against right-wing radicalism and to actively combat its causes but also to react to rightwing tendencies within its own organization.

The DGB and its unions have developed various activities which we will discuss below but also written documents outlining their interpretation and position. Most important is the report produced by the DGB commission on the development of rightwing radicalism in Germany, its causes and possible explanations and potential responses



(DGB commission report 2000). It can be assumed that this report mirrors the current discussion within the union movement how to understand and react to rightwing radicalism.

The report starts with a description of rightwing radicalism in Germany (violent events, successes of rightwing political parties, significant tendencies among the youth and in East Germany, rightwing tendencies in public attitudinal surveys etc.) and of rightwing attitudes among union members (referring to the WDR survey but also to other studies (Held et al. 1994) or surveys on voting patterns of union members - e.g. in the 1992 regional election in Baden-Württemberg union members comprised 30% of the voters of the rightwing party "Republicans"). It then summarizes theories attempting to explain rightwing radicalism in general and the recurrence in (East) Germany in particular. The focus is on psychological theories (personality, deprivation, disintegration / individualization, political culture). For example, Heitmeyer (1992) is quoted as arguing that young people who have identity problems especially in a highly individualised environment are more likely to become rightwing. The reasons why union members are more rightwing boils down to gender differences and the fact that employees who are afraid loosing their jobs are more likely to become union members and hence might be more open for populist attacks against foreign workers (Gastarbeiter). Moreover, it is argued that modernisation, globalisation, individualisation, increasing competition, increasing cost-benefit calculations and 'Standort'-debates all lead to the decrease of solidarity and increase of individual survival strategies.

Finally, the report outlines practical steps for unions. The aim is in the short-range to combat rightwing radicalism at workplaces, in the middle range to change racist attitudes at workplaces, and in the long range to actively support equal opportunities policies (Gleichstellungspolitik) at the shop-floor level, in union training programmes, in schools and apprenticeship schools, in the media/public, and in politics. A DGB working group has now the task to create various union-initiated projects and to foster and coordinate initiatives among individual unions.

For example with regard to initiatives on shop-floor level the DGB works currently on a sample company collective agreement (Musterbetriebsvereinbarung) which should implement the EU directives on anti-discrimination (Florence agreement 1995). A similar initiative is pursued by the IG Metall. These agreements should for example allow to fire somebody who persistently shows racist attitudes and behaviour at workplace level. And they should oblige management to monitor equal opportunities for foreign workers. One should note that some works councils have already negotiated workplace agreements on equal treatment for foreign employees and ethnic minorities (e.g. Jenaoptik, VW, Ford, Thyssen, Deutsche Bahn).

In terms of the educational work within unions the topics "racism" and "discrimination" are projected to be incorporated in all seminars (example DGB-Bildungswerk Thüringen). Some unions already have specific seminars on these topics (e.g. IG BCE) and some unions also provide seminars specifically for their foreign members.

In schools and professional schools various projects to raise the awareness for combating racism have been initiated by unions and/or political parties (e.g. DGB youth Saxony; e.g. Projektschultage - fuer Demokratie, Courage zeigen").

In terms of the media and the public, unions are increasingly participating in organizing public campaigns and demonstrations (e.g. Berlin demonstration spring 2001) and publish declarations condemning racist tendencies in society and demanding active engagement.

The DGB is explicitly interested in cooperating with other social movements on this issue. Yet, this happens mostly at local or regional but not at national level. An exception is the loose “network against racism, for equal rights” which was initiated in 1998 and consists of over 100 NGOs which are active in the anti-racism and anti-immigrant work. They developed an ‘action plan’ with ideas how to combat rightwing radicalism on a political level (what government, regions, communes and civil organizations should do): e.g. the creation of an anti-discrimination law which goes in more specific details (discrimination in private life, job, courts etc.) than the general constitutional anti-discrimination law (Art. 3 Grundgesetz); further modernisation of the immigration law (Staatsangehörigkeitsrecht) and asylum rights, anti-racism education in schools, activities at workplaces (e.g. management-works council cooperation and workplace agreements in combating discrimination).

A coordination among individual unions is provided through the DGB working group, other kinds of cooperation happen mostly at local level and depend on the initiative of individual union officials.

The issue ‘rightwing radicalism’ is in most cases not institutionalised in individual unions (e.g. no specific department is responsible). It is a topic which touches various departments but there is rarely a central coordination (in some unions which have a high percentage of foreigners the issue is coordinated in one department named “women and foreign employees”). Exceptions may be found for example in the HBV, which has a chatsite on their internet homepage on the topic of racism/anti-fascism and encourages locals to inform others about their activities, or in the IG Metall and IG BCE. Both unions provide special training programmes for foreign members as well as workshops on racism and conflict management for foreign and German union members.

Most action happens at local level. For example, there are some promising examples of local cooperation between unions and anti-fascist organizations, especially in east Germany such as the regional organization “for democracy and tolerance” in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (created in 1999) which was initiated by local politicians and union officials. However, the cooperation with other NSMs are in most cases only sporadic and temporary, and are initiated frequently as a response to some rightwing violent local event. More long term modes of cooperation (as they exist for example in Thüringen) are difficult to sustain partly because of the extremely different organizations of the basic-democratic, decentralised antifa movements and the unions.

Thus, in most cases initiatives depend on the individual interest of local or regional union officials to develop activities and initiate cooperation with other local unions and NSMs. These initiatives are not coordinated centrally and frequently leaders at the national level have no overview of the activities at local level.

Finally, similar to the discussion on the green movement the reason why some unions seem to be more actively engaged in anti-rightwing activities than others has mainly structural reasons but also depends on individual union official’s interests. Structural reasons include the percentage of foreigners in the sectoral workforce and union membership, the labour market situation (high unemployment raises anti-immigrant feelings) but also the political position of the union (e.g. traditional left-wing unions such as the IG Metall and HBV are more likely to be active than less politically engaged unions).

In sum, there has definitely been a significant increase in German unions' awareness and activity against rightwing radicalism in the last five years. However, there seems to be some uncertainty about how to react to rightwing tendencies among its own members. Unions concentrate on condemning rightwing violence and positioning themselves publicly against rightwing political parties and their policies. Little is done to open up the difficult discourse about union values and policies and union members attitudes. Can unions safeguard job security of their members and on the other hand favour an open immigrant policy? And little is done so far to coordinate different initiatives at local, regional and national level (among unions and other NSMs) and to use the topic actively for union revitalisation (new networks, modernising the old-fashioned image of unions etc.).

Critical voices also highlight the fact that the explanations and policies advanced by the unions omit structural causes of rightwing radicalism, for example that rightwing, nationalistic attitudes increase through globalisation (Dieckmann express 2000). Some critics hold that unions might only be able to really combat rightwing radicalism if they challenge current neo-liberal postulates more forcibly (e.g. Dieckmann 2000; Heitmeyer 1992). Moreover, Dieckmann argues that when unions become primarily service providers and when solidarity is not a lived reality anymore, attitudes of (German) union members may turn against foreign colleagues once job security is on the agenda. Heitmeyer (1992:624) adds that in particular young unionists are increasingly losing an identification with the values of their union and as such become more open for rightwing propaganda. New flexible work practices, especially flexible working time, increasingly instrumentalizes labor and undermines solidarity and group feelings at workplace level.

Changing attitudes through education and equal opportunity policies is to be welcomed but it is doubtful whether they can combat the underlying structural reasons. In this vein, both Dieckmann and Heitmeyer are critical of the DGB report because it does not acknowledge that the unions have backed policies to protect the German "Standort" (competitive advantage of the German production site) in the interest of saving jobs. without questioning the effects of such a national approach on the rise of rightwing radicalism. Changing values and attitudes is what unions want but arguably the unions need to wage the "battle of ideas" (Hyman 1999) to move forward toward this goal. At present, pragmatism holds the upper hand, projecting social visions is not on the union agenda.

### **c. Anti-globalization**

Although globalization is such a catchword in the current public debate, unions are only concerned with very specific consequences of globalization. There is no intensive debate about the advantages and disadvantages of globalization as which resembles the one currently taking place in the U.S. German unions do not participate in any political campaigns against globalization nor have they participated in any major anti-globalization demonstrations such as Seattle, Washington, Prague or Davos. Unions are primarily interested in two topics, international labor standards and social clauses, and both are organizationally situated in the departments for "economic policy" (Wirtschaftspolitische Referate). The demand for social clauses in international trade and production is a longstanding demand and is particularly relevant for the clothing and textile industry. As such, the German textile union GTB, now merged with the IGM, has created close contacts with organizations such as Terre des hommes and church organizations in the third world.

Moreover, the DGB lobbied for social trade clauses (no child work etc.) at the WTO long before Seattle. The DGB is also engaged in developing a code of conduct for German MNCs jointly with employers' associations, the German government and some NGOs (FIAN, Transfer) ("round table of code of conduct", 2000). It is also currently engaged in lobbying for social criteria in the government securities 'HERMES' for special risky foreign investments of German firms. Finally, one should not forget that German unions' concern to financially and organizationally strengthen the labor movement in central eastern Europe and to politically support an early EU enlargement is also guided by their interest to avoid social dumping and to risk German jobs by the lower labor costs in the East.

The most prominent union campaign on international labor standards is the "campaign for clean clothes" (Kampagne für Saubere Kleidung) which was initiated in the Netherlands in 1990 and adopted in Germany by the textile union. Since 1997 it is coordinated by the DGB (and includes the IGM, HBV, and 17 NGOs). Other similar initiatives are the "campaign for fair flowers" and the "campaign for bananas". Finally, there are some coalitions between individual unions and globalization movements such as the cooperation between the HBV (retail, banking, insurance) and the French network for the democratic control of the international financial markets (ATTAC). The HBV is also planning a world congress on deregulation with 350 unionists from all over the world and representatives of NGOs.

A problem of these coalitions is the potential conflict between interests of union members and of these other social movements. German unions are not against globalization as such but only against social dumping. A major reason is clearly the heavy export-orientation of the German industry but also the fact that German MNCs are not yet notoriously known for their "bad conduct" in the Third World as some American brand-name companies (Nike, Gap).

In sum, globalization is an issue for unions with regard to social dumping abroad. As with the other social movements coalitions are rare and there is no strategy to use the anti-globalization movement to revitalize the labor movement as it is currently happening in the US.

#### **d. Unemployment movement**

It is surprising that despite the consistently high unemployment figures in Germany over the last two decades it has taken the unions quite long to actively provide support for unemployed members. Their preferred reaction to the high unemployment in Germany has been to influence labor market and economic policies of the government and to create employment enhancing concepts with the employers' associations and government. An example of this approach is the tripartite Alliance for Jobs. For the most part, unemployed members do not receive different services than employed members and there are few specific efforts to keep unemployed members in the unions.

Unions have not appointed officials explicitly in charge of unemployed members. At best, we found individual activists in some unions who became involved on their own initiative. There is little understanding that it might be beneficial in the long run to keep unemployed members in the union, to assist them in finding training possibilities and new jobs. A potential problem is of course that unemployed workers might find a new job in a different industry and hence will need to change the union.

Some unions such as the IG BAU argue that it is difficult to have a centralised programme for unemployed in a union which covers sectors with very different unemployment rates. Other unions such as the IG BCE argue plainly that “the union represents employed members and not unemployed ones”. “The IG BCE only deals with the problems of their unemployed members if those approach the union.” (interview B Mähler, IG BCE). Moreover, union officials take the position that it is their goal to create new full-time jobs for the unemployed and not to provide remedies which would establish a low wage labor market for long term unemployed in competition with the unionised sectors (interview with Frau Gehrlich, HBV).

Consequently, coordination with organizations representing the unemployed is rare. If at all unions cooperate with the official unemployment agencies (Arbeitsämter) or with the coordinating office for “union activities on unemployment” in Bielefeld (KOS, Koordinationsstelle gewerkschaftlicher Arbeitslosenarbeit) and the European NGO “Euromarsch”. KOS was found in 1986 and is financed by the IGM, ÖTV and the Länder Northrhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony. It has the goal to improve the contact between the employed and unemployed workforce and is used as a link between unions and other unemployed organizations. KOS has close contacts with the IGM and ÖTV but other unions cooperate as well. “Euromarsch” was initiated by French and German unemployed in 1997 who did not see their interests being sufficiently represented by the union movement and political parties and is partly coordinated by KOS. According to Renate Knapper (ÖTV) there is a latent conflict between Euromarsch, which is critical of the EU policies, and the Europe-friendly German unions.

In sum, unemployment is regarded as an economic and a societal problem but not as an organizational or membership problem for unions. As a consequence, unions have seen little need for cooperation with unemployment organizations.

To conclude, our review reveals different levels of involvement between German unions and the NSMs. There are also differences between the union treatment of the four social movements. For example, unionists attach a high degree of importance to the environmental and the anti-fascism movement, while the anti-globalization and unemployment movement seem not as relevant. Moreover, we found that although a certain awareness among the union movement exists in all four cases, the extent to which these topics are organizationally institutionalized and the extent to which initiatives and coalitions are developed largely depends on the individual union’s size (large unions are more likely to have special departments responsible for these topics than smaller ones) and on the relevance of the issue for the specific union. By that we mean that in most cases the involvement is not dependent on the political stance of the union but to what extent the organization is directly affected by the issue: e.g. how many foreign members the union has, the extent of export-orientation and global competition, environmental problem in production, whether the sector is more industrial or service oriented, and how many union members are unemployed.

Finally, coalition building with other social movements is rare and mostly short-term and not integrated into a long term revitalization strategy. Coalitions that do exist are rarely centrally organized. Most activities happen at the local level and depend on the initiative of local unionists. It is evident that unions seem so far not to be able to translate the awareness of these new movements into a coherent revitalization strategy. However, Müller-Jentsch’s pessimism (1990:409) that “the relationship between NSM

and unions is a sad chapter of the German labour movement" cannot be completely supported. There is increasing evidence of initiatives and also of coalition building, but they differ widely in intensity, purpose and organizational level.

## **6. Cross-Border Trade Union Collaboration: *"It always takes two to tango"***

The strategy field of international collaboration as seen from the perspective of the German unions is dominated by the question of their European engagement. German union officials are certainly participants in international trade union activities. But for the few exceptions which have been presented in the previous section of this paper on coalition building, there is nothing essential to report at the global level in regard to German trade union revitalization. This may be a cause for alarm in light of the accelerating pace of globalization. Nevertheless, we would argue with Jon Erik Dolvik that "it is hard to see how the erosional impact of borderless competition can be prevented by incitement of a new brand of global labor activism or social clauses" alone. "Such bottom-up and top-down initiatives are important but unlikely to succeed unless they are linked together by coherent regional structures with force to coordinate union demands, mobilize pressure on governments and institutions at the international levels, and ensure credible compliance." (Dolvik 2000: 59)

Trade union collaboration at the European level has definitely not reached such a point yet, but nevertheless, it presents a picture of change, development and some innovation. As Jeremy Waddington wrote in a recent article on European trade unions in transition, "trade union activity at supra-national level is required to protect what remains of national trade union embeddedness from the damaging effects of internationalisation" (Waddington 2000: 325) German unions have recognized the importance of bilateral and European cooperation and have begun to earmark more resources for activities at these levels. Lowell Turner has argued that over the past decade, a structural framework of regulations, institutions and organizations for labor relations has been created within the European Union (EU) which provides the unions with a "political opportunity structure" (Turner 1996: 339) for action. Indeed, unions have created and have at their disposal a wide variety of instruments to use in pursuing cross-border activities within the EU, the most important of which are the following:

- The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) as the organization of national trade union federations (66 federations from 29 countries) and 12 European Industry Federations;
- The European Industry Federations which unite national unions along sectoral lines;
- Multilateral cooperation committees such as the so-called Doorn group composed of union representatives from Germany and the Benelux countries
- Regional cross-border wage bargaining partnerships such as initiated by the district committee of the IG Metall in Northrhine-Westfalia in cooperation with union representatives in neighboring countries;
- Multi-country union representation at international construction sites;
- Bilateral union exchanges and agreements on membership rights and recognition;

- Inter-regional Trade Union Committees. Local cross-border cooperation along the national borders of member states as well as between member states and accession countries;
- European Works Councils.

The following presentation will focus on the thrust and status of selected European-level activities of the German unions as participants in EU-wide initiatives. The aim of this selection is to focus on the kind of involvement which extends beyond the traditional context of international trade union activities and offers a basis for possible new developments and constellations. In addition to the informational content we will endeavor to evaluate the effectiveness of such activities, their middle and long range prospects, and their relevance for union revitalization in Germany. What kinds of new activities are German unions developing and for which reasons? How do these European-level activities coordinate with existing domestic goals and activities? Is there evidence of an integration of European and domestic activities or of cooperation among German unions in their European involvements? And are German unions developing strategies designed to realize a European "transnational social area" (Jacobi 2000: 12)?

#### **a. The Social Dialogue**

The Social Dialogue was first introduced into the EEC treaty in 1987 as a means of activating the social partners to develop "contractual relations". Since its inception it has been used only exceptionally, and up to the present, the number and quality of agreements reached by negotiations between the ETUC and UNICE/CEEP for the employers has been minimal (Kuhlmann 1998). Recently, however, there has been increased interest in the Social Dialogue as a sectoral instrument of negotiations (Keller/Bansbach 2000). However one measures the input of German unions into this neo-corporatist instrument of European politics, the prospects of the Social Dialogue developing into a major playing field of cross-border trade union collaboration are slim. Simply stated, the unions have no real instruments for pressuring the employers to negotiate. Ross and Martin have pointed out that the "ETUC has so far developed largely by borrowing resources from European institutions to gain legitimacy with its own national constituents and by using the openings provided by these European institutions to try to elicit changes in employer behaviors." (Martin/Ross 1999: 358) This conclusion may also be applied to the sectoral level as well. Only when the employers have a vested interest in market regulation for their own protection - such as in the case of posted workers (Sörries 1997) - will they be willing to make use of this instrument.

#### **b. The Declaration of Doorn: A multi-national, multi-branch initiative**

The Doorn<sup>54</sup> cooperation group was initiated in 1996 by the Belgian trade union federations in response to a government move to set a wage ceiling based on wage increases in Germany, France and the Netherlands. At a first meeting in 1997, the

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<sup>54</sup> The name is taken from the town in the Netherlands where the group met in 1998 and signed an agreement.

participants<sup>55</sup> agreed on a regular exchange of information, reciprocal invitations to domestic bargaining rounds and annual meetings. The following year, unions from Germany<sup>56</sup>, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg signed a declaration pledging wage coordination in the interest of preventing "a bidding down of collectively bargained incomes between the participating countries, as sought by the employers. The trade unions see this neighborly initiative as a step towards European cooperation on collective bargaining." To achieve this goal, the unions agreed to the following principles:

- "to achieve collective bargaining settlements that correspond to the sum total of the evolution of prices and the increase in labor productivity;
- ... to achieve both the strengthening of mass purchasing power and employment-creating measures (e.g. shorter work times);
- ... [to] inform and consult each other on developments in bargaining policy." (Doorn 1998)

The announcement of this agreement was a surprise to many unionists in as much as up until this point, matters of multinational wage bargaining coordination had been the responsibility of the ETUC. At the follow-up meeting of the Doorn group in September 1999, the ETUC was present to hear that the wage bargaining goals agreed upon the previous year had been achieved in the 1999 round of negotiations. As such, the participants confirmed their interest in continuing their cooperation (Gewerkschaftliches Gipfeltreffen 1999).

The fact that the 1999 bargaining rounds in all of the participating countries could be regarded as acceptable and in line with the agreed formula probably saved this cooperative initiative from being abandoned before it had gotten settled. Had the unions had to face the kinds of problems resulting from the 2000 bargaining round they might have decided to call off the meeting and put an end to further efforts of wage coordination. At least the German unions were the object of criticism at the meeting in September 2000, because their composite wage increases of 2.3% fell far below the 4.1% increase in inflation and productivity (Benelux 2000; Mermet/Janssen 2000). The conclusions drawn from this however indicate a readiness to take a longer term perspective and discuss a variety of factors influencing bargaining outcomes, including trade union strategies.

It is obvious that such a cooperative initiative can not survive without German participation, but that it will not survive if the other national unions feel that the German unions are not seriously adhering to the common goals as formulated. As for the importance of the Doorn group for revitalization in the German unions, it can only be said that the existence of the group and its wage formula is part of an ensemble of references at the European level and has become a recognized fix-point and in the wage bargaining considerations of union headquarters (Kreimer-de Fries 1999: 196). Moreover, the signatures of the largest and most powerful DGB unions to the

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<sup>55</sup> The French unions did not participate, apparently because the federation representatives from the other countries regarded French union structures and interests to be too heterogeneous to be effectively integrated into the group. Expert discussion, March 09, 2001.

<sup>56</sup> The German participants represented the DGB and its member unions IG BAU, IG BCE, ÖTV and IGM as well as the DAG.



declaration of Doorn could enable the DGB to strengthen its role as internal organizer and coordinator of union wage policy.

### **c. Wage bargaining coordination at the sectoral level. Some examples**

The goal of the European Metalworkers Federation (EMF) is to coordinate the wage bargaining policies of its member unions and prevent wage dumping based on its "European Coordination Rule" which is essentially the same formula as used by the Doorn group. While the EMF recognizes the autonomy of its members, it also attaches to that recognition the responsibility of utilizing the full scope of what is determined to be the distributional component. However, according to the EMF annual report for 1999/2000 on collective bargaining policy, the problems associated with the determination of this component and its comparative evaluation are immense. To apply its "European Coordination Rule", the EMF needs the hard data on productivity gains and inflation as a bottom line. But only the German IGM and the Austrian metalworkers union provided the necessary information (EMF 2000: 17).

The report's conclusion is certainly a reflection of the enormous problems associated with the development of a European wage bargaining policy among unions. Not only is wage bargaining still an exclusively national task for unions (Blank 1997: 126), the rules and norms by which they bargain vary considerably from one EU country to the next (Europäische Kommission 1999). Lacking the recognition of elementary rights at the supranational level such as the right to strike, European wage bargaining would easily turn into "collective begging". For their part, national unions have refused to cede the power to levy sanctions for non-compliance. Such are the conditions which internationally oriented unionists must recognize and accept in seeking to develop cross-border collaboration, which is clearly the reason why such policies - despite the existence of the EMU - are still the exception rather than the rule.

For the IG Metall, wage bargaining policy as a European task is currently based on two strategies. For one, the union is committed to the EMF policy of coordinating (but not controlling) the dimensions of national bargaining. Secondly, as early as 1997, the IGM initiated a program of regional cross-border partnerships designed to support the exchange of information and union officials dealing with wage bargaining. In the meantime, the union has taken this approach one step further by proposing that union representatives from all countries participating in the exchange map wage bargaining strategy together (Gollbach/Schulten 1999: 459). To be sure, such is not reality by a long shot, even in the IGM district of Northrhine-Westfalia which has actively supported the program and probably gone further in cementing cross-border cooperation than any of the other IGM district offices (Schartau 1998). As Gollbach and Schulten have noted, the exchange of information has been developed and standardized, but the exchange of persons and the active participation of foreign union officials in actual wage bargaining sessions inevitably encounters far greater difficulties, not the least of which are language and an understanding of the bargaining rituals. Their summation of the prospects of such cooperative structures seems realistic: "Before foreign unionists are able to assume a more 'active' role, the participating unions will above all have to strengthen their mutual 'relationships of trust'. Only then will it be possible to hold controversial discussions over different wage bargaining strategies and work out union differences in an open and solidaristic manner (Gollbach/Schulten 1999: 463).

The IG Metall is not the only German union which has taken small, but concrete steps toward a European coordination of wage bargaining strategies. As early as 1995, the German construction union IG BAU initiated a research project on the foundations of union cooperation on labor market issues in Europe (Lubanski 2000: 106). In March, 1999, the IG BAU signed an agreement with the Austrian and Swiss construction unions on cross-border wage bargaining coordination. This was followed in June, 2000 by a similar agreement with unions from Belgium and Holland to concretize the "Basic Declaration of Principles on Wage Bargaining in the European Building Industry" of the European Federation of Building and Woodworking Industries (Euro-Tarifpolitik der Bau- und Agrargewerkschaften 2000: 50; Zagelmeyer 2000: 14f.) For its part, the IG BCE (mining and chemical union) has set its priorities in developing bilateral partnerships and using these to build a stronger European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers Federation (Zagelmeyer 2000: 15).

These and other initiatives reflect a growing awareness among German unionists regarding the importance of a European perspective in collective bargaining with employers. The lack of more decisive action such as the delegation of bargaining rights to the European-level sectoral union is not only reflective of a reluctance to relinquish control and rights, it is also a realistic assessment of the fact that the European-level union organizations would still be hard pressed to find a bargaining partner on the employers' side willing and able to negotiate. Still, union officials need not wait idly for such a bargaining partner to appear. In the meantime, the level and intensity of cross-border collaboration and exchanges can be increased. Within the organization, efforts should be mounted to strengthen the European perspective regarding collective bargaining and to build a solid understanding of both the existing EU and the accession countries. The cross-border opening of union structures and policy-making will need to follow the disappearance of internal political and economic barriers in Europe if the unions are to be able to commit themselves to an active involvement in determining the EU's future.

#### **d. German unions and European Works Councils**

Over 500 enterprises operating at the European level have complied with the EWC-Directive. Of those, ca. 115 are enterprises with headquarters in Germany. DGB member unions have actively supported the creation and operation of EWCs in those enterprises, with responsibility depending on the organizational jurisdiction within Germany. Information provided by the unions indicates that activities on behalf of EWCs is highly concentrated in two unions: The IG Metall and the IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie (IG BCE). Indeed, the website of the IG BAU replies to queries about "European Works Councils" by ushering the user via links to these unions off to their internet pages.

While responsibility for EWCs at union headquarters has been generally integrated into departmental teams connected to works council matters, unions have for the most part remained at arms length to the EWCs. In part, this is a result of limited resources available for a more intensive support program, and in part it may be a realistic assessment of the actual role played by EWCs. But at the same time, not all EWCs have actively sought a close relationship to the unions. As such, EWCs do not figure prominently in union strategy perspectives for Europe, and they are certainly not a key element of any union revitalization strategies.

#### **e. Inter-regional trade union committees (IRTUC)**

Inter-regional trade union committees are probably the least well-known organizational expressions of cross-border trade union collaboration. And yet, there are over 35 such committees in existence today and some of the oldest were founded over 20 years ago. German unions are involved in thirteen of the committees along Germany's borders within the EU and with Poland and the Czech Republic.

The work of most IRTUCs is generally unspectacular, but at the same time essential for furthering the spirit of European cooperation. The founding of an IRTUC is a supportive step toward establishing ongoing cross-border communication and understanding among employees of two or more nationalities. Once functioning, IRTUCs devote their energies to regional cross-border labor market and regional development issues. In addition, issues such as codetermination in enterprises operating on both sides of the border, social insurance problems of commuting employees, and environmental problems receive their attention.

Despite their numbers and their cross-border regional structure, the IRTUCs have never been regarded as a strategic instrument of European policy by the German trade unions. Nor have the German unions drafted a strategic concept for the inclusion of IRTUCs in a comprehensive plan for revitalization, despite the fact that such organizational structures could prove to be a core element for the promotion of cross-border union strategies in Europe. Concrete experiences made within IRTUCs could be exchanged with other organizational units of a europeanization of union perspectives such as EWCs and cross-border partnerships for collective bargaining (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund 1996).

### **III. Summary and Conclusions**

This paper has sought to present a general picture of the policy and organizational restructuring tasks facing German unions in the selected strategy areas. But beyond such a problem definition based on the particular challenges confronting unions in each area, we have addressed union responses and initiatives, evaluating their impact and potential as instruments of revitalization. Unions are actors. Their policies and politics determine their effectiveness as subjects of change as well as their capacity to react to the input of other actors. Unions are not merely objects of an inexorable process, in which their decline is programmed and the "end game" (Streeck 2001) is soon to commence.

*"Searching to regain the initiative"* is an attempt to describe the difficulties which unions are having from the viewpoint of this understanding. There is much going on, a wide range of projects and activities can be observed. But we can not confirm that there is an upsurge of focused revitalization, nor is it true that the organized labor movement is at a standstill. The question is, as we see it, how can all of these activities be laced together in a coherent revitalization strategy. As such, we conclude that the development and application of successful strategies in the face of today's challenges will require a clear understanding of what unions represent and what role they need to play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The increasing complexity of this task is evidenced quite succinctly by the two catchwords "globalization" and "atypical". Internationally, markets and multinational enterprises have generally remained as much untouched by the regulatory instruments of democratic governments as by the control measures powerful national labor

movements once had at their disposal. At the same time, union foundations are being undercut by extensive changes in the labor force. The "normal" worker is more difficult to define, while the prevalence of so-called atypical workers is growing. What is more, both catchwords refer to processes which are interlinked and as such, unions require a comprehensive understanding and strategy approach to act effectively on both.

On this point, our paper has pointed to deficits in the German unions. Top-down strategies alone are costly and hard to disseminate and anchor throughout the organization. Innovative strategies at the local level have the advantage of the organizational unity of competent problem analysis, project planning and project implementation. But without the means and readiness to spread such experiences in the interest of developing "best practice" scenarios throughout the organization, local initiatives will degenerate to being an exercise in "re-inventing the wheel" anew. In an organization marked by deficiencies in the evaluation of the potential of new approaches, both the impetus for innovation and the learning capacity of the organization will wither<sup>57</sup>. This applies equally to the individual member unions of the DGB federation as well as to the relationship between the members and the federation.

Beyond this general problem of organizational learning, we attach special importance to two dimensions of union revitalization which combine actions of separate strategy areas: German unions need to both expand their field of strategic vision to the European level and at the same time focus their vision on workplace strategies. In regard to the latter, union revitalization turns on more active recruitment strategies coupled with an organizational reform delegating more decision-making and responsibility to the regional and local/workplace level. As employers initiate changes in work environments, unions need to respond with initiatives of their own and of those they (claim to) represent. Gaining the initiative will strengthen employee/union control of the work environment and shape its fundamental character.

As for the other dimension, a broadening of the union strategy perspective from the national to the European level is both unavoidable in the context of European integration, it is above all initiative and presents an innovative opportunity if developed prudently. To be sure, the German unions have contributed essentially as much (or as little) as labor movements in other European Union countries, and a further Europeanization of union organizations and politics can not be initiated unilaterally. But to put the issue into focus as it concerns the German unions, the European perspective has yet to be accepted by all union officials and activists, let alone has it been spread to the membership. Strategies for union wage bargaining, union political action, union mergers and organizational restructuring have at best only marginally integrated issues with a European dimension. And yet, it is unavoidable that all such strategies, whether for the protection of the sectoral contract, for combating unemployment or for eliminating right extremism, must come up short as national approaches.

The German unions have a rich history of success and influence to call upon in finding their road to revitalization. Justice and solidarity have always counted as their basic goals and as the building blocks of their identity. But the unions are in danger of betraying this heritage if they fail to redefine such goals in terms of new challenges, i.e. at the European level and at the workplace. Will the unions grasp the initiative to this

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<sup>57</sup> An excellent example of both the development of innovative strategies with measurable revitalization impact and the failure to communicate and anchor this experience throughout the organization is given by Carsten Wirth in his study of the retail trade sector in Germany. (Wirth 1999)

end? The historians of the Hans-Böckler-Circle gave their own answer to this question 1990 in reference to the problems which German unification was causing the unions. "The German labor movement has always been able to adapt to new demands and conditions only after experiencing a crisis." (Hans-Böckler-Kreis 1990: 590) No one, however, is destined to repeat history.

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