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The Emergence of a European Labour Protest Movement?

ABSTRACT ■ This article considers what a transnational, and specifically European labour movement, would mean in the context of European integration, and whether there are prospects for its development. There are certainly structures and sporadic actions, so the question is whether they can develop further into a movement. I will summarize the literature on the integration of labour in the EU, which commonly argues that it is divided and incapable of action. These obstacles can be considered in a different light when the strand of social movement approaches is applied. Then I will present two cases of transnational European collective action with a focus on the managing of difference and on developing into a social movement. To summarize I will assess the future of labour mobilization in transnational context and conclude with a tentative explanation.

KEYWORDS: EU level ■ European trade unions ■ protest ■ social movement ■ transnationalism

Introduction

The development of regulation at EU level is quite different from that at national level. The representation of labour interests is top-down: the representatives ‘constitute the represented; pre-formulate their potential views and interests’ (Mückenberger, 2004: 276). There are institutions of labour representation at European level, but no movement-driven action (Turner, 1996). A strong labour movement and mobilization are often seen as a desirable outcome and necessity for defending labour rights in the transnational context (Tilly, 1995). Mass mobilization at EU level is thus deemed to be of crucial importance for the success of interest-group lobbying (Rucht, 2001; Tarrow, 2001; Turner, 1996) and social dialogue at the EU level (Hyman, 1994). It is also a common argument that international solidarity needs to be entrenched in the lower ranks of the trade unions (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 1996; Gobin, 1994; Hyman, 2001; Waterman, 1998), and hence that trade unionism in the EU should

incorporate the characteristics of a social movement to be effective (Hyman, 2005). Therefore I intend to consider whether there is a European (transnational) movement emerging and what are the prospects for its development.

We can neither predict the emergence of such a social movement by looking at the EU as a source of common grievances nor by deriving it from the political opportunity structure generated by shifts in power. The capacity to mobilize cannot be derived automatically from grievances; they first have to be mobilized, and there is often a social and institutional network behind collective action. Moreover, it cannot be taken for granted that grievances which are the outcome of EU initiatives will be attributed to the EU, as its directives are implemented by national governments. Hence the influence of the EU must first be identified by any social movement (Imig and Tarrow, 1999). The concept of political opportunity structure is also of limited use in predicting the emergence of a European social movement. The opportunities cannot explain mobilization because not all interests are organized in a group able to exploit emergent opportunities (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004).

The academic debate is generally pessimistic about the emergence of a transnational labour movement, pointing to its fragmentation along national lines (Bohle, 2006). This question has been addressed by Taylor and Mathers (2002b), who observe that the national level is characterized by corporatist interest representation, whereas at transnational level resistance has a form of a grassroots movement of resistance against neoliberalism. There is thus a division between labour movement activists and official trade union action in the political institutions of the EU and in the European companies. They point out that the organizational structure of the ETUC, particularly its intergovernmental character and its accommodation to the neo-liberal agenda, weakens the representation of the labour interests at European level. They contrast this with the examples of grassroots action targeting European decision-making. The European Marches were initiated by *Agir ensemble contre le chômage* and first organized on the occasion of the signing of the Amsterdam Treaty. There is a division between the agenda of this grassroots movement which demands a guaranteed income and resists 'workfare' policies, they argue, and the trade unions adapting to the neo-liberal agenda. The networks of resistance are a basis for labour movement renewal by articulating an oppositional ideology and creating network organizations.

In another article, they observe that the ETUC also goes beyond a mere accommodation strategy, attempting to achieve the incorporation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, including the right to organize and take industrial action, into the EU Treaty. When conventional processes of social dialogue failed, the ETUC organized a 70,000-strong demonstration during the negotiations in Nice in 2000 (Taylor and Mathers, 2002a).

The ETUC incorporated campaigning activities into its repertoire of action (Waddington, 2005). The tendency towards a social movement character can be also observed in their contacts with other groups. Cooperation with social movement actors can be illustrated by the participation of some trade unions in the European Social Forums (Bieler, 2006). Events like the joint demonstration of European ABB Alstom Power (AAP) and national unions against job redundancies in the company and for information and consultation rights in April 2000 (Erne, 2006) or the successful protest of European dockers against liberalization of port services in January 2006 show that the European trade unionists are capable of mass mobilization in the transnational context. Collective action does not only consist of the institutional structures. Does it, however, constitute a transnational social movement or are there prospects of developing sustained mobilizing structures?

This article begins by considering on the definitional issue of what a transnational social movement would mean in the context of European integration. I introduce an analytical differentiation between social movements and coalitions, to distinguish the stages of development. This is motivated by the fact that there certainly are structures and sporadic action, so the question is whether these can develop further into a movement. I summarize the literature on the integration of labour in the EU, where the argument that it is divided and incapable of effective action is familiar, mainly stressing the differences across countries. Then I present two protest events with a qualitative analysis, examining them in respect to their potential of contributing or developing into a social movement. The material has been gathered from press releases, trade union communications at European, national and company level and interviews. In the case of the demonstration against the Bolkestein directive, I interviewed four representatives from the national sectoral level in Poland. The case of solidarity actions among GM Europe workers are based on an interview with a participant. Qualitative analysis can reveal more about the capacity of European trade unionism to mobilize and character of this engagement. In more general terms, it would enable conclusions about the prospects of developing a European labour movement.

What a European Protest Movement Would Mean

Tarrow (2005) points out that a global social movement would mean more than incidental transnational collective action. It would require a sustainable structure, collective demands and identity. Similarly, Rucht (1999: 207) defines a social movement as an 'action system comprising mobilized networks of individuals, groups and organization which, based on a shared collective identity, attempts to achieve or prevent social

change, predominantly by means of collective protest'. Here it should be mentioned that similar criteria are used in the distinction between business and social movement unionism. Lopez (2004: 10) defines social movement unionism in terms of three characteristics: collective action campaigns in contrast to strikes, building of community-labour coalitions and 'framing the demands *politically*' rather than labour market demands. According to Rucht the criterion for the transnationality of the social movement would be its organizational structure, which should consist of 'sustained interaction for coordinating mobilization' around common goals. The need for developing identities, as a precondition for social movements to emerge (Della Porta and Diani, 1999), should also be acknowledged. However, this is difficult to operationalize and leaves much room for interpretation. Therefore, I propose another related criterion: the point of reference of claims and demands.

Tilly (1984) sees the prerequisite for the emergence of the national social movement in the building of the national state. The nation-state, a new centre of power, became the point of reference for the social movement. Assuming that the EU is becoming a state-like entity, one could expect a Europeanization in the form of a shift of reference for the labour movement from the national to the European level. The interrelation between the local and global level in political activism is the subject of Tarrow's book (2005). He also takes the 'point of reference' as one of the foundations of the processes linking the local and global level, which in turn constitute transnationality.

On the basis of these conceptualizations, one can specify two criteria which would characterize a European social movement: organizational structure and sustained interaction on the one hand, and the point of reference in claims and identity. Consequently, a European labour movement would mean sustained transnational labour coalitions with developed structures capable of mobilizing for collective action, understood as collective protest and campaigning, either against specific EU directives or with the demands for specific regulation at EU level.

It is useful to differentiate between a social movement and a coalition. In contrast to social movements, coalitions are short-term collaborations around certain issues which lose their coherence once the issue or opportunity is no more salient. Coalitions can develop in a social movement when the collaboration has reason for longer existence and common identities develop (Tarrow, 2005). Tarrow distinguishes four types of coalitions with different degrees of involvement and duration. The instrumental coalition is a short-lived collaboration around a specific issue. The federation is a formalized long-term collaboration where the individual goals of each actor are in the foreground. An event coalition is based on collective action and has chances to develop into a long-term collaboration once common identities and interests have been recognized.

A campaign coalition combines long duration and high involvement (Tarrow, 2005). The endurance of a coalition is enhanced through three factors: opportunity spirals, institutionalization and socialization. Socialization can take place during moments of collective action and result in the broadening of identities. Below I will examine specifically the possible obstacles to the development of a sustained coalition and social movement within European trade unionism.

Obstacles to Cooperation within the Context of Market Integration

There are several factors which enhance the formation and endurance of a coalition: framing, trust, credible commitments, management of difference and individual incentives. The members must be able to frame the issue in a way which allows a consciousness of a generalized common interest. Tensions based on other factors, like institutional background or culture, need to be managed. Coalitions depend on trust and credibility of commitments, which may be developed either through personal trust relations among the representatives of the groups in the coalition or through institutional arrangements. Cooperation needs to be rewarding for the participants (Levi and Murphy, 2006). The literature on labour in the European common market identifies problems in all these areas. It is argued that the diversity of trade unions in terms of their distinctive institutional forms, identities, cultures and lack of common language make cooperation difficult. There is a lack of strong incentives to engage in collaborative European activity, either because of conflicting interests or the existence of better opportunities at national level. The absence of effective mechanisms for the management of difference, which requires an institutional basis, is also important. Below I summarize the arguments about such problems within European trade unionism.

Regulation at the European level does not promise any advantages as against the national system for the trade unions from countries with high standards. On the other hand, unions from countries with low standards may find the level of proposed EU norms exaggerated and unrealistic (Streeck and Schmitter, 1991). Labour can choose between the strategy of class or national strategies at the European level; and different strategies imply different organizational and political alliances (Streeck, 1998). Different levels of economic prosperity undermine the basis for unification between trade unions from poor and rich countries. Unions from poorer countries are reluctant to support the harmonization of labour standards at EU level, since this is seen as a means of protecting employment in the richer countries. Since there is no prospect of radical redistributive politics at EU level, trade unions prefer a strategy of economic

nationalism. Those from rich countries try to protect their employment by expanding the 'social dimension' of the whole common market (Streeck, 1998: 146–7). Institutional differences also make it probable that national unions will follow the principle of subsidiarity, although this brings less optimal results than harmonization and centralization at the EU level. Moreover, trade unions are likely to engage in national inter-class alliances to increase international competitiveness and protect the position they have gained at national level. Such cross-class cooperation prevents intra-class integration at supranational level which is in line with the interests of capital (Streeck, 1998). Thus interest cleavages among European labour are defined by national economic profiles and levels of prosperity. Distinctive geographical or national identities make the framing of common interests especially difficult for a potential labour coalition, and can hardly facilitate the formation of a social movement.

The literature shows that collective identities would be similarly difficult to construct. Admittedly, progressing homogenization of working-class conditions is a basis for possible class formation. Employees are united by the commonality of facing the same 'multinational corporate employer' and disappointment with the measures of national governments. Nevertheless, they are still polarized by inequalities between the countries, which are often much greater than those within countries (Silver, 2003). These may push them towards drawing boundaries on a national basis and cooperation with national authorities. A comparison of class 'consciousness' between Italian and Polish workers shows that national movements are diverging, presenting an obstacle to further integration. This points to a scenario of an increasing divide between eastern and western workers and the development of two kinds of unionism: defensive in the west and neo-proletarian in the east. Since their problems are not translated into class terms by Polish activists, their anger may turn into antagonism in the west (Meardi, 2000). A similar diagnosis is formulated by Bohle (2006), namely that Polish labour has not managed to formulate a counter-position to European integration and market restructuring. The only actors using a defensive discourse are nationalist and xenophobic parties. Given the tendency towards drawing boundaries along national lines, the project of collective identity construction seems to be very difficult.

Transnational cooperation could also be inhibited by the institutional differences and the incentive structures which they generate. However, institutional arrangements can influence engagement in transnational mobilization in different ways. In liberal market economies, management–labour relations are based on decentralized bargaining and contentious workplace relations. Coordinated collective bargaining and statutory worker representation are predominant in coordinated market economies (Ebbinghaus and Manow, 2001). Until relatively recently, British unions

had little enthusiasm for transnational regulation, because of their concentration on company-based collective bargaining. German trade unions, threatened by relocations and foreign investment, seek regulation at EU level to prevent social dumping. Germany's federal structure and industrial relations system could be seen as facilitating transnational activities (Lillie and Martínez Lucio, 2004). A contrary argument is also possible. In recent years, we can observe an international orientation among British trade unions (Baccaro et al., 2003), as a means of compensating for their weakness at home. Conversely, unions from coordinated economies may be reluctant to engage in transnational cooperation because of the priority of protecting national markets.

These points show that labour faces, in particular, many internal obstacles to transnational cooperation and mobilization. It is other occupational groups (especially farmers) that have engaged the majority of organized protest at European level (Imig and Tarrow, 2001). This is evidence that cross-national differences among economic groups can be managed and do not preclude collective action and contention. Similarly, Erne (1997) has observed that leftist social movement groups have been able to pursue common goals in the supranational context, despite differences in terms of ideology and degrees of radicalism. Therefore, despite the many differences among the workers which can be observed at the national level, there is still a room for collective goals and action at the supranational level. Below I will examine two instances of event coalitions in order to assess the chances of development into social movement structures. I have chosen coalitions where trade unionists from rich and poor countries participate, and different institutional settings are involved.

Mass Mobilization around EU Decision-making

The ETUC regularly organizes demonstrations on the occasion of EU summits or important debates in the European Parliament (EP). In Table 1, I present a selective overview compiled from different sources, mainly trade union communications. This serves as an illustration that the protests take place regularly.

These demonstrations targeted at the EU elites and decision-making can be defined as event coalitions. I will exemplify the organization of these events with the actions against the draft services directive (the Bolkestein directive). On 11 February 2006, before the first reading in the EP, there were coordinated protest actions in many parts of Europe. For instance, around 10,000 people demonstrated on the streets in Strasbourg, 35,000 in Berlin. On the day of the first reading, 14 February, there was a demonstration in Strasbourg organized by the ETUC. Although it was a working day, about 30,000 trade unionists took part. The target of the

TABLE 1. Selective Overview of European Demonstrations Organized by the ETUC

Date	Place	Approximate participation
19 June 2000	Porto	50,000
6 December 2000	Nice	80,000
13 December 2001	Laeken	60–80,000
14 March 2002	Barcelona	100,000
4 October 2003	Rome	150,000
2–3 April 2004	Coordinated days of action at regional and local level	No data
19 March 2005	Brussels	75,000
14 February 2006	Strasbourg	30,000

demonstration was clearly the EU decision-making process, with the particular aim of influencing MEPs. The ETUC stressed that it supported the opening of the market for services in principle, but that this should not generate unfair competition between companies and in working conditions. In particular, it condemned the ‘country of origin’ principle which would allow foreign providers to escape rules on wages and working conditions in countries with higher standards than their own (ETUC, 2006a, 2006b). In addition, the ETUC opposed the application of free market rules to ‘services of general interest’ (public services). These objections were accompanied by more general demands for a stronger Social Europe (ETUC, 2005) and an enhanced quality of life for European citizens (ETUC, 2006a). The slogans of Social Europe and the European Social Model are regularly repeated at such demonstrations.

Although the services directive was an issue which, according to commentators, divided the interests of old and new member states, it was possible for the unions to frame a common interest. For instance, the original liberal version of the services directive had been defined by Polish politicians in the national economic interest, a view repeated in the main Polish media. By contrast, both main unions, NSZZ Solidarność and OPZZ, shared the stance of the ETUC that the principle of harmonization should be implemented in a manner avoiding social dumping in western countries. The teachers’ unions in both confederations and the miners’ union within OPZZ organized protesters for the demonstration, arguing that the harmonization principle would be advantageous for Polish workers. NSZZ Solidarność (2005, 2006) published arguments that this would provide better pay and working conditions for Poles working abroad, and would also mean that standards in Poland would be improved, or at least

not suffer (Gutowska and Ostrowski, 2006; Ostrowski, 2006). The harmonization principle was seen as a means of restoring the social standards undermined by liberal politicians, and enhancing the regulation of industrial relations in Poland. Though a liberal version of the directive would bring short-term advantages, through access to western markets by Polish firms with resulting jobs for Polish workers – essential in the times of high unemployment – the outcome would be disadvantageous in the long run (Ostrowski, 2006).

Hence despite the contrasting positions of workers embedded in different national economies, this did not result in the pursuit of contradictory interests by the unions. A study of frames adopted by other trade unions participating in this protest (Belgian, French, German and Italian) also reveals that similar frames are taken up and repeated across national affiliates. Although interpretation of the issue differed according to the ideological profile of the trade union confederations, this did not preclude effective commitment to collective action (Parks, 2006). It was possible to frame common interests and indicate specific advantages for all participants, a necessary basis for the endurance of coalitions.

Existing trade union structures and communication channels were deployed for the organization of the demonstration. The mobilization was proposed by the ETUC General Secretary and approved at the Executive Committee meeting in December 2005. National affiliates and European Industry Federations (EIFs) were invited to participate, providing channels for mobilization and the spread of information to lower levels of the national unions. Whether this top-down communication process can be depicted as the basis for a ‘sustained interaction for coordinating mobilization’ (Rucht, 1999: 207) is a difficult question. The fact that there were established communication channels which regularly mobilize national representation at such demonstrations allows us to call this mobilization sustainable. There is also an interaction between the national and lower levels of organization. Horizontal exchange takes place mainly between the national representatives during ETUC meetings or within the EIFs. This is, however, the logic of vertical coordination and should not be regarded as diminishing the quality of cooperation. One has to admit that the high financial costs associated with participation in protest actions abroad constrain the scope of mobilization; these financial considerations were mentioned by several interviewees. Another obstacle is the general orientation of each trade union and its preferences regarding forms of action and cooperation. For instance, the Polish construction union, ZZ Budowlani (a federation within OPZZ), did not participate in the demonstration, although it shared the stance of its confederation and is involved in transnational cooperation with western trade unions, because it was sceptical about the effectiveness of such action. Furthermore, the European level trade union structure was seen

as more adequate for representing the interests. Having taken into account the difficulties of organizing a protest in transnational context, I would tend to the opinion that this is an example of a sustained mobilizing structure.

The case can be examined for the three factors – opportunity spirals, institutionalization and socialization – which enhance the endurance of coalitions and foster their development into a social movement (Tarrow, 2005). There is no doubt that the EU provides a continual reason for grievances, and its initiatives are an opportunity for labour to demand a stronger social dimension. Even if the demonstrations in March 2005 and February 2006 targeted a single issue, they are part of a broader set of demands. In contrast to the sequence of development of typical protest movements, the structures and institutions did not emerge out of pre-existing protest, rather the action followed the existing institutional structures. This has also been predicted by Turner (1996), who saw developmental potential in the structures existing when he wrote. Whether participation in the demonstrations has an impact on the broadening of the identities and socialization of the movement is difficult to establish. Certainly, those who decided to come must have shared a certain degree of common identity.

Mobilization of GM Europe Workers

Another example of mobilization and event coalition involved a group of workers with specific interests. The European Works Council (EWC) at General Motors (GM) managed to mobilize European plants in simultaneous strikes against redundancies in 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006 and 2007. In terms of the definition of a transnational social movement specified previously, the protests addressed the employer in the first place, but the European public and European institutions were also its target. The organizers explicitly aimed at media attention and politicization of the restructuring problem as a European issue. Two of the protests were accompanied by the debates in the EP. There are established structures for action: the EWC (officially called a European Employee Forum) and other regular meetings of plant representatives.

In March 2000, GM group management decided to set up an alliance with the FIAT group, without notifying the EWC. The planned outsourcing would have affected around 14–15,000 workers from each group, GM and FIAT in Europe and Brazil. The works councils from both companies organized a Europe-wide campaign which forced management to negotiate. The EWC achieved the signing of a first European framework agreement, which guaranteed rights of representation and obliged management to consult over future decisions on investment and capacity. In December 2000, management notified plans to cut 6000 jobs in Europe and close the Vauxhall Vectra plant in Luton. British GM

employees called for solidarity action from the remaining locations during an extraordinary meeting of the EWC; but the majority insisted that a strike would not help the British workers resist the threat of redundancy. The representatives differed in their assessments but reached consensus on the course to be taken: they formulated a restructuring plan and decided on a European day of action. On 25 January 2001, when the EWC was negotiating with GM management in Zurich more than 40,000 employees from almost all European GM plants took part in strikes and demonstrations. The mobilization was a success, even though workers at the largest plant in Rüsselsheim might have gained a short-term advantage from the closure of the Luton plant. They recognized that the management tactic of coercive cost comparisons between plants would be to their disadvantage in the longer run. The mobilization was a success: the majority of workers stopped production for short time 'out of a natural solidarity for the British and other GM employees'. The action helped the EWC to reach an agreement with GM management, called the second European framework agreement, which alleviated the social costs of the redundancies in the UK (Herber and Schäfer-Klug, 2002).

Rumours of further planned job cuts brought workers to discuss the necessity of renewed joint action, and indeed plans for plant closures were announced on 2 September without prior consultation. The central element of the plan was that the new models of Opel and Saab, currently produced in the main German and Swedish plants (Rüsselsheim and Trollhättan), would be manufactured in a single factory while the other would close; plant representatives would have to make competing bids for economies in labour costs and work organization. On 16 September 2004, a joint letter was sent to GM management stating a readiness for plant representatives to share the job losses connected with restructuring instead of competing over which would close. On 1 October a meeting between heads of the German and Swedish trade unions and the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF) resulted in the 'Copenhagen declaration' which rejected any competition for survival between production locations. On 12 October, management announced plans to cut 20 percent of jobs in Europe. On the same day the EMF secretariat sent a letter to all affiliates denouncing the company's divide-and-rule strategy. On 14 October the trade union coordination group met for the second time and called a European day of action on 19 October, involving as a minimum a one-hour information meeting in every plant. The EP took up the GM case for debate on this day (Weinert, 2005). In the end, however, both plants offered concessions, but the German plant 'won' the contest.

Another international solidarity action was launched in June 2006 to oppose GM plans to close the Opel plant in Azambuja (Portugal), with the loss of 1200 jobs. A protest demonstration of 200 workers was held in Lisbon on 29 June, with the participation of trade unionists from Spain

and Germany, and accompanied by solidarity actions and speeches at all GM Europe plants. The action was suspended when management agreed to negotiate over the future of its plants in Europe (EMF, 2006). The EP debated industrial restructuring and the social responsibility of companies on the occasion of the planned closure. GM was charged with misusing EU structural funds by receiving subsidies without providing stable employment.

The management of differences among a company's workers in different countries is much more complicated than in the case of broader political campaigns. This situation is far more difficult because not an abstract question of general legislation, which will be filtered through national administrative practice, but the distribution of redundancies between plants. This places workers in direct competition with each other. Given that they come from such diverse backgrounds, in terms of the institutional character of industrial relations and the differences in wages, one could have expected them to pursue contradicting interests. However, they managed to frame management practice as playing off the workers of different nationalities and saw their interest in opposing this.

This cooperation was institutionalized under the auspices of the EMF in 2005, when unions and plant representatives from the UK, Belgium, Germany, Poland and Sweden – the countries affected by plans to create a new 'Delta' platform – established a Joint Delta Working Group and signed a solidarity pledge. This cooperation was intended to avoid workers from different plants being played off against each other when production of the new Astra model was determined (Bartmann and BlumGeenen, 2006). The cooperation, and the process of socialization this entailed, would probably not have developed to this extent but for continuous threats on the side of management. The existing institutional structures made it easier for workers to get to know each other, understand the tactics of management and identify their common interests. Some of the representatives had known each other for 10 years due to the meetings in the EWC, whose steering committee put much emphasis on the development of networking amongst the representatives. The emerging solidarity was demonstrated again in a European day of action on 3 May 2007, after GM announced that the Antwerp plant would be excluded from production of the new model; the action forced the company to revise its plans.

A comparison of two EWCs faced by a merger announcement supports my point about the positive effects of social interaction. Erne (2006) labels the contrasting strategies of the ABB-Alstom and Alcan-Pechiney-Algroup (APA) EWCs as 'Euro-democratic' and 'Euro-technocratic' respectively. His comparison demonstrates that factors such as competition for local production capacities or different cultural backgrounds do not hinder trade union cooperation. He points to the crucial difference

that the German and French unionists in ABB Alstom already knew each other socially, whereas the APA representatives did not (2006).

At GM, each successive dispute or action brought the workers together and strengthened their relationship, in turn developing into more institutionalization and socialization. The fact that the workers were striking in a coordinated way might have contributed to the formation of a shared identity. In each action, an information campaign was the minimum commitment. However, the obstacle for development into a movement might be the fact that contacts take place mainly between plant representatives rather than ordinary workers. Exceptionally, the coordinator of the Delta Group once visited the Polish plant at Gliwice and took part in a meeting with the rank and file, in an attempt to convince them to engage in the solidarity action. In the event, the Polish organizers applied the minimum level of action: information meetings and leaflets; but the workers were simultaneously exposed to the information strategy of local management, which blamed the international activities of the unions for their failure to win production of the new Meriva model. But though cooperation encounters difficulties, resulting from different national institutional contexts, the 'politics of small steps' shows results. This can be exemplified by the original reluctance of the Swedish representatives to organize strike action because of legal restrictions, but their subsequent commitment to call a four-hour strike. The sustainability of cooperation is enhanced by its flexible organization which takes account of national differences. This is how the management of differences is achieved. Another important aspect of institutionalization is the coordination of the work of workers' representatives in the plants and trade unions, allowing representatives to deploy resources they would otherwise lack.

The Prospects and Forms of a European Labour Protest Movement

I have described two examples which fit the definition of European (transnational) labour action. One targeted the EU services directive and resisted the proposals of the European Commission. The other aimed at increasing awareness of the threat of redundancies and its social costs for the workforce and the local communities. Both issues were framed as an EU-wide problem. My examples show that the obstacles inhibiting cooperation and durability of coalitions can be overcome in the context of transnational action among trade unions of various backgrounds. Whether they are an emerging labour protest movement is debatable. One could argue that evidence for this would be a common identity among the workers, but perhaps common action is a better measure?

When we accept the processual and relational definition of collective identity, as Melucci (1995) proposes, the condition of collective identity seems to be less crucial. He defines the collective action in which identity is constituted as follows: ‘collective action as the result of purposes, resources, and limits, as a purposive orientation constructed by means of social relationships within a system of opportunities and constraints. It therefore cannot be considered either the simple effect of structural preconditions or the expression of values and beliefs’. Collective identity is produced among the participants of action. They need to position themselves continuously in relation to the goals, means and environment of their action. Commitment is the result of achieving an integration of these elements (1995: 43–4). Therefore, engagement in collective action can be interpreted as a process of identity negotiation and evidence for its success.

The literature identifies two obstacles for establishing and maintaining a European labour protest movement. Integration from above makes it an elitist practice detached from the rank and file (Hyman, 2005). This can result in a lack of legitimacy for the common action, limiting the trade union leaders to an exchange of diplomatic gestures without fully engaging in the European political process. Even if it could be built up from below, as it is certainly not the case for trade union representation at EU level, the institutionalization of social movements can detach them from the grassroots as they adapt to conventional forms of action (Rucht, 1999). European labour interest representation seems to follow a different path, however. First, it emerged as an institutionalized interest group process but seems to take over features of a social movement. Maybe this different development logic constitutes a chance for the development of the movement. The established structures give opportunities for event coalitions to evolve into continuous cooperation and joint actions. Thus the robust institutionalization of trade unionism should not be seen as an obstacle of the further mobilization.

Earlier literature pointed to the attachment of trade unions to the national sphere, because they have established access to decision-making at this level. This has been considered an obstacle to genuine engagement at European level (Martin and Ross, 2001). Indeed, prospects for a collective bargaining at the European level are rather weak for the near future; but this does not preclude the possibility that unions will engage in contentious actions at European level. Also, the example of company-level interest representation indicates that there is not a simple trade-off, or even conflict, between the pursuit of nationally defined interests and engagement at European level (Kotthoff, 2006). Unions faced by ‘changing economic conditions’ need to seek political support; regardless of their ideological orientation or strength (Baccaro et al., 2003). This also implies a search for possibilities of political pressure at the European level.

The social movement approach gives some hints why the obstacles to transnational mobilization have at times been overcome, and hence why these do not have to be seen as inevitable obstacles. The repeated occurrence of grievances fostering the building of social movements (Tarrow, 2005) can be observed in both cases discussed earlier: they brought workers together on a regular basis and enabled collective learning. Whereas in the case of demonstrations organized by the ETUC and EIFs, the institutionalized information network seems to enhance mobilization, in the case of company-based mobilization, the socialization among the plant representatives might have played a greater role. Both cases can be considered in terms of management of difference: they demonstrated the capacity to realize a common interest despite differences. Still, the limits of engaging in the collective action have to be acknowledged. Whereas political economy approaches assess the interests of trade unions from the economic-institutional perspective, the social movement approach lets us see unions as learning organizations where interest formulation is flexible. This perspective enables a richer understanding of the trajectories of European trade unionism.

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