Chapter 1
Flexible adaptation between political, social and economic interests: the multi-faceted Europeanisation of German trade unions

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1. Views and issues

At the first congress of the Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB – German Trade Union Confederation) in the British zone of occupation in April 1947 in Bielefeld the economic policy expert Viktor Agartz assigned top priority to overcoming the hostility between France and Germany. Franco-German rapprochement, according to Agartz, ‘could be the nucleus and crystallisation point of a future new European order’. Two years later, at the DGB’s national founding congress in Munich, 12–14 October 1949, the delegates demanded that the German trade unions take a pro-European stance, with the motto ‘for a European economic community’.

Against the background of this view – and many similar position statements – in the post-war period a basically positive attitude towards European integration has generally been attributed to the German trade unions. While the French trade unions are associated with a strong willingness to strike and the British and most Scandinavian trade unions with latent Euroscepticism (Schulten 2005: 20), the German trade unions are usually characterised by – besides organisational unity, free collective bargaining, works constitutions and codetermination – a basically Europe-friendly position. Sometimes they are considered to have played a ‘pioneering role’ (Jacobi 1991) in the development of Europe’s transnational social dimension. Although such views and assessments are widespread, it cannot be ignored

that the German trade unions’ European policy in the post-war period is coherent only up to a point: the German trade unions do not represent a monolithic unity nor do their stances on Europe since 1945, characterised by numerous ruptures, strategic shifts and changing national and European conditions, represent a clear or even linear trend.

In light of these initial observations this contribution aims, at the same time, to provide a summary and differentiated analysis of the relationship between the German trade unions and European integration since the end of the Second World War. In order to achieve this, both knowledge about the substantive and programmatic reactions to the idea of European integration in the DGB and individual trade unions, as well as the structural and organisational adaptations of trade union policy on Europe in the past 60 years will be examined. We have a twofold objective: to demonstrate not only the basic European policy models and goals, but also European policy realities in individual historical periods in order, ultimately, to account for the Europeanisation of the German trade unions in a broader sense.

We shall pay particular attention in this context to the dimensions of change. With regard to the issues dealt with here we shall examine especially the significance of the founding of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) in 1973 (Dølvik 1999) for the activities of the German trade unions at the European level and the alternative strands of interaction that have been pursued in the past 40 years. Of particular interest in this regard are the different forms of cooperation, structures and models of trade union federations in their historical genesis, as well as the resulting formation, fusion and differentiation processes. We shall also look briefly at bi- or multilateral transnational trade union contacts.

The European integration process is extremely complex, going on in various segments in EU states and in individual policy fields, with different levels of intensity and at different rates. It is largely agreed that political integration to date has not led to the formation of a European (labour) society because every state has continued to pursue its own social policy. Against this background and based on observations from a political-science perspective on changing statehood in Europe (Ziltener 1999; Wessels 2000) the present chapter is also intended to help answer the question of how far trade unions as key actors in communities organised as states have changed their organisational structures and forms of action in the face of the challenges of European integration. The main intention is thus to look at the specific role – but also the adjustment and development processes – of German trade unions in Europe’s multi-level system. Particular attention will be paid to the interaction of the national and European levels and we shall examine whether the vertical ‘linking’ of state competences finds a correlate in the adjustment processes of trade unions between national and European level. What we are really interested in thus finds expression in the question of how far the German trade unions have ‘opened up’ and have turned their attention to policymaking in Brussels and Strasbourg in order to be able to participate actively in the European political cycle. Or have the German trade unions thus far shied away from such opening up? Should they even be characterised, as the literature has tended to do, as ‘laggards’ reacting hesitantly and defensively to the changes in European integration (Niethammer 1977)? Or do the trade unions rather stand for a ‘Europeanisation of employment relations’ (Hoffmann 2011: 131)? Ultimately, these considerations also take account of the issue of how far European integration has led to a transnationalisation of trade union interest representation.

To put the Europe-related activities of the German trade unions into perspective we need at least an outline of the German trade union system. This outline is accompanied by an overview of the current state of research in the following section. This is followed by a
detailed look at particular phases of the German trade unions’ European policy activities, in which both the DGB and individual trade unions are considered. In the summary we attempt, taking an analytical perspective, to take stock of both fundamental trends and processes of differentiation with regard to German trade unions.

2. Background and present state of research

The German trade union system is based on five basic principles. The first principle is the dual structure of labour interest intermediation based on segregation between employee representation at sectoral level by trade unions and at plant level by works councils and shop-floor representatives. The two structures differ in their legal basics, stakeholders and issues. They are, on one hand, framed by the Collective Agreement Act, which allows free collective bargaining between unions and employer organisations at the sectoral level, including the right to strike or lock out. On the other hand they are framed by the Works Constitution Act, which regulates interest representation by work councils at plant level, where strikes are strictly forbidden in order to keep the peace between management and workforce.

According to this, collective bargaining on wages or working time, as well as single plant bargaining agreements on pay or overtime are also separated. Both levels are strictly limited by strong legal regulation and institutionalisation, which is deemed to be the second principle, bestowing continuity. Hence, instruments for applying pressure during industrial conflicts – for instance, strikes or lockouts – are highly regulated, while ‘illegal’ or ‘wildcat’ strikes are forbidden.

The third principle is the comprehensive interest representation of the entire workforce. Collective agreements on wages, for example, are an enforceable right for all employees in the sector and not only for trade union members. Trade unions and their peak organisations therefore are aiming at a monopoly on representation.

As a fourth principle, German trade unions and work councils act as intermediate organisations in industrial conflicts between labour and capital. Works councils, for example, ‘must explicitly consider the companies’ economic goals’ in their rules of procedure. Even during hostile disputes trade unions must avoid that the economy or social peace be harmed due to their role as mediators between labour and capital, taking neither an ideological nor a political approach.²

The fifth and final principle of the German labour relations system is the centralised organisation of trade unions and employer organisations at peak and sectoral level, allowing centralised collective bargaining and binding agreements. The relationship between the DGB and its affiliated industry trade unions is characterised by both coordination and independency – also at European level. While the DGB represents Germany’s trade unions in the ETUC based on mutual understanding with the unions at sectoral level the industry trade unions and other organisations have established their own representations and channels of influence.

² The German trade unions regularly publish so-called ‘election touchstones’ (Wahlprüfsteine) in the run up to elections to compare party manifestos of the German political parties relative to their own interests and policies but they officially do not prefer a particular party.
Although the history of German trade unions in general has been well researched from both a historical (Schönhoen 1987; Schneider 2000) and a social science (Armingeon 1987; Schröder/Wessels 2003; Müller-Jentsch 2011) perspective, work on the role of German trade unions within the framework of European integration – apart from some initial surveys – remains in its infancy. Different from studies on other countries only a few general presentations are available (Hoffmann 2001; Fetzer 2005; Mittag 2009) that look at the topic systematically. Three relatively distinct periods of research on the relationship between German trade unions and European integration characterise research development to date: the first period is marked by a strong concentration on the national level. US political scientist Ernst B. Haas’s neofunctionalist reference work The Uniting of Europe (Haas 1958: 214–239) went into considerable detail on national trade unions. This can be traced not least to the fact that the first studies on the significance of social policy for European integration appeared as early as the mid-1950s (Hampel 1955; Schierwater 1968). Most works on the issue were written by trade unionists, such as Ludwig Rosenberg (1973: 223–289) and Heinz Potthoff (1964 and 1973).

A second phase of integration-related trade union research began in the early 1970s, but from then on considerable attention was paid to the European level. Major impulses for this were provided by the deepening of the European (Economic) Community. After the heads of state and government, at the Paris summit in October 1972, emphasised the goal of a ‘European social union’ and the European Commission in January 1974 presented an extensive list of measures in the form of the ‘social policy action programme’, which also aimed at involving the social partners in this process, now academic scholars, in addition to trade unionists, increasingly turned their attention to the European level. Apart from analysing models and the positions of trade union officials (Elsner 1974) the first more extensive source studies appeared (Köpper 1982). Horst Thum (1982) and Gloria Müller (1991) have documented that social policy arguments and issues concerning codetermination have always played a key role from a German perspective. The research work carried out during this period consistently represented the thesis that German trade unions had reacted merely defensively to Europe’s political and economic integration in their transnational activities. The thesis of ‘defensive integration’ was substantiated especially by Lutz Niethammer (1977), who expounded a developmental history perspective on the German trade unions, focusing on the ETUC. Consequently, for a number of years the ETUC was at the centre of integration-related trade union research (Ruhwedel 1976; Oesterfeld/Olle 1978). In addition to this the first studies (Stöckl 1986) appeared on the European industrial union federations and the sectoral craft union federations at the European level, such as the Europäische Gewerkschaftsföderation für den Landwirtschafts-, Nahrungsmittel- und Tourismussektor (EFFAT), covered more recently by Rainer Fattmann (2008).

The adoption of the Single Market within the framework of the Single European Act, which came into force in 1987, ushered in a third research phase. This phase – which is still ongoing – is characterised by greater attention to the interweaving of the national and European levels, as well as a more comparative orientation. Exemplifying this approach are a number of collective volumes on industrial and work structures in the European Single Market (Siebert 1989; Steinikühler 1989; Deppe and Weiner 1991; Grebing and Wobbe 1993). In contrast, genuinely historical approaches are marginal, concentrating especially on the initial phase of European integration (Volkmann 1996; Bührer 2004; Lauschke and Mittag 2011). With the advent of monetary union and eastern enlargement the European integration process took on a new dimension in the 1990s. The (western) European trade
unions, which were already on the back foot, if not in crisis at this point, were confronted by a new environment for their activities, which led to the emergence of new frames of reference (Bieler 2006). Accordingly, trade union research in the past two decades has focused on stocktaking of recent developments, as well as the analysis of crisis phenomena (Bobke 1994; Leisink et al. 1996; Foster and Scott 2003; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). Increasingly, the focus is not so much on trade unions as on industrial relations in the process of globalisation and European integration (Rüb and Müller 2013). An exception is the publication in 1998 on 25 years of the ETUC (Hoffmann and Gabaglio 1998).

Over the past decade scholarship has been dominated by country studies (Kendall 1975; Lecher 1981; Däubler and Lecher 1991; Mückenberger, Schmidt and Zoll 1996; Silvia 1999). Also increasingly important is work on the strategies of the ETUC and the European branch federations in pursuit of trade union interests, on macroeconomic regulation and on collective bargaining (Sörries 1999; Hein et al. 2004). These comparative works, concerned mainly with the national sphere – although with partial reference to European integration – have been complemented by studies on Europe as a borderless territory and look at whether and to what extent trade union policy also acts ‘without borders’ or beyond borders (Platzer 1991; Guinand 1997).

Characteristic of research work since the end of the twentieth century is an increasing orientation towards the notion of the Europeanisation of national trade unions (Dürmeier and Grundheber-Pilgram 1996; Groux, Mouriaux and Pernot 1998; Weinert 2001; Gollbach 2005; Platzer 2010). Political science research in particular has used the term ‘Europeanisation’ to describe the changes and adaptation processes triggered in national political systems and actors by European integration. In this connection research has focused not only on programmatic ideas and models, but also on the effects of European integration on trade unions’ operational structures (Busch 1996; Deppe 2001 and 2005). In this context, with the more recent studies by Suzuki (2007) and Bühlbäcker (2007) more detailed, source-based historical work has been done on German trade unions, especially the DGB. This has been complemented by further source-based work by Buschak (2014). However, more sources need to be investigated if the past two decades of Europeanisation are to be examined on a scholarly basis. Besides written sources contemporary witnesses must also be considered. To this end we conducted interviews with Willy Buschak and Reiner Hoffmann (Buschak 2013 and Hoffmann 2013) for this contribution.3

Overall, much more recent political science work is dominated by the view that the trade unions in general – given the changes occurring in the political systems and actors that make up their environment – have so far reacted only half-heartedly or at least tardily to the challenges posed by the European integration process (Wessels, Maurer and Mittag 2001). A whole series of more recent trade union research studies have modified this view, however, and have identified a stronger Europeanisation of national trade unions – including Germany – within the framework of industrial relations into a ‘moving target’ (Kowalsky and Scherrer 2011).

3. In 1991 Willy Buschak moved to the ETUC, for which he was active in Brussels for 12 years in various functions and areas of responsibility. Reiner Hoffmann was director of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) from October 1994 to May 2003, and then deputy general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) until December 2009.
3. **Lines of development of German trade unions’ European policy**

3.1. **Up to the end of the Second World War: rhetorical claims and transnational cooperation**

The call for the transnational and global political unity of trade unions was crucial for the self-consciousness of the incipient labour movements, but remained utopian. Before cooperation might be possible among the proletariat beyond national borders – and on this Europe’s evolving labour movements were agreed – another goal had to be envisaged: overcoming capitalism in individual nation-states (Dowe and Klotzbach 2004). Despite basic agreement on this order of priorities the emergent trade unions, in response to similar challenges, were considering how to promote cooperation beyond national borders as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Research shows that the unification of Europe was an issue in both the German trade union press and at congresses (Buschak 2009), especially after the end of the First World War. Thus in July 1926 Engelbert Graf in *The Metalworker* called for Europe’s political consolidation in order to rationalise its economy. The Deutsche Verkehrs bund called in October 1926 for the formation of an economically and politically united Europe. And at the congress of the International Transport Workers Federation in Hamburg in 1924 not only were there debates on European unification, but the member organisations were exhorted to commit themselves to tackling ‘the problem of establishing a united states of Europe’ in order to ensure peace in Europe. Trade union debates on Europe in Germany during this period can be derived above all from the problem of reorganising the European economy after the First World War. The (economic) unification of Europe in this context was considered a key option among the German trade unions, too, in order to hold one’s own against the booming US economy.

Bringing this plan to fruition proved to be more difficult than had been thought. Resolutions of this kind rarely went beyond rhetorical proclamations. Joint action on the part of individual national trade unions was also rare. A typical example of how rhetoric and practical policies diverged was the British miners’ strike in 1926 and the general strike that followed it. Although the British Trades Union Congress called on its German fellow workers for solidarity it made no arrangements for coordination with the ITUC or the ITF. The two actions – the British general strike and international solidarity with it – ran parallel with one another to a considerable extent. The marked scepticism of the German trade unions with regard to efforts to deepen European cooperation was revealed when, at the end of 1926, the ADGB (Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund), the ‘forerunner’ of the DGB, rejected joining the Pan-European Union initiated by the Austrian European pioneer Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi.

Transnational interactions established by trade unions before 1945 primarily concerned general political issues. Activities were often characterised by a personal preference for the partner country or relevant language skills. Trips abroad also represent a key expression of transnational trade union contact; often private interests and trade union activities were linked. Direct individual contacts are thus a constitutive element of bilateral interaction during the interwar period and direct personal communication between officials. An
example of this was the regular summer schools held by the International Trade Union Confederation in the 1920s. Several dozen trade unionists from Britain, the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Spain and Germany took part in, for instance, the summer school held in Brussels, 18–31 July 1926. According to the sources, the German participants travelled at their own expense during their holidays and struggled with language difficulties due to the multinational composition of the course.

The more extensive mobilisation activities of the interwar period included high-profile mass gatherings. In this respect Franco-German activities and relations between the German trade unions and the Benelux states were particularly significant. For example, it is notable that on 26 and 27 July 1930 there was an ‘International country meeting of free trade unions from Germany, Holland and Belgium in Aachen, which the trade unions described as an “international festival of 100,000 people (...) for peace and understanding among nations”’. On a somewhat smaller scale two years later was the meeting of 4,000 German, 5,000 Dutch and 10,000 Belgian trade unionists on 2 August 1932 in Liege to demonstrate against war and armament in Europe.

3.2. The 1950s and 1960s: high expectations and constraints

The first trade union organisations were refounded in the Soviet occupied zone within the Free German Trade Unions Federation (FDGB), followed by the western zones and growing from plant to regional level. From 1949 nationwide peak organisations were established with the German Trade Unions Federation (DGB), consisting of 16 branch-related unions, followed by the occupational German Salaried Employees Union (DAG) and the German Civil Service Federation (DBB). Furthermore, a Christian Trade Union Federation (CGB) with somewhat less influence was founded. Organisational density grew rapidly, reaching 36 per cent in 1950. In general, this initial phase of trade union formation was fundamental for a system of pluralistic, non-partisan and sector-wide, mainly industry-related ‘unity unions’.

While during the resistance to the Nazi regime and in the immediate post-war period there was little enthusiasm for European policy among the German trade unions, from 1947 onwards commitment to and appeals for unification of the European continent grew stronger. In the course of this development the German trade unions advocated, among other things, the Marshall Plan and got involved in the re-established Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC). The DGB – despite considerable criticism in its own ranks – even assented to the Occupying Powers’ Ruhr Statute in November 1949. Underlying these positions was the conviction that trade union achievements could be fully ensured only if the danger of new wars or economic crises could be banished, to which the integration of Europe could make a substantial contribution.

The German trade unions initially greeted the Schuman Plan with caution. The trade unions took a positive view especially of its peace-policy goals. They also welcomed the fact that Robert Schuman’s declaration promised to improve the desolate economic and social situation in Europe and to help to raise workers’ living standards. The ‘planificatory’

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6. The FDGB later evolved to become a political and organisational extension of the Socialist Party of the GDR (German Democratic Republic).
7. Due to mergers and the foundation of ver.di the DGB now comprises eight unions.
8. The DAG was affiliated to the DGB at first but established its own structure in 1950.
aspect of the Schuman Plan was even more congenial to the trade unions as proponents of central economic planning. In the course of negotiations enthusiasm for the Schuman Plan among the German trade unions cooled significantly. This was not least because Germany was not treated as an equal partner in the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the Ruhr was given a raw deal. Many of these objections were dispelled, however, so that in the end the German trade unions welcomed the establishment of the ECSC. To ensure trade union influence over ECSC decision-making the DGB insisted on the establishment of a trade union interest representative in the High Authority, which Jean Monnet initially rejected, before coming round to the idea. With Paul Finet as ICFTU representative and Heinz Potthoff as representative of the DGB there were two trade unionists at the top table of the European Coal and Steel Community.

The DGB also pursued a fundamentally pro-European policy after its establishment at national level in October 1949 in Munich. Institutionally, the stronger orientation towards international developments was reflected within the DGB, among other things in the establishment in February 1950 of a new department dealing with foreign matters (Department II ‘Ausland’), headed by Ludwig Rosenberg. Under the aegis of the latter, who became chairman of the DGB in 1962, the trade union umbrella organisation expressly committed itself to a united Europe that would break with national egoism in order to prevent a reversion to nationalism, militarism and war. A number of special studies of German trade unions’ attitudes to European policy in the 1950s and 1960s (Suzuki 2007; Bühlbäcker 2007) have established that the DGB was strongly committed to Europe, which can be traced to, among other things, the important role played by the free trade unions – which had no historical skeletons in the cupboard – in the very special conditions of post-war West Germany and its limited sovereignty with regard to international recognition and attaining equal rights. At the same time, information obtained as a result of cooperation at European level was used by the DGB for political ends, also in the national arena.

In this context we must not neglect the fact that, besides the DGB, the individual industry trade unions also adopted positions on European policy. The powerful IG Metall was dominated by considerable concerns that the ECSC would undermine codetermination (in coal and steel), restore previous social relations and promote French primacy in coal and steel. The debates within IG Metall thus had not only a fundamentally more political character but also a more sceptical attitude than those of the DGB or IG Bergbau. European unification, according to IG Metall, had to be accomplished in accordance with the principles of economic democracy. IG Metall embedded its list of demands more strongly in the European context than the DGB and IG Bergbau. It saw an opportunity to organise the emerging European Community in terms of trade union demands for a new economic order, in respect of which IG Metall presented itself as vanguard and pioneer of comprehensive codetermination. Only after it became clear that the Schuman Plan had strong support also from the trade union side did IG Metall change its stance; all the more so when the economic benefits of the Coal and Steel Community became evident. In a spirit of ‘catch-up Europeanisation’ (Jojević 2009: 103) IG Metall sought to become increasingly active in European policy, albeit in the face of ‘a complex constellation of forces’ (Lauschke 2009: 102). IG Metall responded with a multi-layered strategy which led, over the long term, to a basic stance on European policy. Branch-specific transnational trade union cooperation at the European level was mirrored by a trans-sectoral approach at the national level.
The negotiations on the Treaty of Rome, as in the case of the EEC Treaty, marked a first major turning point for the German trade unions. Trade union influence on the treaty negotiations on the European Economic Community was much less than in the case of the ECSC. The German trade unions even saw the development of the EEC Treaty as a ‘victory for reactionary interests’ (Osterkamp 1951: 423; Barnouin 1986: 7) and regarded it as a failure (Elsner: 40). In reaction to the founding of the European communities the European Trade Union Secretariat (ETUS) was founded in Düsseldorf in 1958 under German leadership, in which only the signatory member states were represented. The ETUS was thus not a supranational trade union body, as the Force Ouvrière (FO, Frankreich) and the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL) had demanded. The ETUS was merely a coordination body, with which the fragmentation of free trade unions in Europe was brought to an end in four areas, along with the multi-sectoral European Regional Organisation (ERO) in the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the ‘Coal and Steel Committee’ that emerged from the ‘Committee of 21’ and the committees of the craft unions. From 1958 to 1969, when the European Confederation of Free Trade unions (ECFTU) was founded, this was how the European trade union movement was structured.

The German trade unions were closely involved in the establishment of sectoral committees, which emerged mainly as offshoots of the International Trade Secretariats. For example, IG Metall financially supported the establishment and maintenance of corresponding structures (Henning 2013), while IG Chemie, Papier, Keramik carried out the European coordination of chemical and factory workers – up to 1988 – from its headquarters in Hanover (Rumpf 2001). The sectoral structures that emerged in many branches during this period – which initially represented little more than loose associations and communication networks without a unified programme and representative structures – can be regarded within this framework as cross-border information and communication structures (Platzer/ Müller 2009).

The codetermination options of German trade unions were narrowed by the fact that, in accordance with the Treaty of Rome, the Council of Ministers remained largely outside parliamentary control as key decision-making body, the European Commission obtained a monopolistic right of initiative with regard to Council resolutions, the ‘Luxembourg compromise’ nailed down the principle of unanimity and the European Parliament suffered from a chronic lack of competences. As a result, transparent democratic structures that would enable the trade unions’ influence to grow were in short supply. Instead, the trade unions had to fend off the gradual depletion of their institutionally guaranteed options for intervention. One consequence was that, with regard to European policy matters, the German trade unions developed into one of the staunchest advocates of comprehensive democratisation of European bodies. A matter of particular concern was expansion of the competences of the Economic and Financial Committee (EFC), which, in keeping with the DGB’s ideas about macroeconomic codetermination, should have been beefed up into an economic and social council at the European level.

In the 1960s the German trade unions made skilful use of their remaining options for exerting influence, as Stefan Remeke (2009) has researched in relation to social policy in general and youth employment provisions in particular. Personal contacts offered possibilities for informal influence, but even more so the preparatory consultative committees in the Commission’s directorates-general, which could be established with three members, but also on a parity basis. Characteristic of this period was the ongoing demand for a more active social-policy accompaniment to economic integration. This position became stronger
in the DGB in the course of the 1960s and in the early 1970s, peaking in 1972 at the DGB national conference in Berlin in the demand for a ‘social rule of law on a European basis’ and a comprehensive social-policy programme for the European Community.\(^9\)

3.3. The 1970s and 1980s: differentiation and new approaches

In the early 1970s a period of heightened European policy activity can be identified on the part of the German trade unions, accompanied by new adjustment strategies, in both personnel and organisational/programmatic terms. Appointments played a particularly important role. One might mention Wilhelm Haferkamp, who was delegated to the European Commission as DGB representative in 1967, remaining there for 17 years in various positions; Heinz Oskar Vetter, who succeeded Dutchman André Kloos as president of ECFTU in 1970 and was elected president of the ETUC in 1974, seeing it as his task to convince the German trade unions of the necessity of the European project in the teeth of resistance from individual trade unions (Vetter 1983); Alois Pfeiffer, member of the DGB national executive, who in 1985 became a member of the European Commission as successor to Haferkamp; and Ernst Breit, who as DGB chairman 1985-1991 was also chair of the ETUC.

From an organisational standpoint, with the founding of a separate department for ‘European integration’ in 1972, the DGB indicated the importance and weight that this policy area now had (Mittag and Zellin 2009). At the same time, the DGB actively participated in the debates on the reorganisation of trade union work at the European level, with a view to overcoming the organisational fragmentation of the European trade union movement. The founding of the European Trade Union Confederation in 1973 was a key event at the European level. The ETUC was the result of a controversial discussion process, involving numerous setbacks, on the relevant organisational arrangements and substantive issues. The act of founding was ultimately a compromise, negotiated mainly between the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the DGB, the two strongest organisations in terms of membership. The decisive cleavage ran between the supporters of a ‘small solution’, led by the DGB,\(^10\) and those of a ‘big solution’, led by the British TUC and the Scandinavian organisations. The ‘small solution’ emphasised the necessary concentration on more effective and consistent interest representation in Brussels. ETUC membership was, accordingly, to be reserved for the relevant organisations from EEC member states. The ‘big solution’, by contrast, demanded that the emphasis should be on coordination of trade union activities in relation to multinational companies (Dølvik 1999: 55, 74; Gläser 2009).

At least the national executive of the DGB was aware, in the run-up to the founding of the ETUC, that the desire for an organisation limited to EEC members represented a somewhat isolated position.\(^11\) The willingness to compromise in relation to the proposals of the TUC and trade unions from other countries involved in the discussion process – which


\(^10\) For more detail on the positions taken in the negotiations by the DGB see the minutes of the meetings of the ECFTU executive committee, ETUC Archive, files 505–522.

ultimately, after more than once threatening to collapse, led to the abovementioned compromise – gives some indication of the high priority that the DGB accorded to a European umbrella organisation at this point. The marked differences between the trade unions involved with regard to substance, ideology and organisation were reproduced in the ETUC after its founding. The German trade unions’ formal options for exerting influence at the European level thus remained limited. A lack of institutional possibilities in this regard within the framework of EEC structures and inefficient as well as heterogeneous sectoral and multisectoral union bodies made it difficult for the German trade unions to assert their interests. The outcome of internal trade union discussions during this period thus comprised mainly general decision-making, with little by way of direct pressure for action.

The increasingly important role of economic policy in the transition from the EEC to the European Community meant that in the 1970s the DGB put European policy on the backburner. The idea was to counter the Single Market with an organised European social policy. Once it became apparent that this aim could be achieved, if at all, only with major concessions the DGB was more inclined to devote itself to trade union work at national level, thus influencing the European level. All the more so because although the German trade unions had suffered a number of setbacks with the Bundestag decisions on the Works Constitution Act and the Employee Representation Act, economic developments, the relatively high trade union density in Germany and the viability of industrial action meant that they were in a position to achieve substantive goals, such as wage rises, cuts in working hours and longer holidays, as well as improvements on such issues as working conditions.

It can therefore be concluded that European social policy in the 1970s was understood essentially as complementing German social policy. This is indicated by the fact that the DGB – despite occasional rhetorical assertions to the contrary – always opposed a supranational European labour administration and a transfer of competences. The DGB wanted to see national social policy standards safeguarded and, in this framework, the maintenance of the subsidiarity principle. This can be attributed not least to the fact that the Community member states are characterised by very different circumstances and also differ fundamentally with regard to their welfare states. As a result, although the German trade unions expressly supported European market integration, because they hoped to see benefits for the export-oriented German economy, they were sceptical concerning such ideas as a European redistribution policy or a European social fund, fearing that they would undermine the national welfare state. The DGB took the view that Community social policy should be only complementary and coordinative with regard to national social policies and, above all, that there should be no transfers of competences or resources from the national to the Community level (Fetzer 2005: 304).

Thus, for example, Ursula Engelen Kefer, then responsible for international social policy at the DGB national executive, in a letter to the European Commission’s DG V for Social Affairs, stressed that an extension of the authority of the European social fund with regard to combating unemployment would make sense, from a trade union standpoint, only as a flanking measure in relation to national efforts of employment policy coordination. Along these lines the DGB understood European social policy primarily as advisory in character, resisting any suggestion that recommendations should be converted into binding directives.

Another problem facing the German trade unions’ European policy arose from the sometimes diverging standpoints of individual trade unions in relation to the peak organisation. Thus an attempt by the DGB to create a legal framework for branch collective
bargaining at European level was rejected by IG Metall, which regarded collective bargain-
ing as the sole competence of branch organisations and would not tolerate any interference. After this view had come to prevail also in the DGB proposals along those lines in European bodies regularly came under criticism from the German trade unions which, although in favour of the gradual harmonisation of law on collective agreements and collective bargain-
ing in the European Community, were unwilling to limit trade unions’ free collective bar-
gaining in the member states. However, looking at recent court cases such as Laval, Viking and Luxemburg, many trade unions inside the ETUC reject such European interference in collective bargaining.

In the early 1980s a different European policy stance emerged, driven by a credibility crisis facing German trade unions, triggered by scandals and mismanagement (Schneider 2000: 368f). The increased pressure to adapt at national level but also new opportunities for interest mediation at the European level contributed to a re-orientation of the German trade unions. This involved a renewed commitment to European policy and pursuit henceforth of an effective multilevel strategy. Thus after the publication of the White Book on completion of the Single Market in 1985 and the adoption of the Single European Act in 1986 the trade unions urged a greater social policy commitment on the part of the European Community, especially the Council and the Commission. The trade unions’ multi-level involvement was reflected above all in proposals on common social policy that were put on the table again. At European level the DGB strongly backed the establishment of the European Trade Union Institute in February 1978 in order to deepen access to information and academic research. At national level the DGB influenced the position of the German Council presidency in this respect, got involved in the formulation of a social action programme and a European Com-
munity Charter of Fundamental Social Rights within the framework of the ETUC and urged the Commission to implement them.

3.4. Since the 1990s: struggling and coping with the new challenges

In parallel with the deepening of the European integration process with the Single European Act (1987) and the treaties of Maastricht (1993), Amsterdam (1999) and Nice (2003), in the early 1990s the collapse of the GDR and German unification posed the German trade unions new challenges at the national level (Waddington and Hoffmann 2005; Müller-Jentsch 2009). The establishment of an economic, currency and social union within Germany led to changes in organisational structure and collective bargaining, accompanied primarily by economic challenges for both the old and the new Länder, which the trade unions had to cope with. European integration and national unification posed the German trade unions two key problems simultaneously, which could be linked only to a limited extent. Needless to say, the trade union leadership and international departments continued to deal with Eu-
ropean matters. Experts delegated to European bodies and institutions went on with their work, but trade union attention was directed primarily towards eastern Germany in the 1990s. ‘One was’, according to Reiner Hoffmann, ‘concerned much more (...) with coping with the challenge of German unity from 1989 to the mid-1990s. Europe receded a little (...) and only came to the fore once again with the project of monetary union’ (Hoffmann 2013).

After the decision on national economic, currency and social union the eastern Ger-
man trade unions were left with ‘Hobson’s choice’, namely merging with their western Ger-
man counterparts. Organisational unification led to a membership explosion, boosting the
DGB’s ranks from just below 8 million in 1990 to 11.8 million in 1991. In the following years, however, membership declined continuously, at first mainly due to eastern German de-industrialisation. Later on the fall in membership spilled over to western parts of Germany. Already at the end of the 1990s the DGB’s membership had returned to where it stood before unification (Ebbinghaus, Arminger and Hassel 2000: 295–299). In 2011 the DGB counted altogether 6.15 million members including 2.24 million members of IG Metall, 2.07 million members of Ver.di and 0.67 million members of IG BCE.  

The changes in primary law proceeding almost parallel with this at European level were considerable at this time: with the inclusion of Art. 118b in the EC Treaty by the Single European Act in 1987 the promotion of social dialogue became an official task of the Commission: ‘The Commission shall endeavour to develop the dialogue between management and labour at European level which could, if the two sides consider it desirable, lead to relations based on agreement.’ This obligation was reinforced by the Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights of 1989, the Maastricht Social Protocol and the revised EC Treaty adopted in Amsterdam in 1997. A key novelty was Art. 139 EC Treaty which provides that ‘should management and labour so desire, the dialogue between them at the Community level may lead to contractual relations, including agreements’ (Kowalsky 1999: 383ff).

If one examines the conference minutes, annual reports and position papers of the DGB and its individual trade unions during the 1990s it becomes clear that although the issue of Europe was dutifully addressed it was side-lined in favour of current issues and the social problems arising from German unification. Exceptions included the completion of the European Single Market and eastern enlargement, both of which gave rise to fears of social dumping, reflected in an upsurge in motions at trade union conferences during this decade. The fact that the social acquis was established on a weaker basis than the economic union was an object of constant criticism and calls for improvement. Against this background, although the DGB and its member trade unions generally advocated the development of European integration, in the 1990s they warned that a united Europe risked becoming an elite project, not fully democratic, and urged further development of social policy. Typical DGB assertions to this end include: ‘The German Trade Union Confederation’s approval of economic and monetary union remains dependent on how it is organised and implemented’ and called on the German government to ensure that ‘employment policy and employment goals (...) are enshrined in the Treaty’ and that ‘the fundamental right to cross-border freedom of association and the social protocol (...) are components of the Treaty’.  

Also illustrative is the wording of a DGB position paper of 2000: ‘Europe’s economic and political integration has made great strides since the end of the 1980s. The Single Market and the common currency must now be complemented with a common economic policy and the creation of a European social area with full employment, equal opportunities and fundamental social rights.’

At the beginning of the new century the DGB together with the ETUC focused on two major challenges: the first was the strong support for the work of the European Convention that drafted the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Against the backdrop of earlier claims for a codification of social rights the DGB edited during the work of the Convention

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12. Author’s calculation based on DGB statistics.
a special newsletter to inform interested circles. Later, the DGB campaigned in favour of a European Constitution. After the rejection of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe the DGB supported a position threatening that trade unions would campaign against the revised EU if the Charter were not made legally binding. The defeat of the ‘country of origin’-principle laid down in the so-called ‘Bolkestein directive’ (Services directive) – again in strong alliance with the ETUC – was another field of activity. The DGB invested heavily in this campaign, which led to a European campaign with several demonstrations.

A number of parallel strategies can be discerned on the part of the German trade unions since the 1990s. Given its limited resources the DGB has opted for both representation in the ETUC and establishing its own advocacy at the European level as counterpart (Buschak 2013). This strategy follows two main aims: one is centralised negotiations within the social dialogue and its development, although the German unions were quite clear that there was hardly any chance for collective wage bargaining and other core policies if the employers were unwilling. The other aim was to coordinate free collective bargaining and information exchange within the sectoral trade union federations but also regional cooperation in border regions. German trade unions have played a decisive role in establishing cross-border coordination networks, designing approaches and coordination rules for the different European industry federations and the ETUC.

Another area in which the German trade unions have been active within the framework of their Europeanisation strategy is personnel policy: in the persons of Willy Buschak and Reiner Hoffmann – but also others – from the early 1990s two younger trade unionists, with a sound academic background and well versed in other languages, took office at the ETUC and the ETUI and for more than a decade drove both substantive work and academic documentation and analysis. The ETUI during this period took on the role – in substantial cooperation with the German trade unions – of a ‘policy advisor’ in relation to the European Trade Union Confederation, which adopted resolutions based on the preparatory work of the ETUI. With regard to substantive work, the ‘EWC directive’ on European works councils, in pursuit of the goal of ‘transnational codetermination’, was particularly important (Hertwig, Pries and Rampelshammer 2009; Hauser-Ditz, Hertwig, Pries and Rampeltshammer 2010).

From the standpoint of the ETUC and the ETUI the most important contacts with regard to German workers were the DGB and the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung; at the same time, however, efforts were made with the most important individual trade unions – for example, IG Metall, Ver.di (public services), IG Bergbau Chemie Energie [Mining, Chemicals, Energy] (IG BCE), IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt [Construction, Agriculture, Environment] (IG BAU) and their precursors, as well as with the Deutsche Angestellten-Gewerkschaft [Salaried Employees’ Union] (DAG) – to maintain regular contact (Buschak 2013; Hoffmann 2013). On the German side, attention to Brussels increased constantly during this period. Thus Reiner Hoffmann, for example, as head of research promotion at the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung up to the end of the 1980s, began to organise seminars for students in Brussels, initially for those with Hans-Böckler-Stiftung scholarships. But joint events with trade unions from the Netherlands and Italy, at which labour market policies were addressed from a German perspective in discussion groups from other countries, became increasingly important (Hoffmann 2013). The major issues of this period, besides the EWC Directive, included the Directive on a general framework for information and consultation of employees, the amendment of the merger regulation, as well as new forms of labour organisation (subcontracting, divesting companies), the Takeover directive and the interrelationship between environmental protection and labour market policy (Buschak 2013).
Within the DGB the ‘Europe working group’, in which individual trade unions cooperated, acquired a certain coordinative function, preparing activities and even working out positions on the legislative initiatives of the European Commission (Hoffmann 2013). Besides the meetings of the Europe working group coordinated by the international department within the DGB administration, gatherings of the EU representatives of individual trade unions and meetings of individual working groups – for example, the ‘European Single Market’ working group – played an important role with regard to trade unions’ European policy.

Reiner Hoffmann, who was elected deputy general secretary of the ETUC on the proposal of the DGB at the ETUC conference in Prague in May 2003, and re-elected at the conference in Seville in May 2007, describes the growing confidence of these years as follows:

The German trade unions and many other trade unions in Europe were always very pro-European, much more pro-European than many political parties, including the SPD, so that we were already – both programmatically and structurally – ahead of political parties. It is by no means presumptuous to say that even today political parties, at least in terms of organisational structures, have nothing comparable to the ETUC. Although we have the PES or the S&D, which is its name as a party group in the EP, the integration is much looser than in the case of the ETUC. (Hoffmann 2013)

This assertion is in marked contrast to the verdicts of previous decades in which former IG Metall chairman Franz Steinkühler still talked of the ETUC as a trade union ‘paper tiger’ in Brussels and SPD general secretary Peter Glotz referred to it as just a ‘trade union office’ (Kowalsky 2009: 257).

In the 1990s, however, the DGB and individual trade unions did not confine themselves to cooperation with the ETUC, but pursued other strategies, too. While at the outset of the single-market debate the DGB took the view that the common market, in terms of the so-called Hallstein paradigm of ‘Sachlogik’ (‘material logic’), would also lead to stronger cultural and social integration and thus to some extent automatically bolster cooperation at European level. When this did not transpire it developed European policy alternatives in its programmatic assertions and demands and pursued its own interests in Brussels more keenly. The decision made by the DGB national executive in summer 1997 to support its European policy activities by setting up a DGB Brussels liaison office is particularly important in this context. This followed the example of the postal union, which had been running its own office in Brussels for some time or more recently IG Metall opening its own representative office in Brussels in 2014. In the first decade of the twenty-first century the DGB repeatedly supported campaigns at European level, both from Düsseldorf and Berlin, but also from Brussels – most importantly, those in 2006 in Berlin, Brussels and Strasbourg against the so-called EU services directive.

The sectoral level can also be identified as an arena of interaction for the German trade unions. Thorsten Schulten and Reinhard Bispinck have documented – in an anthology full of valuable material – that the European metal-workers’ trade unions in particular

15. Walter Hallstein was the first president of the ECC Commission. Later he attracted academic attention with his book Der unvollendete Bundesstaat. See for details Loth 1995.
16. Note: One might also translate it as the ‘logic of the case’: the idea is that people would be compelled to take a particular line regardless of their personal inclinations because the situation dictated it.
have developed a wide range of approaches to sectorally coordinated collective bargaining. Within the framework of interregional collective bargaining partnerships various IG Metall regions cooperate with trade unions from neighbouring countries; the European Metal-workers’ Federation has also set up a European collective bargaining committee and an information network for collective bargaining. Other trade union federations have pursued this coordination approach, for example, the chemical and construction industries, whose coordination efforts differ significantly. While IG Metall focuses on joint collective bargaining committees, IG BCE regularly sends observers to collective negotiations abroad; IG BAU, by contrast, works with the employers to monitor the labour market to counteract social dumping by means of minimum standards.

Among the industry trade unions, however, critical voices have emerged, especially in the past decade or so, when the EU’s constitutionalisation and substantive deepening processes have been seriously compromised by the failed referendums in the Netherlands and France. For example, in October 2007 IG Metall presented a ‘European policy memorandum’, at an international conference convened by the Otto-Brenner-Stiftung in Budapest, in which mention was made of a severe crisis facing the EU and a ‘devastating outcome’. There was criticism of the fact that the EU is far from achieving the ambitious goals it set itself in the so-called Lisbon Strategy. However, IG Metall did not conclude from this that there should be ‘less Europe’ because ‘a trade union policy concerned only with nation-states would be neither desirable nor successful’. It called instead for a new flagship project, ‘the active shaping of a renewed European social model’. IG Metall also prescribed a ‘reinforced European policy practice that should be self-evident at all organisational levels’. This included the continuation and consolidation of existing transnational trade union networks and the development of a capability to campaign across Europe. The demand to intensify trade union commitment at all levels may also be a result of the – for trade unions rather disappointing – top-down policy of ‘social dialogue’. Within this framework, although some proposed directives were implemented, core trade union issues – such as wages and working time – remained largely untouched. The main reason for this is the basic rejection of transnational collective agreements by employers’ organisations, not to mention the fact that most trade union peak organisations do not have the authority to sign collective agreements.

As the monetary union was being implemented, various national trade unions took the initiative to establish Europe-wide coordination and networking of national collective bargaining. Pioneers in this respect were the German, Dutch, Belgian and Luxembourgian trade unions (with representatives of sectoral trade union organisations, as well as the peak organisations) that met in the Dutch town of Doorn in September 1998. The so-called ‘Doorn declaration’ referred to the need for close cross-border coordination of collective agreements within the Economic and Monetary Union and adopted the sum of rises in prices and productivity as guideline for wage increases. A year later, the ETUC, which had established a committee for coordinating collective bargaining in 1999, adopted the collective bargaining guideline agreed in Doorn for national wage negotiations. However, this guideline to date has had only a limited influence on national collective bargaining outcomes; even Germany has remained markedly behind the distribution target.

Flexible adaptation between political, social and economic interests

Against the background of the Doorn process, the IG Metall Collective Bargaining Department initiated proposals for cross-border collective bargaining networks as early as 1997. Various district organisations of IG Metall developed networks with unions from neighbouring countries. These transnational networks have been established, for example, with Dutch and Belgian unions in the IG Metall district of North Rhine-Westphalia. Other networks came into being between the IG Metall districts Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland and the French CFDT, CGT and FO. Networks involving central and eastern European countries have also been established between the Bavarian IG Metall, Austrian, Slovene, Slovak and Czech unions. Another network with central and eastern European participation has evolved between IG Metall Brandenburg-Saxony/Berlin, the Polish NSZZ Solidarnosz and the Czech KOWO.

In a first step, the aim of transnational coordination was to encourage mutual knowledge and information in order to develop solutions for regional problems concerning the labour market and collective bargaining by the exchange of observers. The second step, which followed in 1999, extended cooperation to joint planning of collective bargaining strategies and within that, real transnational coordination of bargaining procedures. Besides the efforts of the European metalworker’s network, interregional bargaining networks have developed in the construction and chemical industries, for example between Austrian, Swiss and German construction workers’ unions and between IG BCE and its French counterpart, triggered by mergers in the pharmaceutical industry.

The fact that transnational trade union cooperation also has a bilateral component became particularly clear in the 1990s. The German trade unions – especially the DGB, but also IG Metall and IG CPK – were heavily involved in central and eastern Europe when support was needed to develop levels of collective bargaining and expand works councils. A decisive experience in this respect was that in countries such as Hungary and Poland there were similar reservations with regard to works councils as there had been in Germany after 1949. The trade unions did not want to support works councils because they regarded them as competitors.

The enlargement processes of the ETUC with regard to central and eastern Europe have been broadly supported by the DGB and the German trade unions. Besides bilateral support for some countries and trade unions the accession of new federations was considered indispensable (Hoffmann 2013). Consequently, the DGB supported the idea of a reduced membership fee for the new trade unions of the ETUC due their limited resources for the time being – the new affiliates from CEE countries only needed to pay around 25 per cent of the regular fee.18

Considering the developments of the second decade of the twenty-first century the general positions and strategies of Germany’s trade unions vis-à-vis European integration have not changed substantially – not even in view of financial crisis and recession. Different from countries such as the United Kingdom or some central and eastern European states where a trend toward renationalisation and centrifugal forces can be identified among the trade unions due to unfilled expectations and hopes, German trade unions continue to support European integration (Hoffmann 2013; Buschak 2013). Although the DGB has realised that its current influence in the growing network of the ETUC remains to some extent limited when it comes to promoting the specific German-type of codetermination in Europe,

integration is still considered a raison d’être of the German trade union overall. Consequently, many DGB officials have stressed, during the course of the crisis, the importance of joint solidarity-based resolutions. It has been claimed that the ETUC needed to reinforce its common striving for social progress and fair mobility within Europe, both at national and European level. In 2011 at the Athens ETUC Congress the DGB fostered the idea that the ETUC should strengthen its work on board-level representation. The DGB was one of the driving forces behind the setting up of an ETUC expert group which after long discussions finally agreed on the main principles of a joint and unanimous ETUC position laid down in a resolution of October 2014 which for the first time took a stance in favour of workers’ representation on company boards.

4. Interpretations and outlooks

No clear picture emerges from a summary of German trade unions’ European policy approaches and activities. There are both overarching commonalities and basic tendencies, and also differences with regard to details: concerning the former, attention has increasingly been paid to policy formation at the European level with the aim of participating actively in the European policy cycle. This increased awareness with regard to ‘Brussels’ has been an ongoing trend among German trade unions since the early 1950s, which gained in intensity in the 1970s and then again after the establishment of the Single Market in the 1990s. The underlying trends include a fundamentally pro-European stance. Even if the DGB and individual German trade unions at certain times, in particular problem areas and with regard to individual decisions adopt a reluctant or hesitant approach, they are basically in favour of European integration and have always supported further development and deepening of the process. It is worth highlighting that the DGB recently helped to formulate two principles for the future of social policy: (i) to promote as a last resort a coalition of the willing in order to avoid total standstill and (ii) to support the potential threat of the ETUC to oppose treaty revisions whenever they do not support social progress.

Even if increased attention to the European level is something the German trade unions have in common, no uniform pattern of responses has emerged in relation to institutional, organisational and programmatic adjustment processes. The German trade unions have not pursued a particular strategy, nor can a development in this direction be discerned. This also applies to national trade unions from other nations. Different countries have different approaches to the European codetermination system in terms of adaptation and participation. The ways of seeking influence in Brussels also differ considerably. There is a fundamental tendency to seek one’s own access to the European political cycle.

The DGB’s activities are strongly oriented towards basic issues, aspects of constitutional development, inter-branch legislation on the part of the EU and also the manifold ‘soft’ forms of governance, such as the open method of coordination, the Lisbon Strategy and the tripartite social dialogue. In contrast the European branch trade unions focus more particularly on the political economy of EU integration and problem areas, such as monetary union, branch liberalisation and important labour policy regulations, such as the directive on establishing European works councils and the sectoral social dialogue, which directly affects their spheres of interest (Platzer 2010: 5).

The pro-integration attitude of German trade unions can be explained by the post-war situation, but also economic reasons. While the DGB was shaped primarily by the
need for political coordination at the European level, the unions within the coal and steel industries were concerned mainly with economic considerations. In the following decades, German unions established themselves as precursors of integration, although their attitudes and decisions in concrete cases were driven mainly by specific interests. As a result of new challenges due to multinational companies, rising unemployment and decreasing growth rates due to economic interdependence and the macroeconomic crisis of the 1970s, the need for cooperation at the European level increased. However, the German unions suffered setbacks with regard to their ambitions concerning the future role and composition of the ETUC. German trade unions found it hard to agree on European regulations when it came to the first legal acts on European social policy, which was due to the DGB itself to a certain extent. While the German trade unions longed for institutional influence — for example within the European Economic and Social Committee and other committees, such as Commission working groups — they mainly (depending on which kind of European regulation, and what kind of competences) refused to agree to European regulations and to shift competences to the European level. However, even though the founding of the ETUC was influenced mainly by British and Nordic unions, it was still a key interest of the German unions to establish strong ties with the European level. This is even truer with regard to sectoral organisations, in which German unions have participated since the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community. Such transnational bargaining deepened in the 1990s and continues today, although not without certain difficulties.

The completion of the common market and its effects on the global economy strengthened the pressure to coordinate policies within the system of European trade unions, although the German unions still had a strong basis at national level. The tide turned in the 1990s with Germany’s unification, when the impacts of globalisation and Europeanisation, but also of specific national problems, such as the decreasing coverage of collective bargaining agreements, shrinking membership rates and rising unemployment brought new challenges for the labour movement (Serrano, Xhafa and Fichter 2011). The resources of the German unions at that time were tied to structural adaptation at the national level, the need to reorganise eastern German labour structures and merger processes within unions.

The German trade unions’ adaptation strategies vary every bit as much as their policy positions. While in the 1950s and 1960s the emphasis was on participation in the European institutions, in the 1970s the ETUC came to the fore as coordinator of trade union activities in European policy. It rapidly became apparent that representation via the ETUC would not be exclusive. To date the DGB and individual German trade unions have been characterised in their European policy activities by a ‘multi-options strategy’ in the multi-level system. One form of access to Brussels has not been pursued to the exclusion of the others, but rather several strategies are deployed at different levels. For example, the DGB and the individual trade unions both looked for their own particular route to Brussels and continued to cooperate with other trade union federations in the ETUC. Influence was thus sought primarily in Brussels at the European level but from time to time also via national channels in Bonn and Berlin. This became apparent in the 1970s when there was closer cooperation with the SPD-led national government.

The development of European employment policy as a first step towards social policy at the European level at the beginning of the 1970s was triggered by economic developments, when the international economic regime of Bretton Woods, which had been very successful until then, failed to compensate for the effects of the oil crises and their influence
on national economies, with well-known consequences for the labour and product markets. In order to avoid further negative discussions on public welfare, to solve problems with multinationals and migrant workers within the EEC and to regain direct influence over decisions relating to labour interests, the unions fostered an initiative on social policy launched by the German government.

The negotiations on a specific European model of industrial relations – comparable to the different national systems – always remained open. Neither the ETUC nor the ETUFs are yet homogenous enough to deal with core issues of union policy, such as wage agreements. And it is questionable whether they ever will be. The opportunities given by committees at the European level and the social dialogue are still limited, although the social partners evolved in the course of the social dialogue particularly in the aftermath of the treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam. There are also paths of influence through advisory committees within the framework of comitology, the ESC and the Employment Committee. Furthermore, the Social Rights Charter of 1989 and the directives negotiated within the social dialogue contain minimum standards and employment rights, although joint approaches with the directive for European works councils – for example, towards European labour relations at plant level – can be seen.

The prevalent thesis, whether trade unions have to be evaluated as latecomers in the process of European integration – though they started as forerunners – does not point to an unequivocal picture of the German unions. Despite phases of reluctance and hesitance the ongoing adaptation of German trade unions in view of European integration from the beginning, when the European Coal and Steel Community was established, is a persistent characteristic. In general, the traditional corporatist orientation of the German unions fits well the terms of neo-corporatist intermediation structures at European level. Although attempts to obtain institutional influence fell short of unions’ demands and expectations, they managed to influence European employment, social and even economic policy to a certain extent. In considering the limits of national trade union adaptation the specific circumstances in Germany have to be taken into consideration: on one hand, economic reasons resulting from Germany’s role as the biggest economy in Europe with a stable, successful and highly developed export-oriented industry, and on the other hand the traditional, centralised and corporatist model of industrial relations in Germany, which became a stable and beneficial system over a long period of time.

The thesis that treaty changes at the European level were a driving force for the European orientation of German trade unions also seems to be superficial because it broadly disregards their role as economic stakeholders. In fact, German unions geared their efforts mainly to the opportunities granted by the European treaties, but their engagement was triggered by political and economic premises. In the first period they acted within the institutional structures of labour representation provided by the European Coal and Steel Community – mainly the Advisory Committee and the High Authority – while their own structures aimed at interest intermediation and coordination between the unions in the ECSC member states. With the foundation of the European Economic Community, the opportunities for labour representation decreased within the Economic and Social Committee. Sectoral structures were inefficient during that time and thus the German unions focused on institutional representation and tried to influence the European dimension of various national governments. Efforts to create an efficient multi-sectoral structure in ECFTU and ETUC were not as successful as had been expected due to the need to compromise with other unions. In general, treaty reforms can be considered an important trajectory of
transnationalisation, as German unions reacted to new structures and the increasing scope of the European Community at that time. But the treaties must also be seen as political outcomes. The well-informed German unions tried to implement their ideas from the very beginning, in keeping with their level of influence and intensity of interest. The engagement of the German trade unions ebbed and flowed depending on their economic, social and political needs, on one hand, and on the opportunities for intermediation offered by the treaties on the other, including interaction with other actors such as the Commission, national governments and other unions. Given the different characteristics of national political decision-making, assertions about future or optimal adaptation and participation models make only limited sense because such conclusions are possible only in the context of the relevant constitutional-law, institutional and political spheres, sometimes only in light of the relevant policy area. Long-held positions, such as those that consider centralised, strongly hierarchical structures – for example, the UK or French systems – to be more successful than federal systems, such as Germany, with its pluralistic, fragmented, decentralised and non-hierarchical structures, appear to be tenable only to a limited degree, according to recent research. The adaptability of national trade union positions can be explained less in terms of strictly hierarchical coordination and more in terms of a broadly distributed and intensive participation. Germany, with its pluralistic structures, thus seems to fit better into a pluralist system like that of the European Union. Consequently, trade unions have to combine plant-level, national, transnational, intergovernmental and supranational elements in order to become successful players in Europe’s multi-level system.

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Flexible adaptation between political, social and economic interests


Interviews

(Hoffmann 2013) Reiner Hoffmann (born 1955) has been a member of IG Chemie-Papier-Keramik (since 1997 IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie) since 1972. After studying in Wuppertal, an internship at the ETUC in Brussels and a period working at the European Community’s Economic and Social Committee in Brussels and as research assistant at the University of Wuppertal, from 1984 he worked at the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, becoming head of the research promotion department until 1994. From October 1994 to May 2003 he was director of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), then up to December 2009 deputy general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). From November 2009 to January 2014 he was head of the IG BCE’s North Rhine district. In February 2014 he was elected to the DGB’s national executive. In January 2014 he was nominated for the position of chair of the DGB. Our interview took place on 6 November 2013, 9.30–11.30 in Düsseldorf.

(Buschak 2013) Willy Buschak (born 1951) attained a PhD after studying history and philosophy at the Ruhr University in Bochum in 1982 with a dissertation on the trade union’s London office. Between 1987 and 1991 he worked at the central administration of the German Trade Union for Food, Beverages and Restaurant Workers in Hamburg, where he was responsible for all matters related to worker involvement. In 1991 he became confederal secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, remaining in Brussels in a number of roles and areas of activity for 12 years. From 2003 to 2008 Buschak was deputy Director and for a period also acting Director of the European Foundation in Dublin. Since 2009 Buschak has been responsible for basic issues at the DGB’s Saxony district in Dresden. The interview took place on 21 November 2013, 18.00–20.00. It was a telephone interview with further additions and amendments.