

EDITORIAL

Transfer
2014, Vol. 20(4) 479–487
© The Author(s) 2014
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1024258914546280
trs.sagepub.com



This ‘open issue’ of *Transfer* publishes five articles dealing with three major issues for European social dialogue and social policy. Two articles focus on collective bargaining processes in different fields (multinational firms and industry level) while two others deal with the perception of unions by different sets of social actors, one in a cross-country analysis while the other is country-based, in this case Croatia. The last article is also country-based, namely Spain, but its theme – the working conditions of domestic workers – is relevant for most European countries where the same characteristics of these workers are to be found.

The first article is a collective work by five authors, Jörg Sydow, Michael Fichter, Markus Helfen, Kadire Zeynep Sayim and Dimitris Stevis. The aim of their research is to improve the implementation process of Global Framework Agreements (GFA) defined as bilateral agreements between Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and Global Union Federations. In light of the fact that more than 80 per cent of GFAs have been signed with European-based TNCs, this is an issue of high interest for European industrial relations systems and unions’ strategies. Based on two detailed case studies and other examples, the article reveals deficits in the implementation of GFAs. This leads the authors to propose a multi-organizational practice perspective based on three sets of practices – information dissemination and communication; training programmes; and operational measures (introduction of routines, rules and procedures as well as related organizational and inter-organizational structures). However, the authors insist that this systematic and integrated implementation procedure ‘should be conceived as a process of combined and joint activity and decision-making by management *and* labour at all levels and stages of the TNC and its global production network’.

The second article, by Krzysztof Bandasz, analyses the now famous case of the non-implementation of the framework agreement signed for the hairdressing sector which aimed to improve working conditions and minimize health risks for workers. The case is famous because, as the article describes, this was the first time that the European Commission refused to present an agreement to the Council. This occurred after strong pressure from 10 Member States, among them some more usually known as countries of negotiation, such as Germany. The article first gives an overview of past developments in the European social dialogue, at the cross-industry and industry level. It then focuses on the negotiation of the agreement in the hairdressing sector and its main characteristics (particularly the strong incidence of self-employment in the sector) and stresses in particular the motivations of social partners to sign this agreement (mainly to protect employees from chemical products used in the sector). After analysing the political pressure from some countries to oppose the agreement and the response of social partners, the article examines the position of the European Commission and its current focus on the impact assessment and foreseeable cost and benefits of agreements. For the author, this clearly confirms a trend in the philosophy of the Commission concerning the European social dialogue which is endangered by the ‘market making’

initiatives favoured by the Commission over 'market correcting' ones. In conclusion the author discusses the alternative of an autonomous European social dialogue self-initiated by social partners.

The article by Nina Pološki Vokić and Alka Obadić presents the results of a survey carried out among different stakeholders about the future of trade unions in Croatia in the context of union decline in Europe and many other countries. In an introductory section that notes the reasons for union decline (structural, organizational, individual and reasons linked to unions' strategies) and the classical strategies put forward in order to revitalize them (union modernization, recruiting new members and networking), the authors also provide an insight into unions in Croatia today. They then describe the methodology of their survey conducted among 269 individuals (managers, HR experts, trade union officials, government representatives and employees) belonging to eight organizations. This questionnaire consisted of four points: opinion on 1) the influence of trade unions in Croatia, 2) reasons for union decline, 3) challenges for the trade union movement, and 4) potential strategies for union revitalization. The main results of the survey show a negative perception of the current and future influence of unions. The results also provide reasons for this decline prominent among which are 'self-interested union leaders' and 'multi-unionism'. Looking at the challenges faced by trade unions in Croatia the results stress primarily the 'lack of coordination between trade union federations' and 'the lack of agreement between trade unions in federations' which is a sign of a strong perception that competition between unions is the main danger for unions. This is confirmed when looking at the potential strategies for union revitalization which, besides 'recruitment of new members', 'democratic leadership style and union democracy', and 'information technology for communicating with members/potential members', place at the forefront 'coalitions between unions at national level'. The authors conclude that what is needed for the future of unions in Croatia is a new philosophy, that is to say, unions which care about both workers and society, understand employers' and governments' needs and are aware that rules of the game are set by world competition and globalization. In addition, they make a plea for a strong partnership with HRM departments which presupposes strongly established unions at the workplace.

This issue of union presence at the workplace is the topic developed in Jeremy Waddington's article. In the introductory part he assesses the key role of workplace representatives with regard to the building of collective identities and union renewal. He sets out the main reasons for the decline of workplace representation which represents an obstacle to the building of union 'social capital'. The article is based on a survey undertaken by the author among the members of 14 trade union organizations based in 12 countries. The main finding of this extensive research on the perceptions by union members of the performance of unions is the perception that the performance of the union is superior at workplaces with representatives compared to workplaces where there are no representatives. Moreover, when workplace representatives are present the union performance on a range of workplace tasks is perceived to be higher than that of the management. In particular, they are able to prevent a 'crisis of workers' loyalty to unions', whereas this is not the case when there are no union representatives at the workplace. Another strong result is that most members in eight of the 14 surveyed unions were not satisfied with union representation (e.g. not enough). The author also underlines that women members are more likely to be discontented. As in the preceding article on Croatian unions, the argument is backed up by studies which show that support from the union at the workplace is the principal reason for joining a union, suggesting that unions should make substantial efforts to increase the number of workplaces representatives if they intend to foster union renewal and 'social capital' of workers.

In her article Isabel Pla-Julián addresses the difficulties involved in efforts to formalize jobs of domestic workers. The author first assesses the particular features of this kind of work (taking place within households, feminized, informal, ethnicized and vulnerable). Her underlying hypothesis is that ‘this sector is too complex to be regulated by a legal perspective alone.’ To illustrate this she analyses the impact of recent Spanish reforms (2011–2013) by contrasting changes in the law with female workers’ own experiences of change. For that purpose, the author draws on a large number of statistics and interviews with domestic workers and their employers. It was difficult to process all the data because the law was changed in the course of the research but the main conclusion is that the effects of the legal reforms remain ambiguous. Formalizing this type of employment relationship therefore cannot be confined to changing the law but must take into account how different ways of working in this sector have become established as well as social relations, including considerations of gender, ethnicity or social inequality. In particular, Isabel Pla-Julián underlines that formalization of these jobs and decrease in informality – the scale of which is not fully clear due to employers’ avoidance strategies – could be at the cost of an increased precariousness (also driven by employers’ strategies), particularly among migrant workers who are also subject to informality. To conclude, the author calls for solutions that encompass labour, migration and gender issues. She brings to the fore, for example, entrepreneurial alternatives, such as cooperatives, and a much deeper involvement of unions in the organization of workers in the sector. In order to reduce the adverse impact of the ethnicization and genderization of household sector workers she calls for the development of public care services and, more generally, societal recognition of the unbalanced distribution of domestic work between men and women.

Jean-Yves Boulin and Alena Zemplerova