

# Trade unions in solidarity, 2015: testimonials from the Austrian and German labour movements

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## Introduction

The arrival of a large number of people seeking refuge in 2015 saw the rise of impressive solidarity movements in Austria and Germany. The events of 2015 were, however, followed by a tightening of asylum regimes across Europe and a change in the way the media portrayed the ‘refugee crisis’, as well as a certain shift in public opinion (Trauner and Turton 2017; Pelzer and Pichl 2016). The events on New Year’s Eve in Köln<sup>1</sup> were followed by a ‘moral panic’ (Hall *et al.* 2013; De Genova 2017) which Nicholas De Genova describes in the following terms:

Thus, the figure of the refugee – so recently fashioned as an object of European compassion, pity and protection – was refashioned with astounding speed, first as the potential terrorist who surreptitiously infiltrates the space of Europe, and then as the potential criminal or rapist who corrodes the social and moral fabric of Europe from within. (De Genova 2017: 11).

This chapter highlights that trade union officials, members and activists in both Austria and Germany were an integral part of these original solidarity movements, on the one hand in their individual capacity and on the other as trade union organisations. It recounts the atmosphere and experiences of solidarity that were felt by a significant part of the trade union movement. The subsequent shift in public opinion and discourse then affected trade unions internally as well as in their public stances towards the topic of asylum and migration. It is thus essential to illustrate these moments of solidarity, to recount testimonies and to give these narratives visibility. This is particularly important given the developments in public opinion and policy towards more repressive migratory regimes after 2015.

The following text first discusses the Austrian labour movement’s involvement in the solidary movement and then briefly narrates trade unionists’ experiences given the right-wing shift that followed. Following this, the article turns attention to the German trade unions and their position as regards solidarity structures before, similarly, discussing their experiences following the shift to the right.

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1. That is, when numerous women were assaulted. The perpetrators were, in most cases, men of non-European origin. These events marked a shift in the media portrayal of migrants/refugees from victims to perpetrators (Trauner and Turton 2017: 38).

The sources used are based on an evaluation of thirty-five qualitative interviews<sup>2</sup> with trade union officials, employees, shopfloor representatives and activists in both countries, conducted between 2016 and 2019.

## 1. Solidarity structures in Austria

The arrival of large numbers of migrants in 2015 led to a broad mobilisation of civil society in Austria to show solidarity. This is often noted with astonishment in the academic literature, which had hitherto regarded Austria as ‘an environment unfavorable to both asylum seekers and protest activities’ (Milan 2018: 185). In the summer of 2015, grassroots groups, internet platforms and other solidarity networks organised themselves to support those arriving. To a certain extent, the solidarity initiatives were coordinated and worked out in conjunction with state institutions. For example, Austrian Federal Railways (ÖBB) and the ‘crisis management team’ of the City of Vienna coordinated accommodation and the onward transport to Germany of arriving migrants (Milan 2018: 193).

### 1.1 Trade unionists and solidarity structures

In their regions and towns of residence trade unionists participated in fundraising activities, food donations, small organisational activities or even accommodated people in their own homes. Trade unionists also organised solidarity actions in their workplaces: ‘At that moment the mood was so positive; there was nothing where you would have said “there was rejection.” Quite the contrary’ (interview, Sophie, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

Train stations were places where such solidarity structures thrived. Before government institutions were able to manage the situation, civil society had already moved to take charge. Anna, an ÖGB employee, remembers a scene from the first days at the main train station in Vienna: ‘It was the Indian community, and they cooked for people at the main station; they came every day by car – well really, three, four, five cars, yes but also vans, buzzing around with freshly cooked food [...]’ (interview, Anna, 2018). Lucas, a shopfloor representative of the transport and services industries trade union (VIDA), was deeply involved in organising solidarity in his hometown. He made sure that those arriving and passing through were provided for. He did not have any prior experience of this type of organising and remembers his efforts and successes with pride. He recalls having organised a donated wheelchair for a refugee:

[He] goes to the father and gives him the wheelchair and says ‘There you go,’ because they have a boy, who was disabled – 1.70 meters tall, 25 years old the boy, disabled and also mentally handicapped – then he gave him the wheelchair. Suddenly 300 people were clapping there. That gave you goose bumps. (Interview, Lucas, 2018)

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2. The names of those quoted in this text have all been changed in order that interview partners might remain anonymous.
  3. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in German. Translation into English by the author.

David, another trade unionist, was active at a refugee centre and regularly brought food and other necessities. He was witness to the overcrowding of the centre and the basic needs that were missing:

Those were just the moments that also happened at the breakfast events; you have to imagine it that way. I went there with my wife and my son, in my own car, with fruit, coffee, tea and various cakes from Metro, the big supermarket, and as soon as I opened the boot, all of a sudden twenty, thirty, fifty people [were gathered] around the car [...]. (Interview, David)

The Austrian Federal Railways even organised an internal solidarity group: ‘At that time there was “Team ÖBB”, where you could volunteer [...]’ (interview, Sophie, 2018). Max, another trade unionist, was directly involved in the supply and administration of the arriving refugees through his activities in the aid and welfare organisation *Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund*: ‘That was actually the biggest effort, the logistics, i.e. the arrival, the distribution of supplies [...]’ (interview, Max, 2018). Together with civil society networks, he coordinated support at the train stations as well as the overnight accommodation.

These stories illustrate that, in their individual capacity, many trade unionists joined the civil society mobilisation of solidarity. Sophie, a shopfloor representative, recalls her motivation: ‘I mean, I didn’t get paid for the time or anything, no, but simply took it for granted. Out of solidarity, out of «Hello, this has to work,» out of aspiration and values ...’ (interview, Sophie, 2018). Many were impressed by the commitment of the wider population, as Lucas, another shopfloor representative recounts: ‘There were even 70- and 80-year-old women who were working there tirelessly and I was already under pressure to say «Friends, go home, we have a replacement for you now!” ...’ (interview, Lucas, 2018). It came as little surprise to the trade union movement that so many of their members were active in solidarity movements as David, an ÖGB employee, argues: ‘The basic understanding of a trade unionist is to help people who are not doing so well or who are weaker, or to improve their living situation. And refugees are a part of that’ (interview, David).

In addition to the commitment of individual trade unionists, the ÖGB and several of its sectoral unions positioned themselves as part of the ‘Refugees welcome’ movement (*Willkommensbewegung*). A statement issued in 2015 by ÖGB states: ‘The right to asylum is a human right. Especially now it is important to stand together and show what values the union stands for: solidarity; responsibility; respect for human dignity; and helpfulness!’ (ÖGB 2015b).

ÖGB’s involvement in the ‘Welcome’ movement was, among other things, due to Dusika, the stadium located close to the ÖGB’s head office, being used as a refugee accommodation centre. Erich Foglar, ÖGB president at the time, remembers: ‘And we experienced having them here [...], people standing there, all at once and we supplied them with food in our canteen and with toilets; these are the simplest supports that were worth a lot [...]’ (interview, Erich Foglar, 2018). ÖGB and its sectoral unions therefore organised structures of solidarity in and around Dusika. As an employer,

the ÖGB encouraged its employees to help and even made this possible during working hours (interview, Tobias, 2018). Eight-hour shifts of voluntary service were organised by trade unionists at the stadium: ‘There were always people [...], starting with the distribution of articles of personal hygiene; the preparation of various meals, sandwiches, drinks, fruit; distributing the donations that had come in; seeing what else was needed...’ (interview, David, 2018).

In addition, internal seminars were offered on the subject of asylum and migration (interview, Tobias, 2018). Being active in the ‘Welcome’ movement led to a new self-confidence of being able to make a difference as Sophie, a member of a works council, reports: ‘[...] It was exhausting, it was positive, but it was also very [...] formative in the sense that you can make a difference’ (Interview, Sophie, 2018).

Labour market integration was seen by the Austrian trade unions as an essential cornerstone of integration into society: ‘We [were] from the outset, all of us were of the opinion ... that it must be possible to make people fit enough to enter the labour market quickly’ (interview, Anna, 2018). The Austrian trade unions saw their main task in terms of influencing the general framework for the labour market integration of refugees. They did this through press releases and position papers in conjunction with the social partners and through positions within the Public Employment Service (AMS). In general the topic of refugees and asylum was broadly discussed in 2015: ‘[W]e had this as the main topic on the federal committee, the ÖGB committee, the union committees...’ (interview, Simon, 2018). Accordingly, there was a unanimously-adopted ÖGB Position on the Current Refugee Crisis drawn up in 2015, which strictly rejects any distinction between ‘economic migrants’ and ‘refugees’ and calls for the abolition of the Dublin Regulations. The tenor of this position is that challenges can be overcome together and that there is a human right to asylum (ÖGB 2015a).

Furthermore, the Bad Ischl Dialogue in 2016 – the annual summit of the social partners – was dedicated to the topic of migration and integration with the Austrian trade unions managing to build in progressive positions. In the accompanying paper, the social partners emphasised how important migration was to Austrian society. The social partners considered the ‘comprehensive participation’ of migrants in working life and society to be essential (Sozialpartner Österreich 2016: 4).

The ÖGB’s position papers go further and demand the opening of apprenticeship training outside of shortage occupations for young asylum seekers ‘with good chances to stay’ (ÖGB 2018). Erich Foglar, ÖGB president at the time, explains the ÖGB position as follows: ‘[T]he asylum seekers [...] should have clearly defined access to the labour market; [...] where they do not endanger or take away jobs of others, they should have the most appropriate access’ (interview, Erich Foglar, 2018). The Austrian trade unions, therefore, were calling for specific improvements in access to the labour market for asylum seekers (Löw 2019).

## 1.2 Beyond Summer 15<sup>4</sup>

These recounted moments and movements of solidarity were followed by a shift in public opinion and discourse towards a disapproval of refugees and asylum seekers as well as by increasingly repressive measures being taken against them (Trauner and Turton 2017; Knapp 2018; Ataç and Schütze 2020). In Austria, this shift was marked by the change of government in 2016 to a conservative-extreme right coalition (ÖVP-FPÖ) that left the Austrian labour movement in an oppositional role. This authoritarian-populist government established its hegemony through racist division and aimed both to weaken the three pillars of workers' participation and abolish asylum rights (Löw and Opratko 2018; Koza 2018).

The accompanying shift in political discourse was felt within the labour movement. Tobias, an employee of the union of Salaried Private Sector Employees and of Printers, Journalists and Paper Workers (GPA-djp), recalls: '...I believe that, since then, there has been talk of our society being divided. That was not so strong before. And this division also goes through the union itself' (interview, Tobias, 2018). Erich Foglar, ÖGB president at the time, remembers:

Well, until Köln, I would say, it was: 'We have to help and people are coming; they are not well and they have fled; and... and... and... and...'. After Köln, the mood drastically changed [...] It also partly changed in the union itself... [and further] Politically this changed much, much more. And from a personal, and also trade union, point of view – negatively. (Interview, Erich Foglar, 2018)

Those active in the solidarity movements also felt this shift, as Tobias recalls: 'I received positive feedback on these workshop offers, but there were also e-mails about why we are dealing with this issue at all; [that] it is not a core trade union issue.' He continues: 'There are, so to speak, many taboo topics or even fears, I think' (interview, Tobias, 2018).

The Austrian trade union movement was therefore confronted with the strong shift to the right which was also felt within the structures of the union; at the same time, it also needed to internalise the experiences of solidarity within the organisation. As a result the debate about asylum has featured increasingly less prominently within the Austrian labour movement (Löw 2019). However, and particularly within the Public Employment Service (AMS), trade union representatives have continued to work towards the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers.

4. 'Beyond Summer 15' is also the name of a research group of Hans-Böckler-Stiftung focusing on the transformation of the European migratory regime after 2015.

## 2. Solidarity structures in Germany

Angela Merkel's famous statement 'Wir schaffen das'<sup>5</sup> signalled that the German government was willing to strengthen domestic efforts towards the accommodation of refugees, particularly in compensation for the non-cooperative approach of other EU member states, especially Hungary. Civil society actors started to become engaged as a means of easing the arrival of those seeking refuge. Train stations, especially in the south of Germany (i.e. in Munich), saw images of volunteers greeting and welcoming refugees. Such images became the international symbol of Germany's approach to migration. Various independent aid organisations and action groups teamed by volunteers sought to ensure that migrants were adequately cared for after their arrival. 'Welcome' culture (*Willkommenskultur*) in Germany was further influenced by the strong support of Merkel's policy by the main tabloid newspaper *Bild*, with a circulation of 2.46 million copies at the time, which even started a campaign with the slogan 'We help #refugees welcome' (Trauner and Turton 2017: 37). It is estimated that 10.9 per cent of the German population was in some way involved in the 'Welcome' movement (Bergfeld 2017). German trade unions, similar to their Austrian counterparts, were part of these movements.

### 2.1 Trade unionists and solidarity structures

A press release in 2015 from the executive committee of the federal trade union confederation (DGB) read: 'Among the voluntary helpers are also numerous trade unionists. We are pleased about this – we support this commitment and call for continued activity – whether for refugees or against dull racism' (DGB-Bundesvorstand 2015). Reiner Hoffmann, Chair of the DGB in 2015, warmly supported the solidarity movements in several press releases.

The trade unionists I interviewed recalled the commitment of many of their colleagues. Amon, an employee of the services union Ver.di, says: 'There were also many things that did not become so well known. There were language courses that people offered, personal guidance, support ...' (interview, Amon, 2017). Trade union members and labour movement activists were part of local initiatives, engaged in the existing solidarity networks around refugee centres and advocating the inclusion in German society of those who had recently arrived. A DGB official remembers:

Basically, the trade unions also started to say, 'OK, here comes a large number of people; we as trade unions, we want to show solidarity, we will stand at the Munich train station and welcome people; and if they need something to drink, they will get something to drink; and if they need clothes, they will get that; and if they need toys, they get them.' So that was the first few months. (Interview, Katrin, 2019)

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5. Usually translated in English as 'We can manage this'.

The shopfloor representatives of a chemistry company organised a local football team together with asylum seekers and can still recall the positive energy of the moment: 'I also had some refugees in the team – it was really nice to see how they integrated [...]. We can learn a lot from each other' (interview, Janek, 2018). Shopfloor representatives working in an Amazon warehouse recall collecting contributions of clothes, sanitary items and food from their colleagues and then dropping them off together at a nearby refugee centre. During a meeting of trade union representatives, the group decided to go collectively to the nearest train station to greet the arriving refugees: 'That was a story that gave me goose bumps [and that] came from the colleagues themselves' (interview, Alex, 2019).

The German labour movement spontaneously positioned itself 'left of the "Welcome!" movement' (interview, Arnold, 2018). Both as separate organisations and as a confederation, German trade unions considered themselves an integral part of the solidarity structures. Ludwig, an official of the energy, chemistry and mining union (IG BCE), recalls:

We at IG BCE were also very much carried by the euphoria of solidarity for the refugees. At that time we thought it was the right step to give political asylum here as far as possible; and we took this euphoria so much on board that we also provided 'Welcome!' actions ourselves. (Interview, Ludwig, 2018)

IG BCE even initiated funds to pay for such solidarity actions. Other unions experienced these moments in a similar way, also providing the funds for solidarity actions and encouraging their employees and members to participate (interview, Sina, 2018; Bergfeld 2017). The congress of IG Metall, the union of metalworkers, held in the autumn of 2015, was also marked by the 'Welcome!' movement and T-shirts imprinted with the slogan 'Refugees welcome' were even distributed to delegates. Arnold, an IG Metall executive committee member, explained that it felt necessary, based on trade union traditions of internationalism, to participate in the solidarity movement and also as a means of obstructing the shift to the right that was bound to happen (interview, Arnold, 2018). The congress of Ver.di that same year was similarly touched by the arriving refugees and it was one of the main topics of debate. In this sense, the slogan of the congress – *Stärke.Vielfalt.Zukunft*<sup>6</sup> – took on greater resonance. On the fifth day of the congress, two refugees who were in accommodation centres close to the congress site were given the stage and were able to tell their story. Many trade unionists present had tears in their eyes (interview, Amon, 2017) while delegates at all levels recalled feeling very proud of being part of an organisation that had contributed to such a euphoric solidarity movement (interview, Sina, 2018). A DGB employee states a similar experience: '[...] There was a moment where I thought "we can do this", and that's great' (interview, Vera, 2019).

The German trade unions saw integration into the labour market as the main means of integrating refugees into society and they stood out in their efforts to facilitate labour market integration (see Chapter by Helen Schwenken). This task was grasped

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6. Strength.Diversity.Future.

at all levels of the labour movement. This led to a ‘Welcome’ culture at company level (*betriebliche Willkommenskultur*), with shopfloor representatives being key figures (Schmidt 2020). Refugees were met with ‘an openness’ at company level that led some researchers to the joyous conclusion that the integration of current refugees would be more successful than that of previous migrants (Schmidt 2020).

My own research portrays numerous examples of this ‘Welcome!’ culture at company level. Janek, a shopfloor representative of IG BCE, for instance, remembers: ‘We have a programme called “Start in the job” [where] we created additional places for refugees [...] We took on young colleagues [...] and all of them were very well integrated’ (interview, Janek, 2018). Stemming from an initiative by IG Metall, the DGB pushed for ‘integration programmes’ that enabled refugees to work and participate in language classes at the same time. The *Jobcenters*<sup>7</sup> then offered these programmes to refugees seeking work. A member of the IG Metall executive committee explained this focus in the sense of the trade union belief in the concept of *Arbeitsgesellschaften*<sup>8</sup> and, therefore, that integration into the labour market is key to integration into society as a whole.

Additionally, the German trade unions wanted to prevent employers from using refugees to undercut wages and social standards. The call from employer organisations to override minimum wages when it came to refugees in the workplace alerted the labour movement and was met with fierce opposition (interview, Arnold, 2018).

At the same time, German trade unions are part of numerous advisory councils to ministries and other state organisations and therefore participated significantly in shaping labour market integration for migrants (interview, Lorenzo, 2018).

## 2.2 The struggle against the extreme right

The shocking results achieved by the extreme right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in regional elections and demonstrations by the extreme right were accompanied by a shift in public opinion and media coverage of the 2015 migration movements. This went hand-in-hand with an influx of xenophobic and anti-refugee violence (Benček and Strasheim 2016) The trade union movement was not immune to these political trends and experienced an equal impact from such developments (Sauer *et al.* 2018).

It became increasingly clear that trade union members were also part of these demonstrations and that some had voted for the extreme right. Several studies made clear that trade union members were just as likely to vote for the AfD as non-union members. In the *Länder* of Baden-Württemberg, Rheinland-Pfalz and Sachsen-Anhalt, sympathies towards AfD existed at an above-average level among industrial workers and trade union members. Taking into account these three regions, ‘the industrial workers among trade union members therefore did not present a mirror

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7. The German public employment service.

8. That societies are based on the concept of wage labour.

image of society, but in fact formed a significant voter pool for the AfD' (Stöss 2017: 35). The federal election results were less dramatic than the regional ones, but still shocking enough: nineteen per cent of workers and 15 per cent of trade union members in Germany voted for the AfD in 2017 (Dörre *et al.* 2018). A DGB employee working on the issue admits: 'These are not only people who somehow have a very narrow world view, but [they include] also many trade unionists' (interview, Katrin, 2019).

Trade union officers felt the growing pressures. Ludwig, the IG BCE employee, remembers:

We noticed this in the union because we suddenly realised that our euphoria and orientation to help people in need was not necessarily supported by all union members... Our members, then, simply said 'you're not quite right in your head to say "welcome refugees" here!' and of course we tried again and again to objectify this a bit. But I'll tell you honestly, we also tried to keep our heads down. Because the emotions that came up, and the fear, the anger, [...] we as a union could not absorb them. (Interview, Ludwig, 2018)

Even though IG BCE continued to support its members that carried on being active in the 'Welcome!' movement, it pulled back from the public debate and media around the topic. In Ludwig's view, the struggle had already been lost. Trade unions had to deal with the topic of refugees and asylum and, at the same time, racism and the rise of right-wing populism. An IG Metall official recalls:

That was more of a topic in 2016 – that is, from the topic of migration to the topic of right-wing populism and racism – and it was of course always related. If you talked about right-wing populism in the factories and companies, then you talked about migration; and if you talked about migration, then you were right back there again [...]. (Interview, Sina, 2018)

Several trade unionists describe the subsequent atmosphere as 'very emotional' when it came to the topic of migration. Katrin, the DGB employee, recalls being torn between two forces: 'Of course there is still huge solidarity and support for refugees, but also a very vehement and loud group of people saying "Let them all go home, what do they want here?"' (interview, Katrin, 2019).

German trade unions consequently focused their outwards efforts and energies on the labour market integration of refugees. Amon, an official with Ver.di, confirms:

We rather try to get involved where we have the possibilities of influence – somehow or other – so that refugees are integrated into work processes under reasonable conditions, with a reasonable balance between language classes and occupational qualifications. Of course we make sure that no exploitation takes place. (Interview, Amon, 2017)

Anti-racism as a concept within the organisation nevertheless gained in importance. Working groups and positions within the trade unions were created and strategic

discussions held on how to deal with the rise of AfD voters within their ranks. Trade unions collaborated with researchers on the question of extreme right trade union members (Dörre *et al.* 2018) and engaged in strategic debate. The discussion on how best to struggle against the ‘national-social threat’ (Dörre 2016) and the role of trade unions is an ongoing one.

Most DGB trade unions have, however, engaged less and less in debates about asylum politics and refugees. This is also linked to fewer people coming to Germany – therefore the need to find a position on the topic of migration has been less strong. Even so, German trade unions have criticised the tightening of asylum laws and regulations and they have been particularly vocal in criticising the residency requirements for refugees, asylum seekers and those under subsidiary protection (DGB-Bundesvorstand 2019). There are also ongoing discussions about how to show support for trade union members that have experienced racism within the structures of union influence and there have been attempts to make workplace struggles by trade unionists that are also migrants more visible within the trade union movement. The battles of Amazon employees throughout Germany have been examples of how migrant trade unionists are leading the class struggle. Making these more visible is part of a strategy to combat racism and the far right (interview, Amon, 2017).

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the events surrounding the movements of migrants in 2015 by letting the narratives of trade unionists shed light on the experiences that were held by many. Stories of trade unions that were part of solidarity movements with arriving refugees gives visibility to progressive forces within the workers’ movement. This is particularly important given the shift in public opinion towards increasing disapproval of those seeking asylum. In this sense, this chapter has sought to put forward a counter narrative.

The examples of Austrian and German solidarity make clear that the trade union movements of both countries were part of the ‘Welcome!’ solidarity structures in a two-fold way: numerous trade unionists were also activists in the structures that sprang up; while trade unions themselves considered that they were a part of these movements. The emotions retold here were ones of pride and empowerment as a result of being a part of such movements.

Part of the key to trade union action here was that integration into the labour market was seen as a key to integration within society. Consequently, the later shift in public opinion and in the political atmosphere was felt keenly within union movements.

It is important to prevent the labour movement and society from forgetting and sidelining these moments of solidarity. Experiences of solidarity – a tiny fraction of which was presented in this chapter – are not lost but live on within the structures that still exist as well as in the memories of those concerned. For the movements to come which will demand solidarity and activism, these are experiences that enable connections to be made. Particularly considering the rise of right-wing populism all

over Europe, it is crucial to safeguard these experiences of solidarity in the collective memory of the organised workers' movement. This needs to be one of many pillars in the struggle against racism and the extreme right.

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### **Interviews with representatives (referred to specifically in the text)**

Interview with Alex, Ver.di employee, conducted in 2019 in Dortmund.  
Interview with Amon, Ver.di employee, conducted in 2017 in Berlin.  
Interview with Anna, ÖGB employee, conducted in 2018 in Vienna.  
Interview with Arnold, Member of IG Metall Executive Committee, conducted in 2017 in Frankfurt.  
Interview with David, ÖGB employee, conducted in 2018 in Vienna.  
Interview with Janek, IG BCE member of works council, conducted in 2018 in Recklinghausen.  
Interview with Katrin, DGB employee, conducted in 2019 in Berlin.  
Interview with Lorenzo, DGB employee, conducted in 2018 in Berlin.  
Interview with Lucas, VIDA shopfloor representative, conducted in 2018 in Vienna.  
Interview with Ludwig, IG BCE employee, conducted in 2018 in Hannover.  
Interview with Max, ÖGB employee, conducted in 2018 in Vienna.  
Interview with Erich Foglar, ÖGB president at the time, conducted in 2018 in Vienna.  
Interview with Sina, IG Metall employee, conducted in 2018 in Frankfurt.  
Interview with Sophie, VIDA member of works council, conducted in 2018 in Vienna.  
Interview with Tobias, GPA-djp employee, conducted in 2018 in Vienna.