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Editorial

The Future of Trade Unions in Europe. Part I

Trade unions used to be important institutions in the industrial society. In Western Europe they are – with the exception of the particular situations in Portugal, Spain and Greece that were marked by dictatorship – considered to be promoting and stabilising elements of the post-war welfare state regimes. These were their roles until the late 1970s. At the same time membership numbers reached their peak. In Eastern Europe, however, trade unions were an integral part of the socialist regimes. When they did not play a crucial role in the political turnaround like the *Solidarność* in Poland in the 1980s, their hour first came with the political transformation process. Since then the trade unions have undergone a loss of significance, which – with varying momentum – becomes apparent in all European countries particularly in regard to membership numbers, where the loss has only recently come to a halt. Reasons for this loss of members are manifold. The value shift in societies towards “new” values emphasising individuality, personal responsibility and self-realisation and the lack of interest in the membership in “old” large organisations associated with it, is certainly one aspect. In addition, processes of global and regional integration have altered the basic principles for trade unions’ actions. Under the guise of ‘competitiveness’, European governments have cut back on social benefits and questioned major accomplishments of labour organisations. As long as neoliberal thinking was mainstream, trade unions were considered at least to be slowing down progress, if not entirely obsolete. This way of thinking has changed rapidly since the start of the financial crisis in 2008. Trust in the invisible hand of the free markets is sinking, and at the same time, public acceptance of unions is rising again/on the rise and membership numbers are stabilising.

Against this backdrop we extended invitations to the spring seminar at the Inter-University-Center Dubrovnik to discuss “The Future of Trade Unions in Europe“ in the usual interdisciplinary manner. Important questions in this context were among others the reasons for the prolonged loss of significance of trade unions in Europe, new forms of collective action in the era of globalised markets and multi-national corporations, innovative forms of membership recruitment and last but not least alliances of trade unions to meet the European crisis. In addition to that we wanted to illustrate the different developments in the member states of the European Union.

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This special issue presents the first part of the discussion. *Walter Müller-Jentsch* starts off with his essay on the fundamental question of which role trade unions can play in capitalist market societies. The essay reflects the theoretical discussion proceeding from the origins of liberalism to ordo-liberalism and recent debates of business ethics based on the German system of social market economy. *Bengt Larrson, Matias Bengtsson* und *Kristina Lovén Seldén* focus on the Nordic model of industrial relations. Because of their similarity in different dimensions this article summarises the recent development of trade unions in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, without neglecting key national and sectoral differences on an empirical basis. The article by *Jean Faniel* looks at the situation in Belgium, where the Ghent system originated. *Sylvia Rohlfner* presents the change of trade unions in Spain and focuses with the institution of social pacts on the dialogue between the social partners in the tripartism of the Spanish system of industrial relations. With *Martin Krzywdzinski's* article this special issue turns to the development in Eastern Europe. The author outlines the recent history of trade union movements in Poland and discusses mainly the current experiments on participatory structures on the workplace level and on the introduction of works councils.

We will continue the discussion about the future of trade unions in Europe in another special issue of *Management Revue*. At this point we would however like to thank not only the authors for their contributions but also the participants for exciting discussions, the Inter-University-Center Dubrovnik and Nada Bruer in particular for the organisation as well as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for their support.