

Prospects for trade union action in Europe during and after the crisis: challenges, strategic approaches, self-conception and positioning





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FOREWORD

The economic and fiscal crisis led to a long-term change in European societies in economic, political and social terms. This affected the role of workers' organisations in employee representation and in their own decision-making and responsibility. The question is still how workers' organisations can represent and articulate their interests, which ways of action are suitable under the current circumstances, what future they have in Europe, and how their work is changing.

At the same time one of the major challenges for workers' organisations in the near future will be to improve working and living conditions of employees and to promote social security in line with the social market economy model. Therefore social dialogue has to be strengthened and workers' organisations' decision-making and responsibility has to be enhanced.

In the 2013 budget year, under its education and training programme "European Social Dialogue" the EZA co-ordinated projects on the issue of "Perspectives of decision-making and responsibility for workers' organisations in Europe after the crisis", putting the focus on challenges, strategic approaches, self-conception and positioning of workers' organisations as well as on the interplay of requirements for workers' organisations described above.

In terms of the themes, this project co-ordination was linked with earlier EZA seminars dealing with the topics of effective employee representation, future ways for workers' organisations in Europe, and the changing requirements regarding the effective work of employee' organisations in a rapidly changing working environment. Furthermore this project co-ordination can also be seen in line with the 2012 project coordination dealing with the

topic “Ways out of the debt crisis” and the recommendations for workers’ organisations regarding their role after the peak of the crisis.

First and foremost I would like to thank Volker Scharlowsky, who was in charge of project co-ordination and was responsible for evaluating the results, and for the thematic coordination between the member organisations involved. I also wish to thank my colleague Matthias Homey, who coordinated the activities from the EZA Office. The European Commission’s Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion supported our activities with content and funding.

We hope that the results of the project co-ordination reach a large group of people, and that the problem-solving approaches elaborated on the issue of workers’ organisations’ decision-making and responsibility can help give individuals and the various workers’ organisations in the EZA network guidance in tackling this issue.

We invite you to contact us with further suggestions of your own on this topic. Our contact details are on the back of the brochure.

Roswitha Gottbehüt
EZA Secretary General

INTRODUCTION

As one of the tasks of co-ordinating six projects dealing with issues relating to “prospects for trade union action”, this final report was drawn up on the activities carried out, the topics discussed, and thoughts on the prospects. The EZA, the European Centre for Workers’ Questions based in Königswinter, supports workers’ organisations with content, technical assistance and not least funding from the European Union in the discussion of current developments and fundamental challenges “during and after the crisis”, i.e. in a phase of economic, technological, as well as political and social changes. This enables the social dialogue to be promoted in individual national sectors, states, European and cross-border sectors and altogether on a European level, for only with reflective work and well developed thoughts on the future of the world of labour and the economy are trade unions relevant players in the social dialogue. That is one of the reasons the situation of the social dialogue also appears in the report.

At the same time I would like to thank those who took part in the seminars involved from numerous countries, workers’ organisations, scientific institutions, and my contact partners from the EZA Office for the co-operation shown at all times.

SUMMARY

Six seminars on trade union action during and after the severe crisis provide the opportunity to explore and discuss the situation of social dialogue, the employment and income situation, and prospects for trade union action. The speakers from trade unions, politics, civil society and science as well as the participants themselves discussed a large number of possibilities for action. It has become clear that the social market economy needs social dialogue to work considerably better than it does at present, and that the working and living conditions of many workers need to be improved for greater social security to be achieved.

The EZA set up an internal forum on the Internet and supported the entire project with European Union funding.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Description of the issues

Politics, the economy and society are in a process of change in Europe as a whole, but the change differs in the individual states. The central starting point was/is the economic crisis, which also leads to the question what roles and what prospects for action workers have, how their legal, social and economic situation is developing.

Company participation structures, company-related possibilities for co-determination and political social dialogue are ways of incorporating the interests of trade unions, particularly with the aim of representing the interests of all workers. In part these ways are viewed critically, in part they are restricted and reduced – not, however, by the workers or their organisations. So in the seminars the focus was not just on descriptions of the state of things, but primarily and repeatedly on the question of how workers can express and represent their interests.

The entire set of issues is defined by questions for which answers were sought and which were discussed in the seminars. These are specifically:

- What means can trade unions use?
- What future do they have in Europe?
- How is trade union work changing?

As the report shows, the set of issues is not narrowly defined, nor is it conclusively dealt with by the seminars. Nor was that to be expected, given the breadth of issues, the differentiated economic structures in Europe and the different political developments in the countries.

1.2 Description of the tasks

The project co-ordination is seen not only as project-related support but also as transcending the projects.

This firstly enables the organisations preparing and running the seminars to be offered specific advice and assistance, and secondly makes it possible for concerted arrangements and initial documentation of the individual seminars.

A general report function is supported in particular by the forum launched on the EZA homepage. The work phase began with the EZA opening seminar in Milan in November 2012 and ends with the presentation of this report and a concluding viewing of the documents and files made available in the forum.

2 DESCRIPTION OF THE MEASURES

22 – 24 November 2012, Milan, Italy: Opening seminar: Key areas for the European social dialogue, EZA in conjunction with FEDER.AGRI. (Federazione Nazionale per lo Sviluppo dell'Agricoltura)

21 – 24 May 2013, Doorn, Netherlands: European industrial policy and the role and place of the sectoral social dialogue in the European textile, clothing and leather industry, Recht en Plicht

12 – 15 September 2013, Bucharest, Romania: The trade union movement – present and future, CNS “Cartel Alfa” / F.N.CORESI (Confederația Națională Sindicală “Cartel Alfa” / Fundația Națională CORESI)

25 – 26 September 2013, Berlin, Germany: Trade union pluralism, *Krifa (Kristelig Fagbevægelse)*

26 – 28 September 2013, Madrid, Spain: Responsibility has a future – What does it mean for social dialogue in public services? *EUROFEDOP (Europese Federatie van het Overheidspersoneel)*

25 – 27 October 2013, Cracow, Poland: Social dialogue in the education system, *KK NSZZ “Solidarność” (Komisja Krajowa NSZZ “Solidarność”)*

13 – 16 February 2014, Lisbon, Portugal: The market for precarious employment and social cohesion in Portugal and the EU, *CFTL (Centro de Formação e Tempos Livres)*

2.1 Opening seminar

At the annual EZA opening seminar, a working group (Milan, 22 November 2012) discussed the general issues with the organisations involved, and the co-ordination and individual seminars were briefly presented. The seminar-goers agreed to create a mailing list and an internal platform for papers, project results or other documents in order to improve the exchange of experience.

2.2 Seminars

The following section presents the seminars incorporated.

European industrial policy and the role and place of the sectoral social dialogue in the European textile, clothing and leather industry, Recht en Plicht

Specialist presentations threw light on various facets of the general trend in the world of labour (social, economic, legal, trade union situation) and of the prospects by sector (textile, clothing, leather industry). There were national reports on the situation in the particular country. These made it clear that although the sector has considerable importance in individual European states, generally speaking it is experiencing manifest job losses. All in all the social partner relationship/national sectoral social dialogue is determined by the respective traditional basic orientation of the social partners.

The trade union movement – present and future, CNS “Cartel Alfa” / F.N.CORESI (Confederația Națională Sindicală “Cartel Alfa” / Fundația Națională CORESI)

Firstly, it was pointed out that the role of and possible courses of action for trade unions on the respective company level are contingent not only on the degree of unionisation but also on the culture of interaction. Secondly, the seminar referred to a regression in trade union and workers' rights in numerous states since the 1990s. This is combined with considerable globalisation pressure in the states strongly represented at the seminar and a distinctly lacking or weak tradition of social and/or societal dialogue. Thirdly, the seminar also considered that international co-operation – with regard to the EU, European trade unions or the EZA – should be intensified, even if particular states have to go their own way.

Trade union pluralism, Krifa (Kristelig Fagbevægelse)

The seminar focused on questions of dealing with majorities and minorities with the aim of trade union co-operation. Thus trade union pluralism is viewed firstly as organisational pluralism – as in states with competing trade union umbrella organisations – secondly as trade union structuring within an organisation, e.g. with factions such as in Austria. The starting point in each case is the right to freedom of association.

Responsibility has a future – What does it mean for social dialogue in public services? EUROFEDOP (Europese Federatie van het Overheidspersoneel)

The seminar on the public sector's fields of activity and prospects focused on three aspects: working conditions in the public sector, discussions on privatisation, and social responsibility (including CSR) in the social market economy. In particular there were discussions on the current impact of administrative re-organisation processes, public austerity measures and cut-backs, and the prospects of social partnership, including against the background of privatisation tendencies that were viewed critically.

Social dialogue in the education system, KK NSZZ "Solidarność" (Komisja Krajowa NSZZ "Solidarność")

This was one of several seminars during a regular round of consultation on questions of education, training and teachers' interests. The four speeches, discussions and the working group phase focused on the ethics of teaching and e-learning.

Fundamental considerations on the definition of ethics of teaching formed the substance of the beginning of the seminar. Further contributions concentrated on the question of using electronic media/e-learning, especially in schools. The dichotomy affecting all the players in schooling – from parents to teaching staff – was addressed: on the one hand living and working in a world heavily influenced by electronic media, on the other hand using them only to a limited extent at school and not wanting to neglect the imparting of values.

The market for precarious employment and social cohesion in Portugal and the EU, CFTL (Centro de Formação e Tempos Livres)

The seminar that focused on presenting, analysing and combating precarious working conditions was geared to southern Europe and at many junctures clearly dealt with European politics as a whole. The panels were designed in such a way that on the one hand other players beyond the trade union sphere were also considered – for instance the moral role of the churches – on the other hand cases in point like the situation of the world of work in Germany were also subjected to critical scrutiny.

A visit to a socially responsible medium-sized production company offered a positive counterpoint.

3 COMPILATION OF RESULTS

This section reports on results, proposals, possible courses of action on the different sets of issues across the seminars. Reference is made to individual seminars only selectively, because overall it is evident from all the seminars that firstly there are recurring descriptions of situations and secondly – with exceptions – the strategies of the workers' organisations are also similar to some extent.

3.1 Description of the situation

Altogether three key developments characterise the situation in the countries of the organisations/participants represented.

Firstly there is no discernible thoroughly positive trend in the income situation and living conditions of economically dependent workers – instead of stagnation, in many cases there is even deterioration. This applies not only with regard to income and job opportunities in general, job security in particular, but also with regard to the correlation between education/training and work on the one hand, retirement income and life in old age on the other. In other cases entire sections or production areas are under pressure throughout Europe: in retreat in some cases, for instance in southeast Europe, evidently in a restructuring and de-skilling spiral as in the textile industry (Recht&Pflicht, Doorn) or often in the public sector, too (Eurofedop, Madrid).

And then for about two decades now numerous countries have been operating a policy which, coupled with European legislation, has worsened labour law in those countries. These are, for example, provisions from the Hartz reforms in Germany and measures towards a larger temporary work and low-wage sector (CFTL, Lisbon). Trade unionists from the public sector classify

comprehensive deregulation and in particular privatisation strategies in this way (Eurofedop, Madrid). Especially in southern Europe, in Portugal for instance, the effect the conversion of jobs into barely paid/unpaid work experience has is disorienting, demotivating and also causing an exodus (case examples from CFTL, Lisbon). Although personal/family poverty has a long tradition in certain regions, the contrast with economically prospering sectors in the EU and with political declarations of intent has become particularly striking.

And finally the possibilities for co-determination and workers participation in factories and companies (works councils etc.) and of workers organised in federations (co-determination legislation, social dialogue) were regularly subjected to critical scrutiny. There are conspicuously clear differences in developments, attributable to different traditions or worlds of experience. The European Union policy is regularly presented and discussed in the seminars, sometimes in a specific context, sometimes as fundamental background information. As a summary of these contributions, a critical appraisal makes one discrepancy utterly clear: on the one hand, European action is also implemented on a local or regional level or in particular sectors, through intervention, funding measures, projects for instance (on education: Solidarnosc, Cracow; case examples of Erasmus funding at CFTL, Lisbon). On the other hand, the lack or lacking depth of entire policy areas is criticised. For example, the textile industry is suffering from an inadequate industrial policy (Recht en Plicht, Doorn), the promotion of business start-ups in southern or especially southeast Europe evidently works incisively as a “policy of subcontractors” or as the promotion of subsidiaries of multinationals (Cartel Alfa/Coresi, Bucharest, contributions to the debate at CFTL, Lisbon). At the same time the disappearance of traditional manufacturing sectors is criticised, European integration being perceived as de-industrialisation (contributions to the debate at Cartel Alfa/Coresi, Bucharest; CFTL, Lisbon).

This is accompanied by a basic assessment of European policy as neoliberal in economic terms, guided by the image of free markets and deregulated economic sectors but less bound by the idea of the social market economy actually being propagated. The social market economy (cf. the Eurofedop policy paper “Responsibility has a future”, p. 6f) is outlined as an internationally competitive economic order aimed at full employment, social progress, ecological and economic development. This idea clashes with the multiple experiences of unemployment and future uncertainty. This is explicitly perceived as a regional, prospective risk for young people, but they are hardly the only age group that often can only find work in economically precarious conditions of employment (focus at CFTL, Lisbon).

However, it becomes clear from the participation of individual representatives and in their contributions to the debate that in the seminars parts of the political bodies or corporate organisations actively champion social dialogue, negotiating structures with the trade unions – on a cross-company, sometimes company/company-related level. Social dialogue operates partially and selectively, but not as pan-European daily action, it is not a regularly practised procedure as traditional trade union and works council organisations of “classic Western European trade union structures” know it. Positive highlights were the words of welcome from the Romanian Minister of State for Social Dialogue, Pana (Cartel Alfa/Coresi, Bucharest), the contribution to the debate by the member of the Scottish cabinet MacAskill (Eurofedop, Madrid), and the involvement of business representatives (Eurofedop, Madrid, Recht en Plicht, Doorn, the presentation by the Janz group of companies at CFTL, Lisbon).

3.2 Objectives

All the seminars incorporated here were held in different context structures, resulting in differentiated expectations of and objectives with the seminars.

All in all the following general objectives can be derived from the preparations, the seminars themselves, associated discussions and other procedures:

Firstly, in every seminar the focus was on the issue-specific exchange of experience, partly based on verbal/written status reports with visual back-up. The forms varied, but in each case it entailed a transnational view of the situation and reciprocal information.

This was closely linked with a description of the status of the national or sectoral social interaction: how do politicians, companies and organisations, trade unions and workers interact? To what extent is there a functioning collective bargaining policy, for example?

Finally the emphasis was on prospects: the seminars help not least the organisational networking for greater ability to act.

In particular the seminars are also opportunities for discussing, critically scrutinising or re-developing options for action. This applies to every level of trade union presence, from the company to the European level. The following section therefore focuses on this question: in what directions of action were the participants and speakers thinking? The report can only be formulated from the “laboratory situation” of the particular seminar.

3.3 Recommendations for action from the seminars

On the most important issues referred to above, the players in the seminars involved – organisers, speakers and discussants – made a considerable number of proposals for action for their own organisations or where applicable umbrella organisations, for the EZA, their respective national or European policy-makers in general and other players.

Not all suggestions are included here by any means, some of them are introduced in a modified form, others are summarised. However, it is apparent that with self-reflection the seminar-goers regard their own or their own

organisation's action as capable of development. The following proposals are classified under six sub-headings, with overlaps being unavoidable and it being possible to view classifications differently.

Income situation and living conditions

- Secure or develop minimum wage provisions
- Develop education and qualification opportunities
- Regulate the reduction or prohibition of (unpaid) work experience after education and training
- Aim for a reduction or prohibition of temporary or agency work

Work situation

- Reduce or prevent further "brain drain"
- Make more state and European funding available in education and training, including for the qualification of staff there
- In the public sector ensure or restore reliability and continuity in dealings with employees
- Eliminate precarious working conditions (low wages, short employment cycles, no prospect of social security, frequently inadequate for training)

Social dialogue

- Altogether develop the national social dialogue
- Make social dialogue a more binding institution
- Make the right to trade union membership more natural in companies
- Extend collective bargaining

Exchange of experience

- Acquire new members
- Modernise the organisation

- Make experiences transferrable
- Make trade union work more Internet-friendly

Organisation-specific prospects for action

- Extend Internet-supported recruiting, support and informative work
- Interlink work and aims of NGOs and trade unions
- Improve social awareness of and about trade unions
- Secure right to freedom of association and trade union membership
- Communicate the EZA's objectives in Europe more strongly
- Extend international trade union and cross-association co-operation
- Promote co-ordinated work in multinational companies

Political, national and European prospects for action

- Combat corruption structures
- Reduce/prevent further brain drain
- Do not further worsen public services
- Do not further privatise public services
- Modernise public services in a targeted way, e.g. in e-health, e-tools in education and training

4 THOUGHTS ON FURTHER WORK

This concluding section on content – set out in question form – contains first and foremost some of the author’s reflections, resulting from experience in these (and other) Europe-oriented events put on by the EZA and other organisations. May these reflections serve as the starting point for further discussion.

Develop social dialogue?

All forms of dialogue presuppose that everyone taking part is on an equal footing; the pre-requirement for successful dialogue is also willingness to be involved in it. If workers and their organisations lack partners in social dialogue, there should be an investigation as to whether and how European mediator structures can be developed and where necessary introduced thoroughly on a top-down basis. For instance, the question has to be asked whether and how the European Parliament can produce a report on progress in the particular social dialogue (national, sectoral).

Can European effectiveness be extended?

The question should probably be prefaced by “How”, for the request addressed to the European players, primarily the EZA, was repeated on various occasions. In some cases sector organisations also operate on a European level. Yet it is evidently hard to develop a coherent, interlinked, feasible and transparent structure for action to enable the expectations formulated in the seminars to be transported in a better way. That is an expectation from the seminars, though.