

**Trade Unions, Social Policy and EU Enlargement Eastward:  
There is Any ‘European’ Social Identity?**

(draft outline)

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The paper investigates identities, orientations and policies of Western and Eastern European trade unions with reference to the EU enlargement. Drawing on previous empirical research as well as on macro-level research in progress, it will be argued that the process of European integration hides risks at the level of social identities: they might diverge making more difficult than ever before the elaboration of any European social policy. Nevertheless, information and ad hoc co-operation are in a position to make of EU enlargement, on the contrary, a creative occasion. Trade unions could not only avoid conservative withdrawing, but even, starting from East-West co-operation, reformulate their identities and develop more inclusive union policies also within the national workforces.

*The issue*

Controlling and ideally reducing the diversity among European countries in the field of social rights is the main rationale for European social policy and social dialogue. The enlargement Eastwards will increase this diversity and therefore make European social policy both more difficult and more necessary. An inherent weakness of social dialogue at the European level lies in the limited representativeness of interests' associations: the European Trade Union Confederation is all but a real union, while the employers do not have real incentives to organise before labour (Schulten 1996; Gobin 1997). How will the EU enlargement influence this situation?

In order to assess this question it is important to remind that, as argued in different ways by social theorists like Offe, Touraine, Przeworski, Pizzorno, Habermas and Melucci, the social actors are not only a matter of 'interests', but also of underlying identities. The historically various union identities (class, craft, gender, religion, ethnicity...) are rooted in different subjective experiences. Today, in a period of international integration, the boundaries of interests coincide less and less with the boundaries of experiences, and therefore of identities. At the same time, old labour internationalism is weakening. Is any European trade union identity possible?

*The evidence*

In-depth qualitative research on trade union activists in multinational companies in Italy and Poland has discovered a number of obstacles to East-West union co-operation (Meardi 2000).

As a matter of fact, there is not yet European labour integration. The first nine Central and Eastern European trade unions had to wait six years before being accepted into the European Trade Union Confederation. The European Work Councils still do not statutorily include the unions from the EU candidate countries. In the 'core' of industrial unionism, like in the steel sector, solidarity among Eastern and Western trade unions 'has been notable for its absence' (Bacon and Blyton 1996). The fears of social dumping and of *Peripherisierung* of Central and Eastern Europe are widespread (Dauerstädt and Meyer-Stamer 1995). Bargaining priorities remain different on the two sides of the former iron curtain.

Fieldwork research in multinational companies allows saying more. Trade union activists from Eastern and Western plants can easily fall into reciprocal stereotypes: rich egoist Westerners vs. incapable and unfair competitor Easterners. The experiences and the identities of trade union rank and file activists are themselves different. This has to do not only with the state-socialist past, but also with the latest social and economic trends. On many issues (pensions' system, working-time, wage differentials...), post-communist countries are following a sort of 'North American' road rather than the one of the European social market economy.

As surveys show, post-communist workers are mostly in favour of European Union integration and see it as a chance for social promotion. However, this support should not be taken for granted. Some smaller, radical trade unions are already violently anti-European. Others are not against but express much scepticism. At the same time, in the West the ETUC backs the enlargement process, but many unions, especially in Austria and Germany, express serious fears (Poprzęcki 1999).

### *Scenarios for the future and perspectives for research*

The strategies of the social actors involved in social policy in Europe with regard to the EU enlargement are not yet stabilised. Different scenarios are then plausible. *Ad hoc* co-operation might gradually develop, like it is already happening in the borders' regions (Ebert Stiftung 1999). Trade unions, under pressure from both globalization and internal differentiation, might reformulate their identities in order to become more 'encompassing'. A project of European social identity and citizenship might be launched by the social actors. Nevertheless, the creation of two deeply different 'social speeds' (like between Mexico, USA and Canada in the NAFTA case) or widening social gaps and rivalries (like in the case of the German unification or of the Italian divide between North and South) are not impossible.

As the enlargement approaches, it is important to investigate the orientations and policies of the actors involved in order to prevent, or reduce, East-West strains. In the case of trade unions, the possibilities of union East-West co-operation should be studied at three levels:

- The 'top' level of trade union leaderships and policies, focusing on the role played during the negotiations of EU enlargement;
- The 'workplace' level of union co-operation in multinational companies with transplants in Central-Eastern Europe.
- The 'social context' level of employees' orientations, focusing on the different aspirations of workers' in Eastern and Western Europe.

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