'Responding to the changing nature of work: European trade unions and 'precarious' workers'

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This paper seeks to address one of the key problems facing trade unions and industrial relations systems, that of the decline of traditional long-term job security (mainly on the basis of ‘permanent’ or ‘open ended’ contracts of employment) and the rise of temporary, agency, ‘dependent self-employed’ and other ‘precarious’ forms of employment. The paper draws on the initial results of a three-year study of the strategies developed by trade unions in ten west European countries in response to globalisation and other major changes in the world of work by Steen Scheuer (University of Southern Denmark), Richard Hyman (LSE) and this author. This study includes both quantitative research based on a large-scale telephone survey in each country, and qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with union leaders and academics, as well as on an extensive review of secondary literature from unions, the EIRO, ILO and other sources.

The decline of ‘traditional’ contracts of employment and the increase in various forms of precarious employment form a major theme in almost all the countries we have studied. The specific form ‘precarity’ takes in each country varies, depending on its legal and IR systems and its prevailing levels of job security, demonstrating the agility of employers in exploiting the weakest link in every national system. The use of agency work to undercut existing terms and conditions has been further facilitated by the recent European Court of Justice rulings in the Laval, Viking, and Luxembourg cases. Often it is the most vulnerable workers – women, young workers and members of ethnic minorities – who are most directly affected by precarity, while in the current economic climate, precarious workers are sometimes seen as a ‘buffer’ against job losses among ‘core’ workers. This division between those with stable ‘permanent’ employment and those without leads to conflict between the interests of different groups of workers.

In all countries where ‘precarity’ has emerged as an important phenomenon, it has had a negative effect on trade unions’ ability to organise and represent workers and to carry out effective industrial action. Trade unions in the ten countries have responded to these challenges differently, depending on their strength, ideological orientation, form of organisation (single or multiple national centres and weaker or stronger workplace representation) and strategic orientation (‘service’ or ‘organising’ models), and also on the structure of collective bargaining and the framework of labour law. The union response has varied from maintaining a focus on ‘traditional’ permanent workforces to innovative forms of local organising to the formation of new unions or sections within unions specifically aimed at temporary or agency workers. This paper will give an overview of the general pattern of precarious work across the ten countries and then focus on a small number of specific cases of trade union action, before presenting general conclusions on the nature of the union response to the challenge of changing patterns of work.

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