How do trade unions build up alliances across-borders?
An analysis of the trade unions’ responses to restructuring in Europe

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Trade unions and their representatives are facing a serious challenge from what is commonly called globalization. More specifically, increased global competition and change at work undermines trade unions power by weakening control over labour market competition. Restructuring challenges the sectoral and national organization of trade unions and brings new pressures on existing organizational structures and bargaining systems.

Trade unions sometimes counter this threat by trying to establish alliances across national boundaries. Despite an explosion of interests and international studies in transnational labour activities (Moody, 1997; Munck, 1998; Waterman, 1999; Hennebert, 2008; Bieler et al., 2008; Pulignano, 2009 EJIR, Martinez Lucio, 2009 IRJ) and attempts to develop within (and across) sectoral analysis of the determinants of transnational solidarity (Anner et al., 2006; Lillie, 2004; Hancke’, 2000), there have been few systematic attempts so far aimed at providing a systematic analytical typology of different strategies trade unions adopt at different levels (i.e. regional, national, workplace) and with regards to the different nature of restructuring while trying to build up solidarities and alliances across-borders as a response to corporate restructuring. This paper examines what trade unions do to build up alliances in case of restructuring by looking at the different levels of trade unions activity, such as the regional (i.e. European), national, industry, workplace level on one hand, and the diversified nature of restructuring on the other hand. In so doing it attempts to provide a broader view of what trade unions understand as restructuring by explaining the anticipatory internal processes leading to the creation of transnational solidarity and more proactive responses.

The paper argues that trade unions adopt different kinds of strategies in order to respond to restructuring which we analytically classify in terms of (1) organizing and membership mobilization (2) trust-making and the creation of proactive dialogues with employers and the state (3) the communication and exchange of responses through the coordinating across national and sectoral borders. The latter, more specifically including the coordination across national as well as industry and company borders. Within each of the strategies outlined above, national patterns of worker representation as well as European employees representation structures (such as European Works Councils or EWCs) retain the greatest importance because trade unions continue to use them more and more as an important structural and industrial leverage to organize and to bargain in situation of restructuring while attempting to build up alliances and establish social cohesion versus the increasing pressures which derive from corporate management practices, such as benchmarking and outsourcing, which have increased inter-firms competition. For example, at the European level, most of the trade unions’ industry federations in Europe have established strategies for supporting and working with the European Works Councillors, and there have been extensive training programmes to help EWCs to develop effective strategies in area of restructuring. Likewise, trade unions in national settings in Europe have produced guidelines for union representatives on restructuring, which refocus on basic trade union organizational issues, such as why be a union member. They have also coordinated responses across-borders while improving the understanding of each others’ national employment relations systems and laws and learned to reorganize their traditional work along the new line provided by restructuring (for example learning to work across sectors). Information technology has been extensively used to overcome the traditional geographical barriers while fostering communication and coordination among different workers, trade unions and employee representatives in different spatial geographical locations. In the paper we argue that the use of one strategy does not automatically excludes the use of the others. Strategies can be used simultaneously depending on the extent to which trade unions and their representatives are trying to establish short-term strategy in situation of change or are attempting
long-term strategic interventions. The latter helps in building up sustainable alliances and creating a spirit of shared values in terms of justice and fairness: as well as shared methods of collective organizing. On the other hand, it can be also argued that long-term strategic intervention helps in building up cooperation while focusing on workplace organization as an equally important part of trade unions responses to restructuring.

The essence of the paper is that we need to consider different dimensions across which restructuring and union responses occur. To this extent, we need to avoid simply falling into a workplace (i.e. looking at structures of employees representatives alone) and local based view of mobilizing or a national and state level view of union lobbying or organizing, but look at how different levels of union action do different things and complement each other – or not - within the broad politics of restructuring. What is more, we need to also think in terms of not just the external organizational relations (employers, members, community, etc.) of unions but also the internal organizational requirements and relations that build a more proactive response (see Stuart et al, 2009).

The paper combines a cross-national and –industry approach in order to examine important organizational strategies and identify constraints trade unions have in anticipating and managing company restructuring and adding to the development of strategic responses of the trade unions and their representatives at the different levels of the unions’ activity. It draws on 17 cases of joint trade unions ‘key actions’ at both national and European level: 9 cases at the national level including 11 national trade unions confederations and 7 cases at the European level including 5 European industry federations in 7 different sectors such as graphical, finance, metal, chemical, public, education, transport. The cases were developed within the TRACE project (Trade Unions Anticipating Change in Europe) led by the Education department (former ETUCO) of the ETUI-ETUC in Brussels in a two years period 2005-2007. Data collection consisted of participatory observations to trade unions meetings and workshops. In addition, a total of 60 qualitative semi-structured interviews with local, national and European trade union officials covering the sectors and the national trade union organisations integrated the data collection. The authors of the paper have been actively involved in the coordination and evaluation of the TRACE project. Differences reflecting diverse trade union national and sector-based strategies and politics emerged as the key explanatory variable of the diverse functioning and content of the different cross-national and –industry-based alliances which were created to respond to corporate restructuring.

References