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Organising – A Strategic Option for Trade Union Renewal?

Klaus Dörre, Hajo Holst, Oliver Nachtwey

Against the background of a deep crisis in trade union representation, the authors seek to determine some possible starting points for a renewal of trade unions. The employees' organisations are seen as actors who have a strategic choice as to which power resources to tap. Though the specific national systems of industrial relations influence the unions' strategic options, there are nevertheless various opportunities for trans-national learning processes. This contribution analyses the potential for trade union renewal, drawing on several examples of organising approaches in the USA and Germany.

Key words: union revitalisation, power resources, organising, industrial relations

“I do not view the labour movement as part of the problem. To me, it's part of the solution.”

Barack Obama (www.tagesspiegel.de, 30 January, 2009)

The decline of organisational power of the trade unions has been discussed in the social sciences for a while (e.g. Dribbusch 2003). Between 1993 and 2003, the European trade unions on average lost 15% of their membership. German DGB trade unions are no exception, currently their total membership is the same for united Germany as it was for West Germany alone in 1969/1970. Lately, however, some positive counter-tendencies have become apparent. In 2008, IG Metall, for the first time in many years, was able to

bring the decline in membership to a halt, increasing its membership in the workplaces by 1.6 percent, by attracting younger employees (Infodienst 2009). Whether this justifies the headline “Comeback of the Trade Unions” (Tagesspiegel, 1 February, 2009) remains to be seen. The current scientific scrutiny of a possible revitalisation of trade unions can be accredited to the so-called “Labour Revitalisation Studies” (e.g. Turner/Cornfield 2007, Frege/Kelly 2004). In contrast to the fatalistic character of many analyses, they focus primarily on the strategic choice of trade unions’ to act creatively in order to renew themselves.

As confirmed by various studies, there is nothing like a linear decline of the labour movements and trade unions. Instead, a confusing mixture of various phenomena of crisis and – often still in an embryonic stage – processes of renewal can be observed. US trade unions, after being looked upon rather pitifully for some time, are today considered a living proof of the feasibility of alternatives to the bureaucratically administered demise of workers organisations (Geiselberger 2007: 79 ff.). Indeed, the message is making its way across the Atlantic. The international debate on union revitalisation revolves around concepts such as Social Movement Unionism, Organising, and Campaigning. It ranges from methodical innovations in membership recruitment to strategic organisational shifts of entire trade unions. Is this more than just another trend that will disappear as quickly as it came after its first setback? We are a bit more optimistic. The heterogeneous approaches discussed under the umbrella of Strategic Unionism reveal a potential for union renewal that almost seems predestined to set in motion trans-national learning processes. Needless to say, such learning processes always take place within the context of specific institutions and national systems of industrial relations. However, the perspective must not get too narrow, considering that many authors, arguing from an institutionalist viewpoint, do not see the wood for the trees, because of a methodically prescribed overemphasis on divergences (Strange 1997: 183-191, similarly Dufour 1998).

In order to avoid such pitfalls, we will shed light especially on the power dimension of institutionalisation, and trade unions’ capacity to act. A closer look at renewal efforts in Germany reveals that some union branches have

adopted some of the innovations exemplified by American organising unions, and discussed in the corresponding literature – however, without any explicit reference to an overseas model. *Movement orientation*, *membership participation*, and *campaigning capacity* demarcate a realm of possibilities within which a strategic choice can be made by the trade unions. The difficulties of successfully putting into practice organising concepts do not exclusively result from the peculiarities of the respective system of industrial relations. Instead, we argue, trade unions in the Anglo-Saxon voluntarist systems, as well as in corporative systems, face the homologous challenge of gaining access to new power resources. Essentially, the problem of trade union renewal strategies is not the adoption of single organising practices, but instead their conjunction and consolidation in a coherent concept of associated power. We will elaborate this view in several steps. To begin with (1.), the Jena¹ power resources approach (‘Jenaer Machtressourcen-Ansatz’) will be outlined. This is followed (2.) by a compressed summary of the research findings concerning organising approaches in the USA. Next (3.), the efforts for renewal in Germany will be analysed. Finally (4.), some considerations regarding organising and the concept of associated power are presented.

1. Power resources and trade unions

The power of trade unions essentially rests on the efforts of wage earners to overcome the competition amongst one another, at least temporarily and limited to certain industries and territories, in order to pursue collective objectives on the basis of shared interests and values. By this definition, it is a special case of workers’, or rather, of wage earners’ power. According to Wright (2000: 962) and Silver (2005: 30-44), a distinction can be made between *structural* and *organisational power* of wage earners. *Structural power* has to do with the status of certain groups of blue and white collar

¹ The authors call their special “power resource” approach “Jena approach” because they are working at the sociological institute of the University of Jena. It is a special habit in German sociology to name one’s “approach” after the location of one’s institute. There is a Munich approach, a Göttingen approach etc. in Germany, all of them are used as some kind of trade mark (editor).

workers within the economic system. It may be based on primary negotiation power arising from a tense situation in the labour market, but it may also stem from the production power which results from a special strategic position of groups of wage earners within the value chain. *Organisational power*, in contrast, has to grow out of a combination of forces to form political or trade union organisations, and it implies certain logics of collective action aiming at a limitation, or at least modification, of the control of capital over the application of the means of production (Offe/Wiesendahl 1980).

Structural power is often exerted spontaneously. It occurs in the form of “labour unrest” (Silver 2005: 11, 44 ff.), sudden uproars and situational outrage, but also as informal sabotage or absenteeism in production processes. In contrast, organisational power generally depends on trade unions capable of acting, political parties, or similar actors. While structural power can do without trade union apparatuses and formal organisations, organisational power is a resource that can only be acquired through strategically planned collective action and formal organisation². The organisational power of trade unions can substitute and extend the structural power of particular groups of wage earners, but it cannot fully replace it.

Ultimately, organisational power is a derived form of power which can hardly do without professional representatives, or salaried and voluntary functionaries.

In becoming mass organisations, workers parties and trade unions have become enormous bureaucratic organisations, in which the tendency towards an ‘oligarchisation’ and disconnection from membership interests analysed by Michels (1925) is manifested again and again. Of course, these oligarchic tendencies do not, as Michels believes, result from the informational advantage, the tactical skills, or the superior resources of the party or trade union leadership, nor from a psychological need of the masses for “good leadership”. They are just as much a consequence of the desire to stabilise workers’ power beyond the activity cycles of social movements. Michels’ claim that

² In other cases, structural power can manifest itself through the trade union organisation of mostly profession-related sub-groups of employees, who use their structural power in order to pursue their own special interests without applying an overall principle of solidarity.

“with increasing organisation (...) democracy is on the wane”³, because the leadership groups have made their peace with the existing conditions, and are most interested in preserving their own position of power, and should therefore not be understood mechanically as a “natural law” of all large organisations. Despite undeniable tendencies toward bureaucratisation, trade unions can rid themselves of all constitutive features of a social movement only at the cost of complete self-abandonment.

However, it must be added, the power of wage earners can also be institutionalised beyond organisational limits. Apart from the two classical forms of “workers’ power”, a third source of power – ignored by Beverly Silver – exists especially within the developed capitalisms, namely institutional power. What is characteristic for institutional power is the fact that institutions take those social compromises that were agreed upon in the past, and stipulate them for future economic cycles, as well as for times of altered societal power relations, sometimes even establishing them by law. This way, structural and organisational power is incorporated into societal institutions (Fligstein 2001). The relationship between organised and institutional “workers’ power” cannot be easily fashioned. It seems that the organisational power of wage earners must be well developed, before its institutionalisation is conceded by the opposing forces. Once constituted, institutional power can then have a positive effect on the organisational power of the trade unions. Conversely, it appears that the erosion and weakening of institutions, which in a way embody the coagulated interests of wage earners, can negatively impact the organised representation of blue and white collar workers.

The institutionalisation of workers’ power saw its heyday during the “golden years” of a prospering welfare capitalism. However, the incorporation of wage earners’ interests varied between nation-states. Particularly Scandinavian social scientists argue that the level of de-commodification of wage labour, reached through the influence of labour movements, significantly influences the institutional extent of welfare-states. Or, to put it plainly: the greater a labour movement’s capacity to organise and mobilise, the more extensive the welfare-state becomes (e.g. Korpi 1983; Castles 1978;

³ Michels (1925: 26, 370): “Whoever says large organisation, also says oligarchy.”

Esping-Andersen 1985). Of course, critics of this claim have pointed out, a referral to the strength of labour movements alone is not sufficient to adequately explain the institutional “Varieties of Capitalism” (cp. Esping-Andersen 1998). Yet, there is some indication that the institutionalisation of workers’ power and the expansion of the welfare-state (Rothstein 1992, 1998) mutually positively reinforced each other during a specific phase of development of the western capitalisms.

Institutional power implies institutional embedding of the strategic behaviour of organisations. Institutions constitute themselves through rules *and* resources, they influence and structure the interactions, interpretations and strategies of the actors. They limit and enable the actors’ actions and represent the result of political action themselves. Or, as Rothstein expressed it in a paraphrase of Marx: „*[W]hile people make history under circumstances not of their own choosing, the circumstances might well be of their own making*” (1992: 90). National economic and social systems significantly differ from one another due to the coalitions and compromises that make up the basis for the constitution of markets. Following Fligstein’s (2001: 67 ff.) typology, the “architecture of the markets” in Scandinavian states is dominated by worker-state-coalitions, in the United States the alliances are dominated by capital interests, and in Germany the coalitions are founded on compromises between the organised interests of wage earners and capital. And the institutionalisation of workers’ power differs accordingly in its respective state of development. The voluntarist industrial relations of the liberal Anglo-Saxon capitalisms saw such an institutionalisation only on a low level. The ‘Rhenish-corporative’ capitalisms and particularly the German system of dual representation of interests are, in contrast, marked by a high degree of institutionalised workers’ power (Frege/Kelly 2003, 2004).

This can then also have the effect that the trade unions’ action strategies vary if the systems of institutions come under pressure to change. Institutionalised industrial relations suggest strategies of action for trade unions that may still seem convincing, even though societal power relations have already significantly changed. Utilising institutional power requires that the trade unions are still accepted as the authentic representatives of wage earners in society, despite a decline in their cohesiveness. The prospect of extending

institutional power beyond its generating conditions leads some trade unions to compensate for deficits in representation by compliant behaviour towards the institutions. By doing so, however, the wage earners' organisations permanently run the risk of conserving action strategies which have gradually become inadequate for the current conditions. The danger of a mismatch between institutional and organisational power of the trade unions is most pronounced in those systems of industrial relations with a high degree of institutionalisation. Conversely, trade unions within voluntarist systems are – not automatically, but in the sense of a strategic option – theoretically capable of a fundamental change in their organisational practices, much faster than employees' organisations in a seemingly robust institutional shelter.

Not taking into account national particularities and institutional divergences, the decades following 1945 can be described as an era of expansion of institutional trade union power. As never before in history, wage labour – especially within the continental European capitalisms – had been combined with social property in order to ensure existence and status, which then became manifest through a guaranteed right to pensions, dismissal protection and labor protection, co-management rights as well as binding pay-scale norms. The effective coupling of wage labour with protection and participation rights re-created the status of 'citizen', that is to say, despite abiding inequality, the previously impoverished classes now enjoyed a respected status in society. The trade unions were the driving force behind this development. The more they were successful in securing the wage earners' share of productivity growth and equipping them with collective participation and protection rights, the more they themselves changed. In the welfare-state regulated capitalisms, the basis for their strategic action shifted, from structural and organisational power to institutional power. In Germany this meant that the trade unions and thus the affiliated works councils attempted to utilise the "intermediary" logic of the system of dual representation of interests, and the specific combination of free collective bargaining and co-management as efficiently as possible. This way it was possible to continuously expand institutional trade union power. In the Anglo-Saxon capitalisms, and especially the USA, a comparable level of the status as social citizen or the institutionalisation of wage earners' power was never reached.

Nevertheless, it seems to have been possible even in a system coordinated by markets, hierarchic company organisations, and – to some extent rather rigid – state interventionism (Hollingsworth 1997: 133)⁴ to guarantee wage earners a limited measure of social security and individual predictability, at least on a company-level, despite the orientation towards short-term profits (Sennet 2007).

Since the 1970s, and more forcefully since the mid 1990s, this development has been somewhat reversed. A new “capitalist land grab” (Dörre 2009)⁵ is aimed at the political limitations and regulatory structures, in which all market action was embedded for decades (Harvey 2006). The financial capitalist logic of competition tends to be transferred to all sectors of a mixed economy, and thus to be generalized for all of society through at least six mechanisms. In the field of international relations the (1) so-called Wall-street-Dollar-System, mediated through the monetary policy of the USA and with the constant support from European governments, has helped internationalise some constitutive elements of financial market capitalism. Simulta-

⁴ According to Hollingsworth (1997), this system has its roots in systems of production which over decades are marked by the following characteristics: (1) Tendency towards decisions oriented along a very short time frame; (2) poorly developed capability in most sectors to produce high quality; (3) a weak contractual basis for collective governance in the private sector, but a high learning aptitude in some sectors regarding the development of new products; (4) a strong basis for a continuous economic shift as well as (5) a weak commitment for economic equality.

⁵ In its essence, the land grab theorem claims that capitalism cannot reproduce itself on its own, but structurally relies on the conquest of “external” markets and forms of production. Quite distinct from the version promoted by its classical advocates (Luxemburg 1975; Arendt 2006: 332 ff.), however, the updated version of the land grab theorem is free of any collapse-theoretical implications and can thus be generalised. Capitalism can draw on “an already existing ‘exterior’” for land grabs, such as the existence of non-capitalist societies. It can absorb a certain area within capitalism, e.g. an educational system, which so far has not been commodified. However, it can also “actively create” such an exterior (Harvey 2005: 140); be it through discommodification, that is to say, “creative destruction” (Schumpeter 1968) in the form of fallowisation of workforce potential, industries, and regions, or through de-commodification, i.e. through the production of public goods and investments in infrastructure which ensure long-term spatiotemporal fixations of capital. Active creation of an exterior means that the chain of land grabs is basically endless. On such an extended stepladder, the “lapse” (Arendt 2006) of a state-political, or sometimes violently induced accumulation dynamic can and must perpetually repeat itself.

neously, the market for corporate control, and the companies' control by shareholder value, have caused a profound re-structuring of the private economic sector oriented on the world market. What has emerged is (2) a planned economy at the service of maximum profits and highest returns. In it, capital return and profits are no longer the result of some real economic performance, but are postulated as indices by the top management as orientation marks for all decentralized units and actors. However, this system (3) evidently pushes for a structural economic shift. In competition for state subsidies, some micro-regions confront each other as "collective entrepreneurs", because this is supposed to create favourable conditions for absorbing structural collapses. Former public enterprises such as postal and railway services were (4) (partly) privatized long ago, and have since been run as profit-oriented companies designed to go public – which has not happened so far. Public administrations are privatising services and re-structuring themselves according to the principles of (5) New Public Management. Even the weakest groups in society, the unemployed, become "clients" for the job administrations and are expected to develop an entrepreneurial attitude towards their work energy, that is, while under pressure from strict rules as to what is to be accepted as 'reasonable' (Bescherer et al. 2008). The ideological driving force behind this land grab is (6) a new spirit of capitalism which presents freedom in exclusively negative terms, i.e. as the absence of coercion, and which portrays financial capitalist re-structuring, in the name of self-determination and personal responsibility, as a project of liberation (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003).

This new, market-oriented land grab is a cross-system and trans-national phenomenon, which, however, varies according to the "institutional filter" from state to state, as well as in the different systems of industrial relations. The mechanisms of a financial market capitalism can be much more effectively enforced by coalitions dominated by capital, and in those capitalisms with relatively weakly institutionalised workers' power. In the USA, the re-commodifying effects of market-centered corporate strategies were additionally accelerated at a political level by the "Reagan Revolution" and its consequences. The trade unions were confronted with defeatist strategies which added to already scarce power resources. To put it sharply, it seems to have

been easier in the USA to further politically weaken an already poorly institutionalised trade union movement.

In continental Europe the development took a different path. In corporative capitalisms, it can be observed to this day that waning trade union organisational power is being compensated for, at least partially, through institutional power. The larger the gap between trade union organisational and mobilisation capacity on one side, and the institutionally protected conservation of past compromises on the other side, the higher the probability that economic and political elites attempt to bring the institutional and organisational power of trade unions back into a corresponding balance. This point of transition was reached in Germany at the latest by the end of the 1990s. In Germany the weakening of institutional workers' power has not, however, been realized by means of drastic neo-liberal treatment. It is rather happening more subtly within the framework of seemingly intact and mostly stable institutions. It is at the interface between the right to free collective bargaining and co-management that this weakening is becoming massively apparent. For years now, even in large companies, wage agreements have been modified through second rounds of workplace and company-internal rounds of negotiation – often as compensation for limited employment guarantees – which establish deviating wages, working hours and work conditions in decentralised pacts for competition (Huber et al. 2006). Company-internal concession policies and negotiations, which basically aim at determining the extent to which wage labour is tied to market risks, signal a turning point in the relationship between the institutional and organisational power of trade unions. Persistent pressure on institutions such as collective wage agreements⁶ is accompanied by a crisis in membership – which has been acute for some time and has now come to a head especially in East Germany. The organisational power of the trade unions is no longer sufficient to make use of the opportunities, which lie in the system of institutions in terms of interest-oriented politics. Though this process is not taking place simultaneously

⁶ E.g. as a result of membership in employers' associations which are not in line with collective wage agreements, due to wage dumping, the fixing of low wages, or areas free of any wage agreements or standard wages in certain industries and companies.

or in a linear fashion, and also differs in the various industries. There are, however, signs of a re-institutionalisation of wage earners' power (standard wages in cleaning services, minimum wages in postal services). It may be debated whether what is going on is still a controlled decentralisation, or whether we are already witnessing symptoms of a systemic crisis in corporate industrial relations. In any case, trade unions can no longer be sure that their position within the established negotiation procedures can be maintained if their organisational power declines.

2. Organising – a strategic organisational shift made in USA

The erosion of institutional power, as can be seen within metropolitan capitalism, may not be regarded as synonymous with the disappearance of workers' power altogether. In her impressive study Beverly Silver (2005) showed how the geographic relocation of production-sites produces new spatiotemporal "fixations" of capital, and through this generates new working classes and labour movements at the respective newly-favoured production-sites. Silver identifies a spatial diffusion of production power which in many countries of the South becomes manifest through "labour unrest", spontaneous uproars, and revolts. Nevertheless, there are some examples of a revitalisation of organisational power of trade unions – not only in developing countries such as Brazil, South Korea, or South Africa, but also in centre-states such as the USA.

Within the literature, it is sometimes argued (Hollingsworth 1997: 145) that US companies are so enormously capable of learning and introducing innovations, for the very reason that they are not embedded in wealthy institutions. Possibly the particularities of US capitalism force not only companies, but also trade unions – at least those willing to learn – to implement quick and fundamental changes. The example of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and its meanwhile legendary campaign "Justice for Janitors" has influenced the style of the international debate on trade union renewal. As a result of a fundamental organisational shift, the SEIU has moved from being a business union wasting away, to becoming a union able to deal with conflict, and moreover, the union with the highest increase

in membership numbers in the USA.⁷ Now other North American trade unions such as UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees), HERE (Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union), UBC (Union Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America) and LIUNA (Laborers' International Union of North America) have also chosen an orientation along the "organising-model".⁸ The trade mark of the above-mentioned unions is that they tie all their activities to the strategic aim of a long-term strengthening of their organisational power. It seems to be precisely this focus that has expedited the rapid international adoption of the "organising-model".

However, the use of the term "model" suggests a notional and conceptual clarity that does not exist as such. Currently, there is a lively debate among trade union activists and scientists about which action strategies, forms of organisation, and interest-related contents may be depicted by the category of 'organising'. Within the German debate, some definitions are favoured which concentrate mainly on organisation techniques and methods of member recruitment (e.g. Dribbusch 2007: 30 ff.). This may well be legitimate, seeing that any questions about the transferability of "organising"-approaches to the situation in Germany can thus be answered pragmatically. However, such a narrow notion may disconnect the debate about 'organising' from the dimension of content of trade union renewal. In order to avoid this, we will use a broader, more analytical conception of 'organising', as has been proposed among others by Voss and Sherman (2000). In their classic of LRS literature they trace how bureaucratic structures and ground-in practices can be changed, in such a way that the result is a revitalisation of trade union activity, and an increase in member affiliation. Thus, the shift from a service model which aims to bind a passive membership through qualified services to an 'organising' model that focuses on mobilising the members, changing the

⁷ Though recently, this has often been combined with social partnership agreements (Choi/Schmalstieg 2009).

⁸ This concept is contested even within the US trade union movement. Incessant disputes led to the creation of an independent federation, Change to Win (CTW), of all "organising unions" in 2005, which meanwhile represents more than six million members.

work routine of the grassroots organisations, and creating new, participatory organisational structures.

Inspired by examples from the USA, Voss/Sherman (2000) identify three factor-‘clusters’ that should explain successful organisational shifts. Two observations refer to inner-organisational phenomena. First, the widespread awareness of a far-reaching political crisis of organisation creates the conditions among the rank-and-file for a change in leadership. The new personnel established locally ties their own position to a strategic shift. Second, the shift is not limited to the local branches of the trade unions. It engulfs the entire national organisation and, as was the case with SEIU, is accompanied by fierce conflict at the head of the union. Finally, a third observation is of crucial significance: some of the leading staff who are newly appointed – partly due to pressure from headquarters – come from the “outside” and are somewhat experienced with social movements, grassroots initiatives, and neighbourhood work. Initiating a fundamental strategic shift seems to be easier for movement-socialised trade unionists. Usually they have more complex ideas about justice than “traditional” trade unionists. Ground-in union traditions and action routines do not feature in their repertoire. On the contrary, they are much more familiar with techniques of social mobilisation of civil society. Due to their accumulated contacts, they are capable of building alliances with NGOs and movements outside the work sphere, in order to tap their special power resources for the interests of the trade unions (*ibid.*: 327-331).

The emphasis placed on ‘movement momentum’ underlines that Voss/Sherman do not associate the ‘organising’ model with a meaningless set of recruitment techniques. Rather, they describe a type of trade union action, that is marked by the participation of the membership in determining policies, unconventional and in part highly confrontational forms of action, as well as a broad agenda of political objectives. The recruitment of new members takes centre stage in offensive organising models, an objective which is often pursued through unconventional and partly confrontational tactics (*ibid.*: 316). The strong emphasis placed on social justice and human dignity is typical for such approaches. From this perspective, the transition towards the

Table 1: The two basic variants of organising

| | Organising wide | Organising narrow |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Focus | Prioritisation of issues of justice over economic efficiency; combination with crucial social issues, "political unionism"; | Rather neutral in its content, if necessary combinable with value creation-oriented approaches |
| Goal | Strengthening of trade union organisational power as a means for the correction of power asymmetries and social change; offensive focus on organisational success among previously poorly organised groups (precariously employed, women, highly qualified employees) | Membership recruitment in order to strengthen trade unions' organisational power; tendency to concentrate on the trade unions' core groups; if at all, cautious inclusion of strategically important and financially strong groups of employees |
| Reference to opponents | Significant, rather oppositional and confrontational; crucial, however, are the coordination of the different social areas and the strategy mix | Not decisive, co-operation remains a possibility; what is crucial here, too, is the strategic richness and the – scientifically informed – adaptation of tactics and methods to the particularities of the respective field of conflict |
| Methods, Means | Campaign orientation, the practice of which brings about lasting change to the working structures of the trade union | Campaign orientation of a rather instrumental, or even professionalized nature: Partial juxtaposition with the organisational routine |
| Bearer | 'Hinge groups' between social movements and the functionaries' apparatus, active membership, supported by headquarters | Mainly salaried and voluntary functionaries, partially professional organisers |
| Organisation, participation | New forms of direct participation by employees and members, democratisation and decentralisation of the decision-making structures right up to "membership self-determination" | Selective admission of direct participation, integration into hierarchic decision-making structures |
| Alliances | Policy of alliances in order to increase the ability to handle conflict, Priority on protest coalitions | Policy of alliances of a rather instrumental type, no priority on protest or influence coalitions |
| Problems | High standards for strategic organisational shift and trade union renewal; limitation of the ability to handle conflict; to some extent intensive use of resources without any short-term success; under-developed preparedness to participate on the part of the membership | Tendency towards a reduction to a set of methods, technocratic character, organising may seem as an end in itself, limitation of the ability to co-operate; threat of relapse into organisational routine; dominant position of the salaried staff over the membership |

‘organising’ model implies a strategic organisational shift that also deeply changes the relationship between trade union office-holders and (potential) members. So far, the findings of Voss and Sherman have been substantiated by various other studies (e.g. Fiorito 2004; Heery 2005). In the following we will confine ourselves to presenting some selected research findings regarding the content, organisational form, and methods of strategic organisational shifts of trade unions. We assume that the three elements *movement orientation*, *membership participation*, and *campaigning capacity* form a conceptual triangle within which trade union renewal can take place – beyond the institutional particularities of the national systems of industrial relations.

Movement Orientation

The topical direction of broadly understood ‘organising’ approaches is discussed by some of the scientific interpreters (e.g. Frege 2000) using the term “Social Movement Unionism”. This means that trade unions attempt to improve their mobilising capacity, and their ability to handle conflict, by adding central social issues to their agenda. Originally, the category “Movement Union” was coined to depict new labour movements and trade unions gaining strength in some of the countries of the South (Brinkmann et al. 2008: 48-68). These weakly institutionalised trade unions count on mass mobilisations, exhibit a sophisticated participatory culture within their constituency, organise their struggles beyond the boundaries of the factories, and have made coalitions with movements outside the work environment a constitutive element of their strategic action.

Several authors such as Moody (1997) regard this process as the emergence of an entirely new type of trade union, which mainly takes shape outside corporate integration. Other interpreters, in contrast, speak of a remake of the old “political unionism” (Neary 2002). Beyond this controversy, some researchers make an important point confirming a strong link between ‘organising’ approaches and the “Movement Union” (Nissen 2003: 143 ff.). Apparently, those trade unions that primarily compete with management in the solution of problems have great difficulties in being successful in terms of organisational politics, because the trade union’s share of the

“problem solution” is very difficult to conceive, and approaches of this kind do not send out any impulse for participation (Cregan 2005).

Thus, interest-guided policies, that prioritise questions of justice over proof of economic efficiency (Aronowitz 2005), in most cases seem to fulfill the claim of offensive ‘organising’ approaches (Fantasia/Voss 2004: 127-130) much more than those strategies orienting along value creation. However, research findings are not yet conclusive in this regard. As the cases of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Saturn employees and their participation in the re-organisation of work processes (team work, problem solution teams, cooperation with management) show, ‘organising’ approaches can also be successful, in the context of consensus-based and competition-oriented interest-driven policies (Hurd et al. 2003). Because movement politics cannot be maintained permanently, not only the movement unions in the South, but also the North American “organising unions” are struggling for an institutionalisation of their negotiating power. What can be safely established, however, is that ‘organising’ approaches are in many cases embedded in interest-oriented strategies, which seek to offensively claim those issues and fields of conflict that are of central societal importance.

Membership participation

For many authors, direct membership participation represents a central political-organisational form of ‘organising’. Fiorito (2004) views the decentralisation of decision-making within open structures, which allows for a participation to the point of “members’ self determination”, as a decisive condition for the success of offensive ‘organising’ concepts. This not only involves broadening the active base of a trade union. As was shown by Beaud/Pialoux (2004) in their remarkable study on the Peugeot plant in Sochaux, the relationship between activists and “normal” members is based on a well-rehearsed “system of expectations and achievements” (ibid.: 259), which has to be renewed periodically, due to changes in the work process and the composition of the workforce. Such a need for renewal is obvious, not least because, due to scarce resources and the absence of success(es), activists tend to disconnect from the represented through more and more intensive

“organisational work”. Empirical research has shown that the social heterogeneity of potential members does not necessarily lead to a loss of trade union cohesiveness. On the contrary, improvement in members’ participation concerning organisational decisions becomes the main determining factor. According to Lévasque et al. (2005), inner-union democracy and real opportunities for participation are the most important factors when it comes to the successful prevention of members’ dissatisfaction. Moreover, Markowitz (1999) shows that the stabilisation of relations between office-holders and newly recruited members is essential for keeping new trade unionists in the organisation “after organising”. For some authors, such as Clawson (2005), inner-organisational participation represents the key to successfully addressing groups that have so far been under-represented in trade unions (women, precarious workers, minorities). “Face to face” communication and authenticity of active trade unionists (representation through equals) are thus crucial for a lasting change in the relationship between representatives and the represented.

Though such research findings do point to a close relationship between membership participation and organisational-political cohesiveness of the trade unions, the question remains as to if and how a participation-oriented style of politics can be sustained in the long run. The main reason for this problem by no means stems from the gap between participatory rhetoric and the centralist practice of some “organising unions”, which has nevertheless rightfully been criticized e.g. by Frege (2000). As we know from Social Movement Research, it is not only difficult but downright impossible to sustain a high level of participation by the members over longer periods of time. Both old and new members can only engage in participatory work for a certain amount of time and connected to specific issues and projects; but they do this when there are critical decisions to be made, not merely to pay service to participation rituals. Thus, even the most intelligent ‘organising’ approaches will always be confronted with the problem that participatory and representative approaches must alternate and complement each other. In other words, membership participation, or even membership control of the organisation, are not possible without strategic planning and intelligent leadership of the trade unions (Crosby 2005). The best tactic seems to be the combina-

tion of the ability to lead and members' participation, in the best possible way.

Campaigning capacity

For many authors, a strict orientation on campaigns serves to consolidate movement orientation and membership participation in a project-bound fashion. What really stands out from all the different forms of campaigns are the Comprehensive Campaigns. These are a special type of campaign in the course of which the trade union itself undergoes significant changes. In their analysis, Bronfenbrenner/Hickey (2004) reach the surprising conclusion that positive results depend less on the industry or the company structure, but are instead mainly influenced by the style and intensity of the campaign. A large part of what the two authors refer to as the essentials of a successful campaign orientation (ibid.: 37-41) seems rather unspectacular at first sight. This includes the demand for training even during the campaign, or the setting of subordinate targets. Other elements such as the implementation of campaigns on a decentralised level, the avoidance of inner-union competition between different organisations, or the international work on issues concerning multinational corporations may seem obvious, but they do stand in sharp contrast to the organisational routine of trade unions.

Two further characteristics require a particular campaign quality. The adjunct "comprehensive" in the corresponding literature means, firstly, that actions are designed to be broad-based. They can be extended beyond the immediate adversary to share-holders, suppliers, buyers, and consumer groups, in order to maximize the pressure on a corporation or all companies of an industry and to achieve maximum of organisational success. But "comprehensive" may also be understood as "understanding" or "comprehending". This means that successful campaigns require empirical research and analyses of power relations, in order to identify the appropriate "organising" targets and establish a step sequence of escalation tactics. Such a course of action demands a special quality of co-operation between trade unionists and scientists, who then as a team have to develop a common understanding of an industry or a single company and an analysis of the group of employees to be

addressed, in order to come up with an adequate set of tactics and methods. This necessitates not only a set of adequate research methods, but also the sort of scientist that is prepared and willing to commit him or herself to the “lowlands” of trade union grassroots activism.

In sum, related studies (Gall 2005) show that campaign orientation can produce highly varying results. While internal obstacles for successful ‘organising’ (lack of an ‘organising’ tradition, internal resistance, little support from headquarters) are the same in most countries, many of the external obstacles differ greatly. In the USA a large majority of employers has a negative attitude towards trade union activities, whereas e.g. in Great Britain this varies to some extent (Heery/Simms 2007). There, ‘organising’ campaigns are significantly more successful in those businesses in which employers do not pursue an explicitly hostile trade union policy. What is not decisive, however, is whether campaigns are conducted in a more confrontational or co-operative fashion. It is simply those trade unions that deploy a wide range of tactics, and know how to adapt the respective organising methods most efficiently to a given situation, that are particularly successful.

3. Organising – a strategic option for the German trade unions?

Can the US experiences be transferred to conditions in Germany? Carola Frege (2000) has answered this question skeptically. In her view, ‘organising’ so far neither represents a fully developed concept, nor does it offer guaranteed success. In her view, there is very little chance of the US-American “organising” approach being applied to the German conditions: According to Frege, member recruitment has not been the priority in the highly legalised German system of industrial relations, and the task has effectively been shifted to the works councils. But because of their strong institutional integration, the trade unions only rarely have had to resort to the means of mass mobilisations. Though the membership crisis may motivate the DGB unions to adopt some selected practices, she regards the adoption of the ‘organising’ concept as a whole as highly unlikely, let alone the revival of trade unions as social movements.

Frege undoubtedly addresses some important points with her criticism, and raises some legitimate doubts with regard to a simple adoption of US-American organising practices by German trade union branches. This is even more the case since the strategic positioning of the DGB unions is still markedly different from the North American “organising unions”. In the USA, the strong emphasis on movement orientation and building coalitions with NGOs and grassroots initiatives actually came as a result of the trade unions’ weakness in work places and companies, that is to say, from the unions’ diminished negotiating power. For this reason it makes sense to attempt to enhance the trade unions’ assertiveness by means of unconventional coalition policies. In Germany the conditions are different – for now. Neither has the erosion of institutional negotiating power progressed as far as it has in the Anglo-Saxon capitalisms, nor are social movements, NGOs and grassroots initiatives strong enough to compensate for the declining organisational power of the trade unions. This is one reason why the majority of trade unions are very reluctant to sacrifice the negotiating power that comes with co-management and the collective wage system, in favour of a risky policy of coalitions with oppositional movements.

Despite all legitimate warnings of unreflected adoption of practices stemming from other models of industrial relations (Frege 2000), some organising approaches have meanwhile also thrived in Germany. In the IG Metall, a specially created campaigning department is starting organising projects. The service trade union Ver.di is testing organising projects in hospitals, in trade, and in the surveillance business. Also, the trade union Bau, Agrar, Umwelt (IG BAU – trade union for occupations in construction, agriculture and environment) is training organisers, and is making efforts towards offensive membership recruitment. The question is no longer if, but how the German unions are learning from the Anglo-Saxon examples. It is too early to be able to make evaluations from these pilot projects. These projects are mainly just beginning; a scientific evaluation can only take place after some time has passed, and success criteria are currently being discussed quite controversially.

The organisational-political trap

One driving force for organisational learning is the pressure – underestimated by Frege – on the institutionalised negotiating power of the German trade unions, and the resulting increase in significance of some privileged occupational groups with substantial primary power. In the face of a competition that is partly carried out through casualisation of employment, groups with high primary power such as train drivers or doctors tend to look after their own interests separately from other groups of employees. In contrast to company-compliant “yellow” trade unions, their organisations, which are ultimately weak when it comes to absolute membership numbers, distinguish themselves through high wage and salary demands, as well as fiercely fought conflicts. The erosion of institutional (bargaining) power of the large rank-and-file trade unions thus produces a revival of separate special interest struggles of structurally powerful occupational groups. Simultaneously, however, the inequality among wage earners increases, since poorly represented groups such as the 22.5 percent of low-wage earners in full-time employment usually lose out in this conflict constellation. So the DGB unions are ‘stuck between a rock and a hard place’: if on the whole they remain less assertive – because the old corporate mechanisms are no longer effective – they face being trapped between – in part poorly organised – occupational groups with great structural power on one side and the growing mass of precarious jobholders on the other side, and losing even more of their influence. It is this constellation that creates the demand for strategic alternative and draws interest to offensive ‘organising’ practices.

Steps towards campaign orientation

Learning processes have in fact long begun, and the effects can even be seen in those areas of organisation where a conscious orientation along “organising approaches” does not exist, or is even rejected. The adoption of selected tools of “organising” seems quite simple at first sight. An example is Ver.di’s LIDL campaign, which explicitly emulates the model of a Comprehensive Campaign (Schreieder 2007). Unlike in the case of the US trade unions

however, this campaign first of all aims at establishing works councils. Through creating a representation of the workforce the trade union hopes to gradually enhance company's employees' willingness to join a trade union. In contrast to the US-American model though, the campaign severely lacks resources and organisational commitment.

Other examples are campaigns that aim at an improved representation and the recruitment of precarious jobholders. In this regard, the campaign for a minimum wage, which is meanwhile being supported by several rank-and-file trade unions, has a symbolic meaning. De-centralised initiatives are not less important, seeing that numerous DGB branches have begun surveys on the development of precarious occupation. Within the organisational realm of IGM, there are now several projects regarding temporary employment, which seek to claim "Equal pay, equal treatment" for temporary workers and to organise agency workers in the trade unions. Works councils of large companies are supporting the initiators in this. So far there is still a lack of adequate consultation and organisational structures for potential members, who are geographically scattered and often change work locations. Nevertheless, this approach boasts some potential that could be translated – well beyond the issue of temporary employment – into an anti-discrimination policy in companies and corporations. Interestingly, some 'organising' successes have been made possible where trade union protagonists have counted on and encouraged forms of self-organisation by temporary workers. At one of the large automobile production sites, IG Metall proposed that the agency workers elect their own bargaining committee. This committee – even engaging in some limited industrial action – then fought through their own wage agreement. Meanwhile, this approach that encourages the initiative of agency workers, has spread to other workplaces. Before the onset of the crisis, IG Metall had managed to organise several thousands of temporary workers.

The discovery of the membership

This already touches upon the political-organisational form of 'organising', the membership's participation. What is remarkable is that in the "core business" of the German trade unions – company and collective wage politics

– there are some fundamental changes going on. That is to say, the restructuring of the relationships between works councils, trade union office-holders, and (potential) members, as it is being tested within the organisational range of IG Metall. With view to the loss of legitimacy which has accompanied the politics of concession for quite some time now (Rehder 2006), some district and local branches of IG Metall have started tying company-internal wage-agreements to a vote by trade union members, or even the entire workforce of a given production site. In some cases a quorum is agreed upon, whereas in other cases bargaining commissions are created on a company-level.

Even if direct participation is ‘low-threshold’, that is to say, for workforce surveys, or involvement of members in the nomination of candidates for the works council, this still significantly changes the inner-company power games. Negotiating is then no longer exclusively the job of the management, works councils, and trade union secretaries. Instead, with the trade union rank-and-file’s involvement, there is a new actor whose participation in making important decisions brings along uncertainties for the different established parties within company-level and collective wage negotiations. After having been asked their opinion once, the trade union members and other employees will be likely to claim such opportunities for participation in the future. The “better-instead-of-cheaper” campaign of IGM is an example of an attempt to combine such approaches and extend them to the topic of innovation. It is not only about the qualitative improvement of individual company-level agreements (setting of innovation targets). Rather, company-level (wage) negotiations should be in the interest of the organisational politics of the trade unions. Thus, by going beyond the targets set by the respective company-level and collective bargaining policy, they would then be dedicated to the aim of strengthening the organisational power of trade unions.

The prognosis that “workplace interest representation will now, after a phase of co-operative co-management, increasingly turn into grassroots-oriented interest representation” (Rehder 2006: 242) may still seem somewhat daring. This is due to the fact that the degree of diffusion of unconventional membership representation is not particularly advanced at present. Moreover, the initiation of de-centralised forms of participation is highly

controversial within the trade unions, their effects on inter-company level collective wage agreements cannot yet be precisely distinguished, and then there is to a large extent a simple lack – not least because of the lack of qualification – of trade union members prepared for participation. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that, in the sense of the ‘organising’ model as such, the problem of strengthening the organisational power of the trade unions is re-gaining relevance, both within the trade unions as well as in the workplace arena itself.

Content: Innovation, not coherent renewal

Even in the difficult field of “trade unions and social movements” one can, on closer inspection, detect more common interests than one would expect at first sight. Though the anti-G8 mobilisations were much less important to the DGB trade unions than for parts of the “organising unions” in the USA; the topics of the anti-globalisation movement are nevertheless relevant for the German trade unions. And there is in fact some exchange – partially formalised (IGM’s liaison office for social movements), partially informally (interaction with the social movements, both at the top level as well as at the grassroots level). Also, some of the trade unions are involved in the social forum movement⁹ via representatives, and there is something of an issue-related exchange (labour market politics, privatisation of the Deutsche Bahn), and to a more limited extent, personal exchange.

In this respect it must not be overlooked that the German trade unions are more advanced than the US-American organising unions in many fields of workplace politics and collective bargaining. This is true e.g. for some (new) approaches in the fashioning of labour policies, as they are being tested in the project “Good Work” concerning various issues (health protection, demographic change, output control; Schröder/Urban 2009). These approaches may also serve to raise awareness of trade unions, in those expanding employee segments which involve qualified and partly management-like occu-

⁹ The Social Forum Movement sees itself as a public space for a common discussion between critics of globalisation, churches, trade unions, NGOs.

pations. For the time being though, they remain in the testing phase, and have not yet been systematically linked to initiatives for the strengthening of the organisational power of trade unions.

4. Trade unions and associated power

Measured by the benchmark of overcoming the representational crisis of the trade unions, these organising and renewal approaches are, at most, little shoots of renewal, the effects of which will only be able to be assessed after some time has passed. What is more, so far there has been a lack of sound scientific insight concerning the effects of innovative trade union practices. What stands out as a particularity, in the case of the German trade unions against the North American contrasting reference, is that numerous activities aim at raising awareness of existing works councils, re-founding the representation of interests, or reinstating collective wage agreements. This is one reason why campaigns and initiatives do not always result in membership increases. It must also be noted that trade union branches can act as pacemakers for the strengthening of the unions' organisational power. However, we are still a long way away from, not only the body of office-holders, but also a substantial part of the membership systematically dedicating themselves to offensive 'organising' ("members recruit members").

Barriers for trans-national learning

If one attempts to systematize the difficulties of trans-national learning processes, it becomes clear very quickly that many barriers can by no means be explained by institutional divergences. In Germany, a rather pragmatic understanding of organising still prevails. The emphasis on professionalism in membership recruitment often provokes criticism which – expressed from the viewpoint of a different organising approach – warns of the danger of depoliticisation (cf. contributions in Hälker 2008). In contrast, it must be noted, that a pragmatic orientation is by all means legitimate. This is the case for mainly three reasons. Firstly, a real difficulty of adaptation attempts is that the implications of a political understanding of organising often remain very vague. General reference to the ability to handle conflict, the policy of alli-

ances, and the necessity for intensive membership recruitment, may only cause a shrug of the shoulders, precisely among active trade unionists. After all, these key groups within the trade unions can quite rightfully claim to be engaging in all the supposedly new practices already. It then becomes clear that the innovative elements of organising approaches – mapping of workplaces and employee groups, preparation through strategic research, campaigns planned to the last detail, the systematic creation of pressure even outside the workplace, or the symbolic construction of collective identities – can really only be identified and picked up through concrete object lessons and learning from and within the actual practice. Secondly, even politicising organising concepts are ineffective if they do not materialise through local and workplace practices, but instead remain stuck in controversies within the union apparatus, and thus have no practical consequences. Third and finally, where organising becomes the practice within a workplace, some problems of transferability do emerge which originate in institutional divergences.

As mentioned before, the German trade unions – in contrast to the US-American unions, which have to fight for their recognition at a company level – are especially present via the works councils. Elected by the workforce, the trade union's cohesiveness of workplace stakeholders mainly results from political insight, organisational advantages, and moral commitment. Workplace power rests to a large extent on the fact that stakeholders can act without limitation as the representatives of their workforce. Organising approaches, however, at least implicitly shake up the monopoly on representation of the works councils. In those workplaces in which activated groups of trade unionists emerge, there are inevitable shifts in the power triangle of the workforce, works council and the trade union. Well-practiced divisions of responsibilities are questioned, works councils must legitimize themselves to a new actor, the trade union is now visible in the workplace, and the management can no longer rely on the universal validity of statements made by the head of the works council. Such changes do not take place without tensions. They occur relatively smoothly where works councils cultivate an explicit trade unionist self-conception (Candeias/Röttger 2008). This is different with stakeholders with only a weak connection to trade unions, or even an attitude skeptical of trade unions. There have been cases in which

stakeholders have regarded the organising activities in the workplace as disliked competition, and in some extreme cases actually reacted by withdrawing from the trade union.¹⁰ Such conflicts do not necessarily have to escalate, but they do point out the need to coordinate trade union organising activities with the responsible works council in a timely and binding fashion.

After the collapse of the financial markets: answering the question of meaning

Beyond the difficulties which – also – result from institutional divergences, organising approaches in the USA as well as in Germany face a common problem. Besides all pragmatism, it must be made clear why employees should organise in trade unions and engage in activity in the first place. An organising approach primarily aimed at new methods of membership recruitment does not respond to this crucial question of meaning. Though it may – in the best case – be possible to recruit new members through elaborate campaigns in the short-term, these are not lasting affiliations. As soon as the workplace routine returns, and positions and functions are allocated new members often disappear as quickly as they came. In the case of the highly innovative agency worker campaign (Holst 2009) of IG Metal, such a negative development may currently be on the brink.

In order to avoid organisational-political flashes in the pan, organising approaches will not get around answering their addressees' questions of meaning. The global financial crisis and its consequences definitely provide sufficient "problem raw-materials". In a phase of epochal upheavals the trade unions would be utterly ill-advised to withdraw from the political stage due to their acute weakness in representation. On the contrary, now is the time for them to prove that they "represent universal and widespread social concerns" (Crouch 2008: 146). The re-definition of economic democracy would represent such a concern. If it is to be formulated credibly and linked to organising

¹⁰ According to some first insights from an evaluation study regarding different organising projects which we are conducting together with Ver.di.

objectives, then this undeniably has consequences for the self-conception, organisational structures, and (political) agenda of the trade unions.

The readjustment of the relationship between trade union office-holders and members at the same time requires an innovative fundament of labour policies. Generally, it can be said that the financial capitalist-dominated restructuring of labour weakens the possibility for democracy (Schuhmann 2008). Performance intensification in the areas of qualified labour and information service (Kratzer et al. 2008), tendencies towards re-taylorisation in production, and particularly the casualisation of employment, deprive those affected of energy and often also of the basic security that is necessary in order to participate in democratic processes. By initiating the project of “Good Work”, the trade unions have managed to successfully place an issue in the public political debate. A broadening of this concept, in the sense of democratically embedded work, virtually imposes itself (Pickshaus/Urban 2009). Democratic work, however, absolutely requires overcoming a self-conception that “in a very intelligent manner” primarily reflects “the interests of the white male standard worker in the manufacturing industry” (Crouch 2008: 146). As tough as it may seem in the light of scarce resources: organising approaches that seek to contribute to a project of democratic work will have to be expansive, i.e. aimed at traditionally poorly represented groups. Basically, the goal is to realize the principle of “equal pay, equal treatment” for all those groups suffering from “over exploitation” and permanent discrimination.

If the goal of democratic work is in fact to be pursued realistically, trade union interest politics cannot remain on the level of labour organisation. They will have to engage precisely at the level where companies make strategic decisions concerning the balance of internal and external flexibilisation (temporary work, production contracts, spin-offs, etc.). In this context, capital market-oriented forms of management can no longer be seen as untouchable. In an economic environment in which the state takes up immediate service functions for banks and financial market actors, as well as for manufacturing enterprises, a planned economy at the service of the highest possible returns becomes dysfunctional. And since the claims of the shareholder-value principle, to commit top managers to principles of efficiency by tying them to

owner-interests, has failed so spectacularly due to systemically encouraged corruption and disloyalty, such forms of management seem likely to gradually lose legitimacy, even among the economic elites. The trade unions should take advantage of this, and engage in an offensive debate over the social function of world market-oriented companies. Due to the scope of their decisions, such companies have long ago become public institutions which need to be controlled internally involving the participation of the workforce. Essentially, this means expansion and Europeanisation of codetermination, but also a self-critical handling of corporatist sleaze within the representation of interests and – in a long-term perspective – the participation of representatives of reproductive interests (environmental and consumers' organisations, NGOs) in important company decisions (Dieckmann 2008).

This touches on one last important point. Organising, embedded in a strategy of democratisation, ultimately requires an alternative concept of society. Here, a central ideological weakness of the labour movements in the centre states becomes noticeable. For decades, not only the US-American trade unions, but also the German unions, have abandoned the formulation of an alternative social project. In a situation of systemic crisis of financial market capitalism this shortcoming is being painfully felt. For a long time it seemed that raising the 'system question' was a dusty ritual only engaged in by some incurable traditionalists. In a historic constellation in which financial market capitalism is rapidly undermining its own legitimacy, and the advisors of the new US president are pleading for long-term investments in an ecological-social "New Deal", it would be disastrous if the trade unions were satisfied with organisational-political pragmatism. It is precisely the active groups that need basic principles on the basis of which they can translate the societal phenomena of crisis into arguments for trade union organisation. The idea that organising approaches promote democratic conditions could form part of these basic principles.

The debate over new forms of economic democracy has certainly only just begun (Krätke 2008; Demirovic 2007; Bontrup 2005). For the time being, the conceptual notions remain very vague. They are loosely linked to concepts of an economy of solidarity which aims at re-asserting social rationalities (orientation along the common good etc.) that were for a long time dominated

by the logic of financial capitalism. Of course, it could be objected that economic democracy currently represents a distant, outright utopian goal. The public framing of the goal of economic democracy would nevertheless have an immediate effect. It would contribute to changing social debates and, subsequently, the system of legitimacy of contemporary capitalism. With a view to the state-interventionist period that lies ahead (Wallerstein 2008), economic democracy and control by the workforce would define a distinguishing criterion as opposed to authoritarian crisis solutions. The production of a new social “exterior” as de-commodification, that is to say, setting the direction for a new land grab in the course of investment in ecological-social infrastructure, could thus be tied back to democratic-social principles. One of the US’s leading economists, James K. Galbraith, described the prospect of such a land grab with the following words: “What makes up the alternative? The fact that from the beginning, a targeted, long-term strategy is pursued, which at its outset rests on public investment, i.e. government spending on the reconstruction of the infrastructure systems of America, a reform of the patterns of energy consumption, and the development of new technologies in order to cope with climate change and other urgent problems” (Galbraith 2008: 47 f.). Help and support should benefit those that were hit hardest by the bursting bubble. Investments should flow into the unemployment insurance and social security systems, and, furthermore, into the promotion of public services, advanced education, adjustment assistance, and employment programmes (ibid.: 48).

Extending democratic participation, to cover e.g. strategic decisions regarding investment of large companies, could well be integrated into such an agenda. Democratic legitimacy and codetermination by employees could distinguish state-interventions from an authoritarian protectionism, which presents itself to the different societies as a problem solution strategy for the recovery of the system. In light of the declining organisational power of trade unions, a strategy of democratisation today may seem unrealistic, bulky and impracticable. However, bearing in mind the dramatic upheavals that still lie ahead (consequences of the financial crisis, energy turnaround, global inequalities), a self restriction of the trade unions to organisational-political functions may soon prove even more unrealistic and impracticable.

What seems highly unlikely, both in the USA as well as in Germany, is that the trade unions will initiate a process of renewal that will, in the long run, make them the bearer of an alternative social project – as used to be the case – simply by themselves. Without challenges from social movements and support from the political sphere, the renewal of trade unions will hardly be successful. To sum up, a renewal of the trade unions requires more – and more diverse – measures than merely renewing the traditional sources of labour power in the period ahead. Surely, these sources have not yet run dry completely, and quite possibly they can be used better and more intensively. Ultimately the goal must be to interlock the production power of wage earners in new ways with the political public, discourse and consumers' power, the influence of protest movements, non-profit organisations, cooperatives, and other organisations within civil society. As several successful examples of organising have shown, the result is a kind of power that makes use of the new means of information and communication technologies, creates publicity, and – quite in the sense of Habermas – takes advantage of the casual coercion of the better argument in order to increase the problems of legitimacy of the financial capitalist regime and attack its transfer mechanisms. The combination of wage earners' and oppositional discourse power, as well as co-operation with other actors of civil society, is what we call associated power. After the second Bush era and the dramatic demise of the US trade unions, to many it seems ironic that it is in fact the election of a new US president that is signaling an alternative project. And it is by no means a coincidence that the revival of weak association within civil society in the USA is taking place through the application of organising methods which have their origin in the trade union movement.

The future will show whether the vital spark will make its way to Europe and Germany. Despite some resemblance with 'organising' approaches, the existing innovative practices have not yet been condensed into a coherent interest-guided policy. What is needed is an adequate organisational-political infrastructure, 'organising' academies, opportunities for specific qualification, but also the corresponding co-operative structures that involve scientists, journalists, and media experts. Office-holders who are willing and able to place an emphasis of activity beyond the organisational routine, in order to

intervene in workplace organising processes and social conflicts, are still rather scarce. Thus, we cannot yet attest any real “strategic organisational shift” within the DGB trade unions as a political understanding of organising would imply. In some isolated cases though, the protagonists have advanced further in the reconstruction of the trade unions’ organisational power than the widespread fatalism of demise and decay would suggest. Also – and especially – valid, for these little plants of trade union renewal, is that they are not the problem, but part of the solution.

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