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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

Rainer Hampp Verlag

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Greven, T. (2006). U.S. unions' strategic campaigns against transnational enterprises in Germany. *Industrielle Beziehungen : Zeitschrift für Arbeit, Organisation und Management*, 13(3), 253-269. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-343702>

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Thomas Greven\*

## **U.S. Unions' Strategic Campaigns against Transnational Enterprises in Germany\*\***

**Abstract** – U.S. unions have developed the instrument of strategic campaigns to overcome growing employer resistance and political hostility towards union organizing and bargaining. In recent years, campaigning unions have increasingly sought to leverage transnational linkages of target companies, including attempts to employ the support of unions in the company's "home country." I explore, firstly, why German unions have often encountered U.S. unions' strategic campaigns in Germany with scepticism, and secondly, the circumstances under which German unions have been forthcoming with support despite their scepticism. Differences in industrial relations account for the scepticism of German unions regarding strategic campaigns. Four factors help explain under which circumstances German union support is forthcoming regardless of the scepticism: Political orientation, union strength, industry sector, and target company.

### **Strategische Kampagnen amerikanischer Gewerkschaften gegen Transnationale Unternehmen in Deutschland**

**Zusammenfassung** – Gewerkschaften in den USA haben das Instrument der „strategischen Kampagne“ entwickelt, um den wachsenden Widerstand von Unternehmen und Politik gegen Organisierungsbemühungen und Tarifverhandlungen zu überwinden. In jüngerer Zeit versuchen US-Gewerkschaften zunehmend, transnationale Verbindungen der Zielunternehmen in den Kampagnen auszunutzen, einschließlich der Unterstützung von Gewerkschaften im „Heimatland“ der Unternehmen. Ich untersuche erstens, warum deutsche Gewerkschaften den amerikanischen strategischen Kampagnen oft skeptisch gegenüberstanden, und zweitens, unter welchen Bedingungen die Kampagnen trotz dieser Skepsis unterstützt wurden. Unterschiede in den Systemen industrieller Beziehungen erklären die grundlegende Skepsis deutscher Gewerkschaften in Bezug auf strategische Kampagnen. Vier Faktoren helfen zu erklären, wann die Kampagnen dennoch unterstützt wurden: Politische Ausrichtung, gewerkschaftliche Stärke, Branche und Zielunternehmen.

Key words: **Strategic Campaigns, Union Strategies, Labor Transnationalism, Transnational Enterprises, Comparative Industrial Relations**

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Thanks go out to John Russo, with whom I presented an earlier version of this paper at the 'Global Companies – Global Unions – Global Research – Global Campaigns' conference in New York, February 2006. I would also like to thank three anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments.

\*\* Artikel eingegangen: 15.5.2006  
revidierte Fassung akzeptiert nach doppelt-blindem Begutachtungsverfahren: 8.8.2006.

## 1. Introduction

Unions are on the defensive in most countries. Observers generally agree that they need to increase their transnational activities and expand their “strategic domain” (Martin/Ross 1999) to be able to challenge the neo-liberal “new constitutionalism” (Gill 1998) and shape the global governance of modern capitalism.

Ultimately, the transnational activities of unions must be anchored in strengthened national positions – there is no conceivable scenario for unions to be successful “global players” without a strong base at the local level, at workplaces and in politics. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore innovative union strategies developed at the national level and designed to improve union political and bargaining power predominantly at that level, but including elements that may provide some potential for effective transnational union action.

Beginning in the late 1970s, U.S. unions have developed the instrument of strategic campaigns to overcome growing employer resistance and political hostility towards union organizing and bargaining. In recent years, campaigning unions have increasingly sought to leverage transnational linkages of target companies, including attempts to employ the support of unions in the company’s “home country.” This support is crucial for the desired “boomerang effect” (Keck/Sikking 1998) of strengthening local actors by generating external pressure through allies abroad.

After introductory paragraphs about, first, the concept of, and experience with, strategic campaigns in the U.S. and, second, the transnationalization of the strategic campaign, I will address two main questions. Firstly, on the basis of existing case studies and participant observation, I explore why German unions have often encountered U.S. unions’ strategic campaigns in Germany with skepticism. Secondly, I will discuss the circumstances under which German unions have been forthcoming with support despite their skepticism. Differences in industrial relations traditions account for much of the skepticism of German unions regarding strategic campaigns. While the cooperative features of German industrial relations, which currently provide potential campaigning leverage, bias German unions against the more adversarial practices of American unions, the adversarial industrial relations system in the U.S. favors voluntaristic union strategies focused on narrow campaign demands and biased against the establishment of stable inter-union networks. Four factors help explain under which circumstances German union support is forthcoming regardless of the skepticism: the political orientation of the respective union; union strength; industry sector; and target company. It is important to note that there was some German union support in every U.S. union strategic campaign. I aspire to shed some light on why there were different levels of support. I end with a paragraph on ongoing cross border learning processes in the context of transnational strategic campaigns.

## 2. The U.S. experience with unions’ strategic campaigns

Beginning in the mid-1970s, several innovative U.S. unions began applying strategies of the famous community organizer Saul Alinsky, especially his concept of power

structure research, to labour relations.<sup>1</sup> The concept of “corporate campaigns,” so dubbed by Ray Rogers (at the time with ACTWU, a textile workers’ union which later merged with the ILGWU to form UNITE, today head of Corporate Campaigns Inc.), was developed to cope with the increasingly adverse legal and political climate and with growing employer resistance to union organizing and collective bargaining.

Under U.S. labour law, employers have the right to permanently replace striking employees in case of economic strikes. Rarely used until the 1980s, this practice, and even more so, the threat of it, became common after President Ronald Reagan gave it quasi-official blessing by “permanently replacing,” i.e., in effect terminating, striking air traffic controllers in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Collective bargaining and organizing have been impeded by this and other features of U.S. labour law, as well as by “union busting” consultants (cf. Levitt 1993), by the slow judicial process regarding remedies to employer unfair labour practices such as the illegal firing of union activists, and by the threat of, or execution of plant closings, made easier by the processes of economic liberalization (cf. Bronfenbrenner 2000).

The new strategy focused on the company as a social institution, i.e., on the many relationships any company has with society at large, e.g., its customers, suppliers, creditors, subsidiaries and/or parent company, its shareholders and board members, with various levels of government, with the communities it operates in etc. as well as on the “relationships of these relationships” (Banks 2005), in order to identify vulnerabilities of the target corporation and thus leverage for the union. In an early comparative study of ten “corporate campaigns,” written from a management perspective and using game theoretical language, Charles Perry argued that campaigns were about unions’ “expanding the scope” of labour disputes and escalating the conflict, vertically by elevating the issues at hand to issues of principle and horizontally by identifying potential allies (Perry 1987). In addition to this “game of principle,” he described four additional strategic “games” that make up corporate campaigns: The “game of politics,” i.e., appeals to different levels of government; the “game of protest” (through stockholders, often against the corporate parent of the target company); the “game of pressure” (using consumer actions such as boycotts); and the attempt of disturbing the target companies’ business relationships, which he called the “game of principal.” Initially, corporate campaigns and especially Ray Rogers’ campaigns often focused on strategies of “following the money,” i.e. the games of protest and principal.

In a more recent study of corporate campaigns, again from a management perspective, Jarol Manheim argues that the “systematic exploitation of key stakeholder relationships (...) defines the corporate campaign.” “Corporate campaigns are always about power. (...) They are solidly based in sophisticated research – into the network of interests that sustain a corporation and give it power, into the public image of the corporation, into its strengths and vulnerabilities – but they are conducted not in an

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<sup>1</sup> To this day, Alinsky’s 1971 book “Rules for Radicals” is readily available in the U.S., even in the main bookstore chains.

<sup>2</sup> Unless an agreement is reached, permanently replaced employees will be placed on a “preferential hiring list” after the end of a strike, so technically they are not terminated.

ivory tower or a research institute, but in the real world of political and economic struggle" (Manheim 2001: VII-VIII).

From a union perspective, the key is indeed to look for the target company's vulnerabilities beyond the immediate domain of labour relations and the shop floor, and to exploit them strategically. There is no "magic bullet," and the AFL-CIO's Secretary Treasurer Richard Trumka has therefore aptly called the corporate campaign the "death of a thousand cuts" (quoted in Manheim 2001: V). While they were very controversial at first, corporate campaigns today are a mainstream strategy of the U.S. labour movement. The AFL-CIO and many of its affiliated unions have established specialized strategic research departments, and for the affiliates of the new Change to Win Federation, corporate campaigns are at the very heart of their understanding of union activity (Greven 2006a). In order to avoid "pattern targeting," i.e. the simple execution of a standard campaign game plan that can be easily deciphered by the target company, unions are generally following a multifaceted and creative approach, which is why the terminology has changed from "corporate campaigns" to "comprehensive," "coordinated," or "strategic" campaigns. I will use the latter term, because it best captures the key element of contemporary union campaigns in the U.S.: the *strategic* application of research and action.

Among the many important aspects of campaign strategy, three deserve particular attention in the context of our question about cross-border inter-union support: strategic research and planning, an effective media strategy, and escalation. In terms of research, the key for a campaigner is to know the industry in which the company operates intimately, i.e., to think from the perspective of the company rather than from the union's in order to identify key company vulnerabilities (Chu 1993). Through strategic research and planning, the transnational links of a target company – which are not always obvious – are brought into focus. Secondly, media strategy is to frame the issues of the campaign for targeted audiences in order to elevate them to issues of general concern (as noted above, Perry called this the "game of principle," and emphasized its importance above all other "games"). According to Karen Keiser (1993), issues can be framed in a number of ways, using different but sometimes compatible scenarios: "David vs. Goliath," "Social Justice," "Political Clout," "In Common Good," "Strange Bedfellows," "Betrayal." If the media strategy includes attacks on the company in its home country, the generation of inter-union support may be impeded as the union may be under pressure to side with the company. Finally, a key part of devising a strategy is to develop a timetable of campaign events that allows the initiator of the campaign, the union, to escalate pressure on the target company (or one of its relations) as needed. This escalation can exacerbate any existing scepticism regarding adversarial strategies resulting from different industrial relations systems and organizational cultures.

### 3. The transnationalisation of unions' strategic campaigns

On balance, strategic campaigns have been a successful innovation of a U.S. labour movement in continuous overall decline.<sup>3</sup> The best known example is the Justice for Janitors campaign by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which in many cities has successfully overcome resistance to union organizing by putting union, community and political pressure not on the direct employers, the janitorial contractors, but on building owners and managers as well as tenants (Waldinger et al. 1998). In 2001, renowned British director Ken Loach turned the struggle of immigrant janitors in Century City, Los Angeles, into his acclaimed if somewhat romanticized film "Bread and Roses."

While even some of the very early strategic campaigns had international elements, often orchestrated through Global Union Federations (GUFs) such as the International Chemical, Energy and Mine Workers Federation (ICEM), today transnationalisation is a standard feature of campaigns because more enterprises, including small and medium-sized, are engaged in international business activities.<sup>4</sup> While transnational business linkages offer additional leverage to the campaigning unions, resorting to transnational strategic campaigns is generally a sign of union weakness. At the local and national level, where union action has traditionally been focused, labour's bargaining and political leverage is eroding because increased liberalization of trade and capital transfer has generally created favourable conditions for business. Transnational enterprises (TNEs) "whipsaw" different localities, e.g., workplaces, sub-level governments, and nation-states, by using the threat or execution of their "exit option." In contrast, unions do not have the capability to conduct cross-border bargaining or strikes, in part because there is no effective international labour rights regime to protect their transnational activities (cf. Greven/Scherrer 2005). It is no surprise, then, that most transnational campaigns have been initiated by particularly embattled labour movements such as the American and the Australian that seek to generate leverage beyond the domestic arena.

In the literature on NGOs, this transnationalisation of advocacy work, i.e. local actors generating external pressure on their targets through the actions of their allies abroad, has been called the "boomerang effect" (Keck/Sikking 1998). While Dombois et al. (2003) are sceptical whether the "boomerang model" can be applied to labour issues because of the complexities of industrial relations systems, asymmetries of power and conflicts of interests in the context of competition, it seems clear that the exploitation of transnational linkages has the potential to generate additional leverage and thus to strengthen unions.

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<sup>3</sup> There have been several high-profile defeats, e.g., United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local P-9's struggle against the food giant Hormel in 1985/86 (Green 1990). In many other cases, campaigns have been abandoned quickly and with little fanfare.

<sup>4</sup> Several of the Global Union Federations (GUFs, formerly known as International Trade Secretariats) have built up capacities to assist their member unions in transnational campaigns (cf. Zinn 2000).



Most research on U.S. unions' strategic campaigns has so far been in the form of case studies of individual campaigns (Banks 1998; Russo 1998; Juravich/Bronfenbrenner 1999; Greven 2003; Brown/Chang 2004; Zinn 2000). The studies of Perry (1987) and Manheim (2001) identified core elements of strategic campaigns, and Bronfenbrenner and Juravich (2001) looked at several campaigns of one union, the United Steelworkers of America. In general, combinations of structural factors and union and employer tactics greatly influence the outcome of campaigns, but only Hickey (2002) compared first contract "comprehensive campaigns" at five multinational corporations in order to identify common patterns of factors regarding union success: rank-and-file activism, strategic consideration of union strength in the industry, and the level of employer resistance.

In transnational strategic campaigns, the generation of support from unions in other countries, especially in the home country of the target company, is a key source of leverage as well as one of the most important challenges for the campaigning unions. Several of the case studies have addressed the organization of inter-union cooperation and the variation of responses from international unions. For example, the United Steelworkers found it easier to work with, and generate leverage from unions in Switzerland and Germany than from unions in Japan (Bronfenbrenner/Juravich 2001), and in Germany, they found it easier to work with the metalworkers' union (IG Metall) than with the chemical workers' union (IG BCE) (Greven 2003). No attempt has so far been made to draw general conclusions from these rather anecdotal findings, and no attempt will be made in this paper to generalize insights gained from the small number of U.S. strategic campaigns in Germany. The aspiration is to narrow the range of possible avenues for further research regarding the conditions for inter-union cooperation and support in the context of transnational strategic campaigns by providing an overview and analysis of strategic campaigns in one country.

The following campaigns were considered: Teamsters (IBT) against VW; United Steelworkers (USWA) against Continental General Tire; USWA against Titan; Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) against Marriott; Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) against Brylcreem (PPR); International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) against Osram (Siemens); United Autoworkers (UAW) against Chef Solutions (Lufthansa); UNITE-HERE against Gate Gourmet. Details regarding some of these campaigns can be found in case studies and reports (Banks 1998; Greven 2003; Raffo 2003; Kriszun 2004). My research is based on these studies and on participant observation of several campaigns as well as of international union conferences focused on the cross-border diffusion of labour movement strategies.<sup>5</sup> The overview of strategic campaigns in Germany is not complete, especially since some campaigns never go beyond the exploratory stage, and others are episodic and tend to quietly fade away when lacking success.

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<sup>5</sup> Part of the empirical research for this paper was conducted as participant observation in the German-American campaigner network OrKa (Organisierung & Kampagnen) which provides support for unions conducting strategic and organizing campaigns. I would like to express my gratitude to OrKa and especially Jeffrey Raffo.

#### **4. U.S. unions' strategic campaigns against transnational enterprises in Germany**

When dealing with companies operating in Germany, and especially with those headquartered there, U.S. union campaigners can in most cases expect significant leverage from inter-union cooperation because of the German system of co-determination. German works councils and employee representatives on company supervisory boards have unparalleled access to corporate information and decision-making. While both union density (20-29% in 2003, cf. <http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2004/03/update/tn0403105u.html>) and union coverage (68% in West Germany and 53% in East Germany in 2004; cf. the Tarifarchiv at [www.boeckler.de](http://www.boeckler.de)) have been declining, German unions still wield considerable power, especially in larger enterprises.

At the same time, German unions are often highly irritated by U.S. strategic campaigns run in Germany, which they perceive to be overly aggressive. In some cases, the resulting unwillingness to challenge management on behalf of the campaigning union has in turn been a source of discontent for American campaigners.

Why, then, is support forthcoming in some cases and not in others? I will first explore in more detail why German unions have often encountered U.S. unions' strategic campaigns in Germany with scepticism, and secondly, address the circumstances under which German unions have been supportive despite their scepticism.

##### ***4.1 Obstacles to inter-union cooperation in transnational campaigns***

There is a vast literature on obstacles to international labour solidarity, especially regarding conflicts of interests along the North-South divide (cf. Eder 2002). Material interests are at the heart of union activity, and in the context of a global capitalist economy, there is bound to be competition between unionised and non-union workplaces, as well as between different unionised workplaces. In fact, ongoing processes of liberalization, deregulation and privatisation have increased the commodification of labour and thus increased such competition dramatically (Silver 2003). Material conflicts of interests are exacerbated by legal and institutional obstacles to inter-union cooperation such as different national labour law regimes and widespread regulations against sympathy strikes, by cultural and language barriers, and by different labour movement strategies regarding globalisation, which in part result from institutional and cultural differences (Greven 2006b).

Specifically, there are two main reasons for the distrust of German unions regarding U.S. unions' strategic campaigns. Firstly, the cooperative features of German industrial relations, which currently provide potential campaigning, leverage bias German unions against the more adversarial practices of American unions. Works councils and employee representatives on supervisory councils are legally required to work on behalf of the company – which is not to say that these requirements fully determine their actions. In addition, core sectors of the German economy are oriented towards export, and thus focus on international competitiveness. Consequently, German unions often engage in productivity and competitiveness coalitions with management, and extend this micro-corporatism to their transnational strategies as well (ibid.). They prefer stable networks and institution-building (e.g. European and World



works councils, and so called International Framework Agreements with TNEs) rather than adversarial strategies. While these features of “social partnership” are becoming increasingly unstable, they still greatly influence German union policy.

Secondly, the adversarial industrial relations system in the U.S. favours voluntaristic union strategies focused on narrow campaign demands and biased against the establishment of stable inter-union networks. U.S. union campaigns usually focus on neutrality agreements in organizing (to prevent aggressive anti-union campaigning by the target company) and on wages and working conditions in contract campaigns, and this exclusive concept of solidarity is in stark contrast to the German unions' corporatist traditions, which induce them to focus their campaigns on broader demands beyond the interests of the union membership. More importantly, the requests for support often come ad hoc and at the last minute (“phone call solidarity”). The expectation that German unions will be able to take care of any problem with a German-based company likely reflects the perception of their institutional prowess (as well as German unions' expressions of superiority). However, it is certainly difficult to respond to an emergency without previously established inter-union structures of cooperation.

Many German unionists also wonder whether strategic campaigns are not simply “one-way-solidarity” (“Einbahnstraßensolidarität,” as one unionist put it). Often, U.S. unions appear unwilling to challenge corporations on behalf of others when they have good labour relations, which could be leveraged. There have, however, not been many such requests for support, and some U.S. campaigning unions, in particular SEIU, have recently begun to form long-term international alliances in the context of strategically organizing campaigns concerning transnational employers that may allow for continued reciprocity (see below).

The tension between U.S. and German unions can be better understood by looking at a 1999 strategic campaign involving the German tire maker Continental AG, the German chemical workers' union IG BCE (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, Chemie, Energie), and the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) (cf. Greven 2003). In 1999, the USWA conducted a strategic campaign against Continental, whose U.S. subsidiary General Tire in Charlotte, North Carolina, had rejected the union's bargaining demands and hired replacements for the striking workers. The USWA found it difficult to work with the IG BCE, Continental's primary union in Germany. Not once were USWA delegations able to speak directly with German Continental workers and works council members (who were reported to be unsupportive of the campaign), except with those sitting as employee representatives on the company's supervisory board, who were deeply committed to the established practices of co-determination (“Mitbestimmung”) and social partnership. Their legal double-bind as representatives of the workers as well as of the company and, more importantly, the cooperative orientation of the IG BCE led them to be highly sceptical of confrontational tactics such as challenges at the company's annual shareholder meeting.

When the German media picked up on disagreements about strategy between the unions, IG BCE president Hubertus Schmoldt went as far as to publicly call the

USWA's adversarial tactics "not helpful" (*Die Welt*, July 28, 1999).<sup>6</sup> But while the IG BCE did very little to publicly support the Steelworkers, the constant pressure on the company meant pressure on the union as well. The German media was reporting heavily on the dispute and the campaign, and the IG BCE wanted the problem to go away. In the end, the IG BCE did use established channels of co-determination to help facilitate an agreement, e.g., an informal high-level meeting was arranged shortly after the company's annual shareholder meeting that helped to re-start the suspended bargaining sessions. The dispute was settled eventually (for a number of different reasons), but the IG BCE's irritation remained strong. Rumours have persisted that no support would be forthcoming in future disputes.<sup>7</sup>

This may not be entirely voluntary, as the IG BCE's position at Continental has been considerably weakened, at least regarding the tire making business. It is somewhat ironic that IG BCE, which has repeatedly expressed distrust towards American campaigning unions, currently suffers the probable defeat of the dominant German union strategy concerning globalisation, i.e. micro-corporatist productivity and competitiveness alliances. In early 2006, Continental's management unilaterally decided that the concessions agreed to by the works council and the union less than a year before would not suffice to keep any tire production in Germany, regardless of its profitability. All tire-making facilities in Germany would be closed and moved to Eastern Europe. For the first time, the management of a major German company had decided not to honour an agreement negotiated in the spirit of social partnership.

While the IG BCE – which has generally been supportive of Continental's business strategy of moving from the production of tires to becoming a high-end automotive supplier – and management subsequently agreed to a compromise involving some immediate job cuts and a delay of the plant closing until 2007, the larger context of this serious blow to competitiveness alliances is the erosion – or at least serious weakening – of the German system of industrial relations (cf. Fichter 2005). This erosion may lead German unions and works councils to rethink their dominant strategies in dealing with globalisation. Competitiveness alliances are an expression of cooperative and trust-based relations in the context of social partnership. Critics have long pointed out that such strategies can amount to "wild cat cooperation" with management, undermining broad-based rights and standards. The focus on competitiveness, however, arises from the strong export orientation of the core German industries, which are at the same time the industrial unions' strongholds. While there has been some criticism of the German "neo-Mercantilist" strategy including calls on the unions to rethink

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<sup>6</sup> IG BCE's predecessor, the IG Chemie (the chemical workers' union, which merged with the mining workers' union), was even more reluctant to support a campaign of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW), since merged with the Paper Workers union to form PACE, against the German chemical company BASF in 1984 (La Botz 1991). As part of the campaign, OCAW highlighted BASF's predecessor IG Farben's role in the Nazi economy. This aggressive tactic irritated IG Chemie representatives greatly (Perry 1987).

<sup>7</sup> The relationship between the unions is put to the test at the time of this writing as the USWA is once again involved in a dispute with Continental General Tire.

their complicity in it (Beck 2005), for now it seems unlikely that German industrial unions will refocus on the domestic economy and mount an offensive against concession bargaining.

#### ***4.2 Explaining union support in transnational strategic campaigns***

While the differences between the American and German industrial relations traditions go a long way to explain the general distrust towards confrontational tactics such as strategic campaigns, they do not predetermine German unions' behaviour when asked for support. In fact, German unions have generally been at least somewhat supportive of strategic campaigns, and outright hostility towards the campaigning unions is extremely rare. Based on the limited evidence provided by strategic campaigns conducted in Germany since the 1990s, four tentative observations can be made regarding the likelihood of German union support. Firstly, political orientation of the union at various levels plays a key role. Generally, the more "left" a union entity is, the more "internationalist" and supportive of a strategic campaign it will be. Secondly, the level of support is also influenced by union strength. This factor, however, is more ambivalent than the first. It seems that German unions are more likely to support U.S. strategic campaigns if they have recently come under increasing pressure themselves. Thirdly, international solidarity is easier for unions operating in the service sector, because they are not faced with as much direct or indirect competition between each other's as unions in the manufacturing sector. Finally, it seems to be more difficult to generate support if the ultimate target company is German-owned, i.e. if the campaign in Germany is a direct attack rather than the attempt to leverage the relationships of a company.

##### *Political orientation of the union*

In the above mentioned case of the USWA's Continental General Tire campaign, e.g., the Steelworkers worked much better with the German metalworkers' union IG Metall, which represents workers at a company then newly acquired by Continental. In German union politics, the IG Metall is considered a fairly left-wing union with links to traditional labour-friendly Social Democrats (SPD), while the IG BCE is considered to be more moderate, with links to so called "modernizers" within the Social Democrats.<sup>8</sup> Then-IG Metall president Klaus Zwickel wrote to then-USWA president George Becker that "Continental's behaviour in the U.S. is unbecoming of a company that, in Germany, adheres to the principles of social partnership," a phrase which was used widely in the campaign because it captured in a nutshell the expectation that the exposure of a company double standard could be leveraged to win the "game of principle."

Previously, the IG Metall had proved to be supportive of a successful 1994 Teamsters' strategic campaign regarding a dispute involving VW employees in the Wilmington, Delaware, port (cf. Banks 1998). The German service sector union ver.di (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft) is also considered a politically progressive

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<sup>8</sup> There is also more support for the new "Left Party" from within the IG Metall. The post-communist party PDS is in the process of merging with the WASG, a party that formed to the left of the SPD in protest of welfare reforms. WASG's membership consists largely of union members and staff who have become disillusioned with the SPD.

union. Ver.di's president Frank Bsirske is a strong advocate of adopting more aggressive and creative union strategies (cf. Bsirkse 2005). The union has been supportive of U.S. strategic campaigns, e.g. in the case of the U.S. textile workers' union UNITE's campaign against the catalogue clothing company Brylane in 2003 (Raffo 2003; Kriszun 2004).<sup>9</sup> UNITE was trying to organize workers at an Indiana distribution centre of Brylane, which is owned by the French conglomerate Pinault Printemps Redoute (PPR). While the main international campaign activity naturally took place in France (involving, for the first time in history, cooperation between the traditionally anti-communist AFL-CIO and the communist French union CGT), representatives of ver.di were instrumental in initiating actions against Gucci designer stores in Germany – also a PPR subsidiary and selected as an indirect target because of its high visibility and stake in an untarnished corporate image.

These findings regarding the importance of unions' political positions are hardly surprising, as politics heavily influence the extent of internationalism in other arenas of union activity such as European Works Councils (cf. Hürtgen 2003).

#### *Union strength*

In more ambivalent ways, the level of support that German unions provide for U.S. strategic campaigns is also influenced by the relative strength of German unions. It seems that German unions are more likely to support U.S. strategic campaigns, and even begin to take an interest in adopting some U.S. strategies, if they have come under increasing pressure themselves recently. While only some of the unions that formed the service sector union ver.di were open to U.S. strategies prior to the merger (in particular Handel Banken Versicherungen, the union in retail, banking and insurance, which started to adopt U.S. campaign techniques in the mid-1990s, cf. Wohland 1998), the fact that the merged union continues to lose membership has increased interest towards U.S. union strategies and alliances with U.S. unions. I will further explore these ongoing cross-border learning processes below.

At the same time, union weakness can play out in different ways. When the United Autoworkers (UAW) requested support from ver.di for an organizing drive at Chef Solutions in Connecticut, a Lufthansa-subsubsidiary which makes bread for the Lufthansa-owned airline-caterer Sky Chefs, there was great reluctance (also, once again, the call for support came rather late). Ver.di President Frank Bsirske, a union member of the Lufthansa supervisory board, was under pressure from shareholders because of his support of a costly strike at the Frankfurt airport. This case is a good illustration of the legal double bind of employee representatives on German supervisory boards. Rather than use the case of the UAW organizing campaign to illustrate the necessity and legitimacy of union action (there had been cases of sexual and other harassment of the mostly female immigrant workers at the Connecticut bakery), Bsirske preferred to not further agitate the shareholders, even though they cannot vote him out.

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<sup>9</sup> UNITE has since merged with the union of hotel and restaurant employees, HERE.

*Industry sector*

German unions operating in the service sector are not as invested in the above-mentioned neo-Mercantilist competitiveness agenda as industrial unions and therefore not faced with as much direct or indirect competition with each other as unions in the manufacturing sector. Also, the campaigns in the American service sector are mostly organizing rather than bargaining campaigns, so that there is less concern about increasing the costs of a German company's foreign operation (which appears to have been one of the concerns of the IG BCE in the case of the campaign against General Tire, see above). In addition, it is the U.S. service sector unions, in particular SEIU and UNITE-HERE, that are offering more long-time cooperation and reciprocity in campaigns, thus recognizing the legitimacy of the above-mentioned German critique of "one-way solidarity" (see below).

*Target company*

Finally, obtaining German union support seems to be somewhat easier if the ultimate target of the strategic campaign is not a German-owned company. For ver.di, support in the campaign involving Gucci stores was more readily available than in the case of Lufthansa. Even the IG Metall, while supportive in the campaign against VW in Delaware and in the campaign against Continental (which is predominantly organized by the IG BCE), had more difficulty in the campaign by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to organize workers at an Osram facility in Kentucky that attempted to leverage the company's link with Siemens. Once again, however, this latter campaign lacked strategic preparation and focus.

**5. Cross-border learning processes**

If unions are to pursue transnational strategies effectively, they must be sensitive to these factors and to the national systems of industrial relations that they reflect.<sup>10</sup> Adversarial strategies based on the voluntaristic U.S. tradition such as strategic campaigns are effective in conflict situations, but may be too narrow and exclusive and thus not immediately suited for the building of stable networks. In contrast, network-building is the strength of approaches based on the cooperative German tradition, including such instruments as European and World Works Councils and International Framework Agreements with TNEs (Müller et al. 2003; Müller et al. 2006), but these strategies have not yet been effective in organizing cross-border collective action in conflict situations. Ultimately, however, the credibility of unions in cooperative institutional arrangements rests on their capacity to mount such collective contentious action, and this is why it is likely that German unions will become more interested in adversarial tactics such as strategic campaigns since the established Fordist institutions and social partnership traditions of the German industrial relations system are eroding.

In fact, considerable cross-border learning of union strategies is already underway, in particular regarding the U.S. "organizing model," i.e. the re-focusing of all union activities from the servicing of the existing membership to the aggressive orga-

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<sup>10</sup> Transnational union strategies also vary in important ways between different industries (cf. Anner et al. 2006).

nizing of new members, including some elements of strategic campaigning.<sup>11</sup> The organizing model was first adopted by unions in Australia and the UK. In Germany, the academic and union reception was rather critical at first – again reflecting the distrust of more adversarial tactics – but has become more positive recently (Frege 2000; Meyer 2002; Behrens 2005).

There has been much less academic and union discourse on U.S. strategic campaigns (Dribbusch 1998; Greven 2001). On the margins of the German labour movement, however, experiments with strategic campaigns were made as early as the mid-1990s. In 1994 and 1995, a successful regional campaign against one of Germany's largest drugstore chains, Schlecker, to establish works councils was organized by Handel Banken Versicherungen (hbv), which later became one of the unions to merge into ver.di (Huhn 2001). The campaign resulted in considerable membership growth for the union.<sup>12</sup>

The interest in strategic campaigns has grown within ver.di. Ver.di staff learnt about the new tactics first-hand in the context of SEIU and UNITE-HERE organizing campaigns and when they returned, they started to lobby within the organization to invest in campaigns (cf. Schreieder 2005). A newly established campaign fund is currently financing a nation-wide campaign against the giant discounter chain Lidl to establish works councils against severe company resistance (cf. Schwetz 2005). Several conferences on organizing and campaigning have taken place, organized by ver.di and/or the campaigner network OrKa, always with participation of American unionists (cf. [www.neverworkalone.org](http://www.neverworkalone.org)).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There is considerable debate in the U.S. regarding the “organizing model,” especially in the context of the recent split of the labour movement (cf. Greven 2006a). The organizing successes of the unions of the new Change to Win Federation are rightfully hailed because they have reached new immigrants, women and youth. The failure to do so significantly crippled a divisive and fragmented U.S. labour movement in the past, and SEIU and others certainly deserve credit. But I believe Ruth Milkman (2006) misses the point when she argues that it is the organizing tradition of the American Federation of Labor, with its occupational and local focus, that explains the success of SEIU and others. In the context of globalization, it is simply easier to organize the relatively immobile service sector, especially when focused on local markets where labour can effectively be taken out of competition. The U.S. labour movement runs the risk of repeating a different past failure: In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it failed to merge the defensive struggle of craft unions against deskilling and Taylorism with the dynamic industrial organizing of non-skilled immigrant workers (Davis 1986). Now it must find ways to unite the defensive struggle of industrial unions in manufacturing with the new dynamism of organizing in service sector.

<sup>12</sup> In Germany, individual union membership is possible but not necessary to receive the benefits of a bargaining agreement, as those companies bound by an agreement will unilaterally extend its terms to all employees.

<sup>13</sup> The German construction workers union IG BAU has also shown interest and its president even talked about introducing “American-style rapid-reaction forces.” IG BAU organizes the building services that in the U.S. are organized by SEIU, but it is unclear whether new tactics are going to be introduced across the board.



In the recent academic debate, Renneberg (2005) enthusiastically advocated the adoption of strategic campaigns from a participatory point of view, i.e. concerning the possibilities for rank-and-file participation. This is in contrast to criticisms sometimes raised in the U.S. about the top-down and non-transparent nature of campaign decision-making and the rather tactical participation of the membership. Similar criticisms have been raised against the adoption of the "organizing model" in the UK. Heery et al. (2000) called it "managed activism." This is certainly a danger in Germany as well; there is already some debate to focus merely on membership recruitment. If campaigns fail to meet benchmarks regarding new membership, the new tactics can be discredited. In any event, serious transfer problems remain and are visible in ongoing campaigns.

One can expect that German unions engaged in strategy transfers from the U.S. will be more willing to support American unions' campaigns. They will, however, likely take great care not to unduly jeopardize remaining social partnership elements of German industrial relations. In order to overcome the distrust towards adversarial tactics and to generate support from German unions, American campaigners will thus have to take a complex set of expectations and objectives into account. Ultimately, a combination of the U.S. and German key strategies is called for: The establishment of stable inter-union networks, armed with the willingness and ability to conduct effective strategic campaigns, using all available leverage.

Interestingly, the increased interest in U.S. organizing and campaigning tactics on the part of German unions coincides with an increased interest of U.S. campaigning unions, in particular SEIU and UNITE-HERE, to conduct more cooperative international campaigns and to build stable inter-union networks around those campaigns.<sup>14</sup> Since 2004, SEIU has a permanent representative at Union Network International (UNI), the GUF for the service sector, and in 2005 the union established a global team that operates in Poland, the UK, the Netherlands, and in Germany, to name only the European countries. Network-building and cooperative campaigns to organize workers in the building services and security industries are well underway. E.g., ver.di Hamburg is undertaking a very ambitious program to train German union organizers (a new job description, as traditionally works councils have recruited new members) for a campaign in the security industry, and SEIU organizers have been instrumental in the effort.

## **6. Conclusions**

German unions have often encountered U.S. unions' strategic campaigns in Germany with scepticism because of differences in the industrial relations traditions. The cooperative features of German industrial relations, which currently provide potential campaigning leverage, bias German unions against the more adversarial practices of American unions. At the same time, the adversarial industrial relations system in the U.S. favours voluntaristic strategies of U.S. unions biased towards narrow campaign demands and against the establishment of stable inter-union networks. But while these

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<sup>14</sup> Tactical and therefore episodic networks have often been part of transnational strategic campaigns (cf. Russo 1998).

differences go a long way to explain the general distrust towards confrontational tactics such as strategic campaigns, they do not predetermine German unions' behaviour when asked for support. Four tentative observations were made regarding the likelihood of German union support. Firstly, political orientation of the union at various levels plays a key role. Generally, the more "left" a union entity is, the more "internationalist" and supportive of a strategic campaign it will be. Secondly, the level of support is also influenced by union strength. German unions are more likely to support U.S. strategic campaigns if they have recently come under increasing pressure themselves. Thirdly, international solidarity is easier for unions operating in the service sector, because they are not faced with as much direct or indirect competition between each other as unions in the manufacturing sector. Finally, it seems to be more difficult to generate support if the ultimate target company is German-owned, i.e. if the campaign in Germany is a direct attack rather than the attempt to leverage the relationships of a company.

If unions are to pursue transnational strategies effectively, i.e. if they want to generate additional leverage through the "boomerang effect," they must be sensitive to the national systems of industrial relations and to the obstacles to inter-union cooperation they create. This requires considerable efforts in cross-border learning. In fact, such transnational learning processes are ongoing in both directions. First, as U.S. campaigning unions are becoming aware of the scepticism of unions in Germany and other countries with social partnership traditions regarding the adversarial and ad hoc nature of strategic campaigns, they are more willing to invest in stable inter-union networks and reciprocal solidarity. Secondly, as the credibility of unions in cooperative institutional arrangements rests on their capacity to mount collective contentious action, German unions are becoming more interested in adversarial tactics such as strategic campaigns because of the erosion of established Fordist institutions and social partnership traditions. Ultimately, a combination of U.S. and German key union strategies is called for: The establishment of stable transnational inter-union networks, armed with the willingness and ability to conduct effective transnational strategic campaigns.

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