Global and European Trade Union Federations

A Handbook and Analysis of Transnational Trade Union Organizations and Policies

Hans-Wolfgang Platzer and Torsten Müller
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This study is concerned with branch-level transnational trade unions at both global and European level. At the global level, these are now referred to as Global Union Federations (GUFs), but from their inception in the late nineteenth century and until the beginning of the twenty-first century they were known as International Trade Secretariats (ITS). At European level, branch-level trade union federations are now known as European Industry Federations (EIFs). The research mainly deals with the period from the 1990s until the present, and aims to provide a broad and systematic presentation of the organization, strategies, and policies of transnational branch-level union federations.¹

This will involve two steps. In the first, we set out organizational profiles of individual trade union federations, outlining and analysing their key features and distinctive characteristics, current structures, and policies. The second stage involves an analysis of their main areas of activity and the development of their functional characteristics over time, in particular focusing on instruments and arenas of transnational trade union activity that have emerged or undergone major change in the period covered by our study.

Our conceptual framework and research strategy, explained in Chapter 2, includes a number of analytical tools intended to facilitate a consistent approach to the large number of organizations in the study. At the core of the study is the question as to whether and to what extent the issues, tasks, and the forms and scope of these organizations’ engagement with

¹ As noted in the Preface, most of the fieldwork for the study was conducted during 2006–2008: some updating was carried out in the context of ongoing research and for the English edition.
transnational problems have changed as a result of the advancing pace of globalization and European Union (EU) integration: in short, whether there has been a transformation in the functional profiles of global and European trade unions over the period of our research.

The significance of the various levels of transnational organization in the context of a multi-level trade union strategy, as practised within national, European and global spaces, is a key element in the theoretical discussion about the status of global and European unions as autonomous ‘actors’. From the beginning of the twentieth century, this issue has also been part of the trade union and research debate on the central strategic question of how trade unions can develop an international or European trade union organizational form and strategy that constitutes an ‘historically’ appropriate response to the challenges and circumstances of the international economy and the international state system.

Context and issues

The study is located in two contexts that have shaped long-standing policy discussions and theoretical debates: firstly, the issue of the shaping and regulation of globalization, customarily subsumed under the designation of ‘global governance’; and secondly, issue of the ‘social dimension’ within the EU, and specifically employment and social policy, that has now acquired the formal designation of the ‘European Social Model’.

Three basic aspects characterize each of these contexts.

– The relationship between the transnational economy, state regulation and the system of social intermediary organizations.
– The question as to which level, or within which spatial dimension – national, regional, global – governance and regulation can and should take place, and how a multi-level system of governance should be structured and where its crucial levers should be located.
– The relationship between state norm-setting and regulation, and (self-) regulation by private civil society actors.

Our study of the role of transnational unions is located at the interface between these overlapping political and theoretical sites. As a consequence, we aim to link a theorization of trade union organization with a political science perspective that draws on models and analyses of ‘governance in the EU multi-level system’ and corresponding thinking on ‘global governance’.

The study is based on the following premises and working hypotheses.

1. Advancing political and economic internationalization and Europeanization constitute significant new determinants for trade union strategy and activity at the start of the twenty-first century in that they both ‘subvert’ and ‘overtake’ national arenas.

We argue that processes of globalization and European integration have taken on a new quality over the past decade-and-a-half (see Chapter 3, below). The scope and pace of these processes increasingly call for a multi-level trade union strategy, in which new levels of engagement with issues ‘beyond the nation state’ gain in significance in addition to established national arenas. The process of ‘social transnationalization’ (Mau, 2007), or the ‘transnationalization of the social world’ (Pries, 2008a), is not only raising the significance of supra-state levels of activity in the field of union interest representation but also often injecting a new ‘political’ quality into transnational trade union relationships as a result of growing economic interdependence and changed conditions of competition.

One example can be seen in the fact that as labour markets have become internationalized, with growing competition between national locations over social standards, working conditions and pay, there has been a growing need for transnational coordination – both quantitatively and qualitatively – and a corresponding change in the conditions under which ‘international solidarity’ can be constituted and organized. Compared with traditional forms of international trade union cooperation, such as mutual support and solidarity actions,
new challenges are emerging at the transnational level of organization: these include the constant balancing of differing material interests in order to formulate common objectives and approaches to regulation and a need to represent these policies and strategies effectively within inter-state and supra-state political processes. To these can be added the need to organize and facilitate cooperation and transnational private governance under conditions of intensified competition through the development of effective norms and rules and, if needed, through agreement on sanctions to enforce compliance.

2. The relationship between globalization and EU integration is characterized by both an ‘internal’ linkage and a complex mutual interplay, with each process having its own specific dynamic of socio-economic development, and its own set of political framework conditions. EU integration is both a part of, and a driving force in, globalization; at the same time, the depth of economic integration (Single Market, Economic and Monetary Union) and its particular political characteristics (including supra-national lawmaking) embody a number of significant regional features not encountered elsewhere that render the EU institutionally and historically unique.

3. The ‘debordering’ of the national space for trade union interest representation, fostered and accelerated through EU integration and economic globalization, and the increasing need to engage with problems transnationally, is confronting both the European and global trade union levels of organization and activity with some identical and some similar challenges, but also with a number of very different requirements in terms of new problems that need to be addressed transnationally. This has led to comparable responses and common strategic approaches at both levels, involving coordination between the European and global levels, as well as to responses that differ depending on the level, and in some instances to competing approaches.

4. The assumption that might follow from this – that there should be an extension of trade unions’ transnational problem-solving capacity – does not translate in a deterministic way into corresponding activity: that is, it does not necessarily lead to real growth in the significance of the European and global levels of action, and with this a growth in
the importance of transnational organizations in terms of the structures and activities of the EIFs and GUFs – for example, through their acquiring greater powers and wider scope for activity, more resources, corresponding adjustments in decision-making procedures, or other appropriate changes.

5. Rather, the transnationalization of trade union strategy is a complex and contradictory process, as more intense competition between national locations resulting from neo-liberal globalization and EU integration also induces or ‘enforces’ adaptive responses at local and national levels, including forms of concertation, such as workplace alliances, concessions bargaining, and incorporation into national modernizing coalitions, all of which (can) lead to ‘competitive corporatism’.

   Furthermore, changes in the structure of (industrial) society and in the character of social problems, notably unemployment, often lead to membership losses and a weakening of trade union resources and capacities. These constellations and trends at national level can obstruct and inhibit the scope for addressing problems transnationally through EIFs and GUFs, despite the need for a ‘new’ trade union internationalism professed in trade union discourses and strategy debates or the requirement for trade unions to act transnationally, often posited as an ‘objective’ necessity by some observers: as an example, consider Ulrich Beck’s dictum: ‘Trade unions must re-invent themselves transnationally’ (Beck, 2000).

6. In critical awareness of this, we begin from the premise that the question as to the extent to which the reordering of the economic and political environment has influenced and transformed transnational trade union activity at global and European level since the 1990s can only be resolved through empirical study.

This multi-faceted set of empirical issues – the prerequisites and limits of a multi-level trade union strategy in the context of globalization and EU integration – will be dealt with, and bounded, as follows. The focus of the study is exclusively on observable changes in organizational strategies and the transformation of the historically-evolved functional profiles and activities of the EIFs and GUFs. The simultaneous processes of the