Horses for Courses? Trade unions responses to the crisis in Romania and Ireland

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Theme 2: Industrial relations around Europe: What future in Europe for collective voice and response to the employment crisis?

Abstract

This paper examines the responses of trade unions to the recent crisis in Romania and Ireland. It focuses on developments in three sectors (healthcare, finance and construction) severely affected by the crisis. Both countries required ‘bail-out’ deals followed by the implementation of austerity measures. It is claimed that both have a special type of ‘neoliberal capitalism’, as prior to the recession, they had social partnership agreements. However, the Romanian and Irish unions have very different traditions; the Romanian trade unions generally rely on legislation and political support to gain legitimacy and power, whilst the Irish trade unions have a long tradition of voluntarism, characterised by limited state intervention in their activities; their power depends primarily on their capacity to attract, and mobilise, members. Thus, the responses of the unions to the substantive and procedural austerity measures could be expected to vary more between the two countries than across sectors within each country.

However, the findings based on our qualitative data suggest great variation in unions’ responses across sectors within each country, depending on employers’ attitudes to recent changes in employment relations. In both countries, trade unions together with representatives of employers are trying to maintain the collective bargaining institutions in the construction sector (the private sector industry worst hit by the crisis), while the relations between trade unions and state specialised agencies have become more adversarial in the healthcare sector in both countries. Nevertheless, the main trade union in the Irish banking sector used extensively the litigation route to deal with employment issues since 2008, while there have been no major changes in the unions’ role in the Romanian banking sector, where unions had limited influence before the recession. Overall, there has been rather limited unions’ resistance to government led changes towards the marginalization of trade unions in both countries.

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