German Trade Unions and Social Movements – Coalition-building with the Alter-Globalization Movement at the G8-summit in Heiligendamm

(Working Title)

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Abstract
Trade unions in Europe face diminishing resources and decreasing influence due to labor market and industrial relations changing within a globalized economy. Coalition-building has recently been identified as a promising strategy for unions to counter this trends and regain strength in the traditional channels of influence. However, coalitions are also an integrative part of a very different form of trade unionism in which trade unions behave (once again) more like social movements. Especially in coalitions with the alter-globalization movements trade unions need to broaden their appeal to issues that go beyond the workplace and apply repertoires that are more common for social movements than for contemporary institutionalized unions. This study investigates the large-scale protests, organized by a diverse protest coalition between German labor unions and different actors within the alter-globalization movement that took place before and during the 2007 G8-summit in Heiligendamm. The purpose of this study is to gain insights into the trade unions motivation to join coalitions with the alter-globalization movement by interviewing officials of both participating and nonparticipation unions. In order to identify the role that those coalitions play in trade unions strategic orientation close attention will be given to the relation of coalition-building to other union strategies and the role of leaders’ strategic choice vs. rank-and-file action. The findings may be important to assess the revitalization efforts of German trade unions and thereby evaluate the future role of trade unions in Germany and beyond.

Introduction
In June 2007 the 33rd G8 summit took place in Heiligendamm in Germany, accompanied not only by international media but also thousands of protesters who participated in various forms of protest, ranging from discussion fora, workshops and live music to road blocks and violent clashes between protesters and the police. Among other things the protesters demanded fair trade with and debt relief of the global South, the preservation or restoration of the welfare state and global social rights, the transition towards green and sustainable energy, measures against racism, the abolition of deportation and borders, and peaceful conflict resolution instead of military intervention (Demo-AG, 2007). As usual for the alter-globalization movement, participants and organizers came from very different backgrounds. In the case of Heiligendamm, more than 40 groups and organizations participated in protests on site and at the alternative summit in Rostock, including churches, alter-globalization groups like attac, Die Linke (the leftist party in the German parliament), environmental and animal rights groups, radical democratic movements and anarchists.

Moreover, several German trade unions participated in this coalition and many workers, unionized or not, joined the demonstrations. The participation of unions and other workers movements in the alter-globalization movement is nothing new, and especially since the protests in
the so-called Battle for Seattle their mobilization capacity for this movement has become more than clear. Participation in several World Social Fora (WSF) and affiliated events, like the Subversive Festival in Zagreb, support the observation that workers and their organizations are heavily engaged within the alter-globalization movement. Despite this engagement it comes as a surprise to see German trade unions so actively involved in coalitions with such diverse partners. Especially the alter-globalization movement is looked at with some caution by German unions: although they are not silent about the drawbacks of liberalized trade and markets in the form of outsourcing labour to low-wage countries, they are generally supportive of free markets and trade, since many of their members are working in export-oriented sectors that often benefit from expanding markets and less transaction costs (Behrens, Fichter, & Frege, 2003).

In addition to this unexpected participation from a substantive point of view, their participation is neither expected from a strategic point of view: if unions were to participate in order to gain membership and influence, German Unions would certainly not be the most likely ones to apply such a strategy since is often claimed that in the German system of industrial relations with strong collective bargaining institutions and co-determination on the work floor, the ground for innovative strategies to counter the trend towards diminishing influence is less fertile than in countries where unions enjoy a less favorable position in the first place. The very strength that German unions enjoyed since the Second World War would have made them inflexible and centralized union structures make the use of innovative strategies less likely (Baccaro, Hamann, & Turner, 2003; Frege & Kelly, 2004).

Coalition-building is one of several strategies for union revitalization that have recently been identified by Frege & Kelly (ibid.) Frege et al. (2004) further elaborated on the question why trade unions enter coalitions with other actors in society. They stress that, although they are a range of different motivations, push-and pull factors and favoring conditions for unions to enter coalitions, those coalitions are always a secondary method which is used to gain access to resources that would otherwise not be attainable for the unions, in order to support their primary strategies. For the lack of a better term I will call this approach the resource-based approach. Another way to look at coalitions, especially in the case of coalitions between trade unions and the alter-globalization movement can be subsumed under the term social movement unionism. To give a comprehensive definition of social movement unionism (SMU) is rather hard, given the many different definitions in the literature. Introduced as a prescriptive utopian vision of trade unionism it has later been used to analyze workers movements in South Africa, coalitions between unions and community organizations in the United States or anti-privatization campaigns in the German city of Hamburg. Although there is still considerable debate on the prescriptive meaning of this term, analytically it has been used to describe a form of trade unionism that goes beyond collective bargaining and workplace politics and
becomes a thriving force for justice and democracy. Joining coalitions with other actors is an integrative part of trade unions in this understanding.

Of course, both approaches are not incompatible with each other and Frege’s et al. (2004) conceptual framework is very helpful for investigating coalitions, regardless of the underlying motivation. The important difference between both approaches is that in social movement unionism, coalitions are not (or not only) a secondary method in order to gain resources for some primary goal but far and foremost an expression of the unions raison d’être and self-conception as part of a movement for democracy and social justice.

Reconsidering the points mentioned in this introduction, one can identify several reasons why the coalition between labour unions and other actors in Heiligendamm deserves an in-depth investigation. First of all the way in which the unions frame their participation gives us valuable insights in how cooperation between unions and other societal actors can be given shape to. This is especially interesting in cases where unions work together with very diverse partners within one master frame as is the case in coalition with the alter-globalization movement.

Secondly the fact that there was considerable differences of opinion both between and within variant German unions about whether to participate or not provides an interesting case for studying decision-making within unions and the differences in decision-making between unions.

In the third place the interaction between unions and new social movements can be studied extensively in this case. Their participation in the “movement of movements” provokes the question whether these actions are just a way of building up networks in order to gain resources and burst membership, or whether actions are the result of a fundamental change in the identity of trade unions in which they broaden their appeal to the society as a whole (social movement unionism).

This research project takes the protests in Heiligendamm, especially the alternative summit in Rostock, as a starting point to an investigation of the revitalization efforts of German Trade Unions. The goal of this research project is to gain insights into why German unions joined/did not join the protest coalition against the G8-summit in Heiligendamm by investigating their (non-) participation through interviewing union officials and members. The central question is: Why did German trade unions (not) participate in the protest coalition? In order to answer this question, an in-depth analysis of the unions’ choices to (not) enter in a coalition with other actors within the alter-globalization movement is necessary. To analyze the relationship between the union and their coalition-partners the shape of the coalition will be investigated. In order to estimate who initiated and who opposed closer alliances with the alter-globalization movement there will be given close attention to the role of both leaders and rank-and file activists. Therefore three central questions emerge:
1. What was the underlying rationale for (not) participating? *(Resources vs. SMU)*

2. What was the role of leaders and activists?

3. What shape did the coalition take?

This paper is structured as follows. First different forms of coalitions will be presented. After that the *research-based approach* and the *social movement unionism* approach will be described in detail. Then the methodology and the findings follow. At the end there will be a discussion of the result and the paper closes with some concluding remarks.

**Types of coalitions**

Coalitions between unions and other actors in society are neither new nor unusual. But although they happened in the past they can hardly be called an essential part of union action in Germany by now. However, there are instances where unions use protest in coalition as a means to replace traditional action on a local level, when those traditional means are no longer sufficient to reach the unions’ goal. Greer (2008) has shown that unions in Hamburg have effectively build a coalition with partners ranging from the *Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* (DGB) to atac to stop the privatization of hospitals in a situation where traditional ways of influence where blocked. By linking their claims to the broader issues of health care and local democracy, the coalition was able to make use of a strong public opinion to influence policy makers, increase union density and reestablish strength (ibid.).

The above is only one example of union-civil society coalitions on a local level, but coalitions are not bound to the local level. However, mobilization is easier when established networks are rightly available and the costs of not acting are clear to everyone, which is often easier on the local level with conceivable local consequences (Johnston 1994, as cited in (Tattersall, 2006)). In order to find a broad definition Frege, Heery, and Turner (2004) define coalitions as “involving distinct, intermittent, or continuous joint activity in pursuit of shared or common goals between trade unions and other non-labour institutions in civil society […]” (p. 138). It is essential to note that in this definition coalitions can range from one-time cooperation to long-lasting alliances and from the local to the national level.

Different taxonomies have been developed to further comparative research on union coalition-building. One characteristic of coalitions that can differ is the way in which coalition partners interact with each other. Frege et al. (2004) make a difference between vanguard, common-cause and integrative coalitions. In *vanguard coalitions*, coalition partners of unions act as mere supporters of their struggle, taking the role of an inferior partner. *Common-cause coalitions* are those where coalition partners identify “separate but associated interests” (ibid.). In this coalitions there is a need for a frame that allows both coalition partners to speak to their own supporters without discouraging the supporters of the coalition partners (Heery, Williams, & Abbott, 2012). In *integrative*
coalitions trade unions take over the goals of their coalition partners as their own. Another way of looking at interactions between unions is provided by Krueger, who looks at the complexity of interaction ranging from discursive networks to policy communities (Schmidt, 2005). In the same vein Turner (2006) ranges coalitions from events to institutional coalitions, where from the former to the latter there is an increase of both: the degree of institutionalization and the sophistication of networks between the different actors.

Using the methods that coalitions use and analyzing how they are related to state policy-making can also form the basis of a workable taxonomy. In this respect Frege et al. (2004) differentiate between coalitions of influence and coalitions of protest, where in the former, unions build coalitions with partners within the policy-making process and in the latter, unions search for coalitions outside of state policy making with the goal of applying external pressure.

Why do unions enter coalitions?

Resource-based approach

Asking the question why unions decide to go into coalition with other non-labour actors presupposes the acknowledgement that unions are capable of strategic choice. In their seminal work on union revitalization Frege and Kelly (2004) develop a conceptual framework in which state and employer strategies, union structures and the institutional context of industrial relations mediated by framing processes determine strategic choices of unions. To qualify this argument Baccaro et al. (2003) compared union strategies in five industrialized countries and shows how institutional embeddedness can explain much of the variety of union strategies:

“They have used [...] [political power to build institutions of inclusion (such as comprehensive collective bargaining and codetermination), they may then rely on social partnership and de-emphasize the mobilization of participation. Where they have a weak institutional position, they are more likely to rediscover the rewards of organizing and rank-and-file mobilization, as well as coalition building in civil society.” (p. 129)

However, even strong institutions are constructed and uphold only as long as those who benefit from it have enough power to withhold those, who would like to see it deconstructed. That globalization has led to a diminishing influence of unions, even where they were or still seem to be strong institutions is already broad consensus. In his account of a successful coalition between the United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club, Turner (2006) shows how increasing coalition-building is indeed a reaction of unions to increasing pressures from liberal globalization and their wish to still participate in decision-making.
Underlying this is the idea that union coalition-building is mainly understood as “secondary method that is used to support primary activities of organizing and servicing members, engaging with employers and participating in the political process” (Frege et al., 2004, p. 141) by accessing different kinds of resources provided by the coalition partner(s). These resources can be in the form of “physical and financial resources, networks of communications, expertise, legitimacy, and the capacity to mobilize constituency and popular support” (ibid.). Frege et al. (2004) further suggest that unions enter coalitions for two different types of pressure: Internal pressure pushes unions toward coalition because of diminishing resources, a broadening of their agenda or the influence of “bridge-builders” which establish a link between unions and new social movement or other actors in civil society. External factors pull unions into coalition, especially favorable opportunity structures and the availability of suitable coalition partners (ibid.).

**Social movement unionism**

Social movement unionism provides a more integrative role of coalitions and protest. Developed at the end of the 1980’s by Peter Waterman, it was first and foremost a utopian vision of how discursive contact between new social movements and traditional trade unions could lead to global solidarity by combining socialist elements of class (conflict) with the struggle for radical democracy and broader societal concerns and networking techniques of new social movements (Waterman, 2004). Waterman (ibid.) has later criticized the application of his term in scholarship and practice (ibid.) and indeed, social movement unionism has almost as many interpretations as Google shows hits on this term (which are 229,000 at the time of writing). First applied in the context of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (ibid.), it since had significance influence on both the American and the European literature on trade union revitalization and for many it is one of the most promising paths to union revitalization. Although Waterman developed the concept in prescriptive terms, current research on social movement unionism is of rather descriptive nature (Seidman, 2011; Waterman, 2004).

Current research focuses extensively on new forms of organizing and coalitions with local, regional and even national actors, ranging from local consumer groups, city councils, feminist and environmentalist groups to the alter-globalization movement. Different definition emerged, from which some basic features of contemporary social movement unionism can be derived. Three characteristics that are more or less part of most of the research done so far are

- the emphasis of grassroots democracy and rank-and file action
- coalition-building with other actors in civil society
• the framing of issues in terms of (global) social justice that goes beyond pure traditional 
economistic goals.  

Some critics (e.g. Upchurch & Mathers, 2012; Waterman, 2004) have argued that the contemporary 
usage of the term diminishes the role of class and thereby underestimates the political nature of 
union activity (especially related to the demise of the party-union nexus in social-democratic trade 
unionism).

By focusing on issues that transcend the work environment of workers, social movement 
unionism is not merely a strategy for union revitalization but describes a fundamentally different 
form of trade unionism that goes beyond collective bargaining and workplace politics and becomes 
(once again, given the origins of the labour movement) a thriving force for justice and democracy as 
“agents of radical social change” or, as Scipes (2000) puts it, a unionism

“[...] that sees workers’ struggles as merely one of many efforts to qualitatively change society, and the 
workplace as neither the only nor even the primary site for political struggle and social change. 
Therefore, it seeks alliances with other social movements on an equal basis and tries to join them 
when possible, both within the country and internationally” (p.6).

Although research on social movement unionism mainly focuses on cases beyond Europe, there are 
examples of similar developments taking place in Europe as well, even in cases where strong 
institutional embeddedness would let one expect the opposite. The case of privatization protests in 
Hamburg has already been mentioned above, others call attention to protests against the 
dismantling of the welfare state and the affiliation of several (regional branches of) unions with the 
movement unionism strategies in campaigns against the employers Lidl and Schlecker in Germany. 
He stresses that support from leaders as well as grassroots mobilization are essential for strategic 
innovation. Parker shows how elements of social movement unionism can be traced in the coalition 
efforts of the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) (2008) and the New Zealand Council of Trade 
Unions (2011).

Social movement unionism therefore differs from other forms of unionism. In the coalitions 
with the alter-globalization movement that difference is most visible. In those coalitions unions 
“protest more than act in concert, [...] build horizontal networks with other unions instead of relying 
upon hierarchical organization, and [...] construct encompassing collective identities instead of 
focusing on the defense of economic interests” (Della Porta, 2006, p. 75).

1 See Parker 2007, Dibben 2004, Shiavone 2007, Seidman 2011, Upchurch and Mathers 2011, Fletcher 2011, 
How do unions enter coalitions – activism and leadership

Coalitions of unions with other actors in civil society do not appear out of nowhere and several factors can enhance the likelihood of unions forging coalitions. Frege et al. (2004) identify several push-factors that enhance the likelihood of unions to enter coalitions with other actors in society: diminishing resources, expanding interest representation, activism and leadership, union identity. Diminishing resources, expanding interest representation and union identity are central to what I have called the resource-based approach and social movement unionism, respectively. That leaves us with the role of activism and leadership. Leadership can be both beneficial and unfavorable for the likelihood of innovative strategies like coalition-building. In Germany for example “[i]nnovators from inside the German labor movement find their initiatives opposed by traditionalists who rely on institutional position to defend past gains” (Turner, 2006, p. 92). Similarly Krinsky and Reese (2006), in their study of the Workface Justice Movement in the United States, found that innovators in labour unions faced reluctant leaders and insufficient resources when attempting to use innovative strategies like renewed organizing and coalition-building. Likewise, Nissen (2004) shows how innovation in Florida’s unions was only possible after a turnover in council leadership after which it was finally accepted that labour won’t be the vanguard in coalitions with community groups, which would not have been accepted by other groups in the coalition.

This draws attention to the fact that labour unions may need to step back from their role as vanguards in coalitions and that coalitions may be most successful where unions and other groups meet at eye level, which is the case in common-cause coalition. If trade unions and their coalition partners are able to identify common goals and frame them in a way that satisfies both their constituencies and leaders, coalitions are more likely to be forged successfully (Nissen, 2004; Tattersall, 2005). This highlights the importance of bridge-builders - union leaders or activists that bring in experience in other social movements – who are able to find common elements in the demands and ideas of different movement and organization (Frege et al., 2004).

Thus, when looking at the influence of activists and innovative leaders when has to take into account that unions are often hierarchical institutions where resource allocation and strategic orientation is decided upon by central leadership.

Methodology

This research will be conducted primarily by semi-structured interviews with union members and officials of the eight unions that are part of the DGB and officials of the DGB itself. Interviews will be held with members of the unions’ executive boards and where possible, with rank-and file members.

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2 For an examination these factors see (Frege et al., 2004, pp.145-150)
that were active in the coalition. The participation of the different unions under the DGB ranged from more passive engagement like signing of demands and mobilization of members to active participation in the forming of the coalition and organizing of the protest events. The Gewerkschaft der Polizei (union of the police) abstained from participation completely. But also within the unions there is variation with local branches and individuals that participated and others that abstained. The choice to investigate all unions, even those that did not participate in the coalition, ensures variety in the dependent variable on several levels: between the unions (participation or not) and within the unions (degree of participation).

The focus of this interviews will lie on the reasons and rationale for the unions to enter the coalitions and especially on the relationship between coalitions and other (primary) union strategies. Close attention will be given to the question whether coalitions are supportive or supplementing to those strategies in order to answer the theoretical question whether those coalitions are purely based on need for new resources, as expected by the resource based approach or indicate a transformation towards social movement unionism. In order to answer this question in greater detail, empirical issues will be investigated by also focusing on the form of the coalition, the relationship and interaction between the unions and other coalition partners, the role of leaders, activists and bridge-builders and the effect of this coalition on the networks between the unions and the alter-globalization movement after the protests in 2007.

**Conclusion**

*In progress*

**Bibliography**


