‘Toward European Industrial Relations and European Solidarity: European Trade Unions and Cross-Border Collaboration’

Abstract for IREC conference, Dublin, 10 – 12.9.14

Theme 2: Industrial relations around Europe, or
Theme 1: European Social Dialogue: is the role of European social partners changing? Are we moving to a new social dimension?

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This paper addresses two of the key themes of IREC 2014: It asks what progress has been made toward a Europeanisation of industrial relations, and does this by exploring the changing role of European trade unions and the further development of their European-level collaboration. It builds on my contribution to the 2013 IREC conference, where I focused on the development of the European and international-level policies of national trade union confederations, by evaluating the practical implementation of these policies in their efforts at increased cross-border collaboration within Europe, whether on a bi- or multi-lateral basis or through the ETUC and other European-wide trade union bodies. This presentation draws on the results of a five-year study, undertaken with Richard Hyman (LSE), which was published in late 2013 as European Trade Unions: Hard Times; Hard Choices (OUP).

While our study covered unions in ten EU Member States and looked at a wide variety of themes relating to unions’ response to globalization and other major challenges such as the changing nature of work, collective bargaining, and the decline of trade union membership and power, for reasons of space it was not possible to explore all these themes in depth. I will go into further detail here on the European level of trade union action, focusing on the cross-border collaborations of national level trade union confederations and sectoral unions. While this presentation will refer to the actions and policies of the ETUC and the European Industry Federations, the focus will remain on the actions of the national confederations, in keeping with the ETUC’s own decision to leave the initiatives for cross-border collaboration to its national affiliates. These initiatives include some at confederal level, such as the Doorn group, which started in 1997 and brings together the confederations of the Benelux countries and Germany, and others at sectoral level, such as the European-level coordination and network set up by the European Metalworkers Federation’s (now IndustriALL) in 1998. In addition, there are a number of regional or sub-regional level initiatives in the Nordic countries and in other border regions, such as that around the borders of Italy, France and Germany.

These cross-border initiatives aim, for the most part, to improve information exchange, increase bargaining coordination and extend solidarity in times of conflict. Actual international or even European – level collective bargaining remains relatively limited (leaving aside here agreements reached by European Works Councils). The different attitudes of Northern and Southern trade unions, in particular with regard to the coordination of wage demands and the creation of a European minimum wage, remain very different and sometimes opposed. These initiatives and networks are nonetheless leading to a greater sense of international solidarity among European trade unionists and have had some practical benefits for their members.