International conference

Contemporary trade union representation of workers in Central and Eastern Europe: barriers, opportunities and challenges

Organised by

Institute of Sociology, University of Wrocław

and

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

With cooperation of

Polish Sociological Association
Wrocław Branch and the Section of Sociology of Work

11-12 October 2012, Wrocław

Venue: Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wrocław, ul. Koszarowa 3

Objective:

In the 1990s, CEE trade unions in the 1990s rarely engaged in membership acquisition. However, in the first decade of the 21st century some trade unions in the region began to be more involved in organizing the unorganized workers. This is a strenuous, financial and human resource-intensive task which often encounters legislative, structural, cultural and organisational barriers and so far has produced quite limited quantitative effects in terms of membership growth. What have we learnt during the decade of trade union organising experiences in Eastern Europe? To which extent the problems faced by trade unions in Eastern Europe are similar to those in Western European countries? How can we make trade union organising more efficient and overcome the existing barriers? This workshop will aim at identifying the existing barriers and proposing the ways of their overcoming through confronting the views and experiences of academic experts and practitioners, including sectoral trade union leaders and NGOs in sectors targeted by trade union organising campaigns. The main questions addressed during the workshop include: (1) how to define
the goals of trade union organising and the best methods to achieve these goals?; (2) how to improve the link between trade union organising, collective bargaining and political agenda of trade unions?; (3) how to overcome internal opposition in trade unions against shifting resources to organising; (4) to which extent coalition-building with NGOs and social movements can address the challenges faced by trade unions involved in trade union organising? Addressing these challenges will help to rebuild the political relevance of trade union organising in CEE context and avoid its reduction to the counter-effective business unionism approach.

In order to increase its leverage on trade union practices and information exchange, the workshop in Wroclaw will be organisationally coupled with the conference organised by the Department of Economic Sociology, Warsaw School of Economics, on “Organising the Disorganised” on 9-10 October 2012. The transfer from Warsaw to Wroclaw will be made available to the registered participants.

Description of the workshop:

This two day international workshop aims at bringing together (1) academics studying trade union organising, (2) the representatives of trade unions and NGOs which were involved in trade union organising and creating new forms of worker interests representation in Eastern Europe, in particular in Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary and Slovenia. The workshop will cover in particular the retail sector as the sector which includes a large number of low-paid, precarious workers and the sector which was one of the main targets of trade union organising campaigns in the last 10 years. For the reasons of exchange of experiences, the representatives of TU in other sectors might be invited, too.

The workshop will consist of two parts. Its first, ‘academic’ part will start from three keynote presentations: (a) the presentation discussing the results of a recent comparative research on trade union strategies in the retail sector in Poland, Slovenia and Estonia (dr Adam Mrozowicki, dr Tatiana Bajuk-Sencar and dr Triin Roosalu); (b) the presentation discussing the UK experiences with trade union organising (dr Melanie Simms, University of Warwick, UK); (c) the presentation discussing the experiences of social movement unionism and radical political unionism as a way of representing precarious workers in Europe (dr Lefteris Kretsos, University of Greenwich, London). The keynote speeches will be followed by critical comments by panellists including dr Martin Krzywdzinski (Wissenschaft Zentrum Berlin fuer Sozialforschung), prof. Juliusz Gardawski (Warsaw School of Economics), prof. Jacek Sroka (University of Wroclaw) linking international organising experiences with Eastern European context. Next, there will be comments by a representative of trade unions and an open discussion.

In the second part of the workshop (2nd day), there will be roundtable discussions focusing on the best organising practices, their outcomes and their shortcomings. Table 1 will focus on the comprehensive trade union campaigns and resource transfer for organising (moderators: dr Jan Czarzasty). Table 2 will be concentrated on the cooperation between trade unions and NGOs and social movements (moderator: Marek Canek). Table 3 explore the link between organising, collective bargaining and political campaigns (moderator: dr Vera Trappmann).

In the last part of the workshop, the results of roundtable discussion will be presented and the strategies to overcome the identified barriers and the ways of implementing them will be discussed. The working-languages of the workshop will be English and Polish.
Expected outcomes of the workshop

The objective of the activity will be achieved by stimulating 'organisational learning' through combining academic presentation with practitioners feedback (part I), parallel discussion in small thematic roundtables (part II) and a summary panel reporting on the results of roundtable talks. There will be around 50 participants of the workshop. We also plan to keep the first part of the workshop partially open also for students which should stimulate the transfer of knowledge about trade unions to young people. The second day of the workshop will be strongly 'practical', based on roundtable discussions led jointly by an academic researcher and trade union leader/organiser. The results will be published in two main forms (a) an edited book in English reporting on the academic output of the seminar; (b) an organising manual including contributions about trade union organising experiences/best practices and the summary of roundtable talks. The manual will be initially published in English with possible translations to national languages (depending on resources) to serve internal debates with trade unions. We also plan to develop an international Think Tank which would continue an advisory work for trade union organisers in Eastern Europe.

Further information

The participation in the workshop is free for registered participants.

Please register by sending an email stating your name, email address and institution/trade union affiliation to Adam Mrozowicki (adam.mrozowicki@wns.uni.wroc.pl) till 22 June 2012 (early bird registration). For practical reasons, the registration will close on 1 August 2012.

Further information can be obtained from

Adam Mrozowicki, email: adam.mrozowicki@wns.uni.wroc.pl
Phone: +48 602817721