JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2023 – Volume 1 – Issue 2
DOI: 10.54195/jps.16512
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH

Islands of Trust in a Sea of Locational Competition: Towards Transnational Solidarity in Corporation-based Workers Networks

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Abstract

How can workers develop solidarity across national borders, when in fact they are, at least potentially, in locational competition with each other? One possible answer is the establishment of transnational trust among worker representatives. This article delves into this argument, specifically examining the International Network Initiative (Internationale Netzwerkinitative, NWI) implemented by IG Metall. Drawing upon participatory research conducted from 2016 to 2023 and focusing on the NWI-project of Lear, a tier-1 automotive supplier, I argue that charting islands of transnational trust in the sea of locational competition is ambitious – but nonetheless possible.

Keywords: Solidarity, Trust, Conflict, Value Chain, Network

1. Introduction: Trusting Competitors?[2]

In the context of the recent multiple crises, including the Corona pandemic, the semiconductor crisis, humanitarian and energy crises following Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine, escalating inequality, poverty, hunger, democratic regression, and, certainly not least, the existential climate crisis, workers and their collective interest groups face immense challenges. To be sure, these more recent crises are undoubtedly increasing the pressure on workers. Over the past few decades,

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2 I thank the two anonymous reviewers very much for very constructive and thought-provoking comments.

workers have grappled with the profound transformation of the global economy. In contemporary capitalism, work has become largely characterized as "work without boundaries" (*entgrenzte Arbeit*, see Voß 1998; Ludwig et al. 2021; see also Allvin et al. 2011) encompassing spatial, temporal, and normative dimensions. Under neoliberalism, production is expected to be maximally flexible and globally accessible, often at the expense of working conditions (see e.g. Streeck 2016; Suwandi 2019; Lessenich 2023).

From the standpoint of workers and their representatives, such as trade unions, works councils, and NGOs, global value chains and the ongoing transformations within them pose significant challenges. Their ability to act and exercise collective competencies at the transnational level is relatively underdeveloped, as the container logic of the nation-state, as described by Anthony Giddens (1981), still largely prevails. However, the situation is markedly different for multinational corporations, which operate beyond national borders and have emerged as dominant actors in value chains, not only in economic terms but also socio-politically. Comparable to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, these powerful corporations, particularly *Original Equipment Manufacturers* (OEMs) such as Daimler, Ford, or Volkswagen at the apex of the chain hierarchy, wield extensive control mechanisms within their own organizations and in relation to their direct suppliers. Intentional opacity characterizes the investment strategies of global corporations, while workers and their collective representatives face a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding supplier relationships within the intricate and challenging-to-navigate, thus anonymous, value chains. These factors underscore my argument that global value chains not only serve as catalysts for inequality (Ludwig and Simon 2021; Selwyn 2016), but also for uncertainty.

In the face of the monopolization of economic and epistemic power by transnational corporations within global value chains (Hübner 2015; Suwandi 2019; Teipen et al. 2022), the urgent need for transnational solidarity among workers to collectively build power resources (Schmalz et al. 2018; Webster et al. 2016) becomes unmistakably evident. Rather than in spite of, it is precisely due to the locational competition engendered by the "zones of uncertainty" (Crozier and Friedberg 1979) within value chains that cooperative solidarity between workers and their representatives across national borders is crucially required. However, the question of how to initiate this process and how to *get the ball rolling* often remains a challenge. It presents a typical chicken-and-egg dilemma: in order to foster transnational solidarity among workers, uncertainty within value chains must be diminished, for instance, through the sharing of information about respective plants and corporation strategies. Conversely, to reduce uncertainty, both sides must initially be willing to act in solidarity. The question then arises: where should this initial willingness originate? After

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all, why should workers at one plant demonstrate solidarity with their counterparts in another plant abroad if production could be relocated there at any given moment?

The answer to this question lies in the venture of trust. While workers and their representatives may have clear interests and rational aspirations for transnational solidarity-based cooperation, such as mitigating competition and enhancing working conditions, a purely rational cost-benefit analysis is insufficient to foster resilient solidarity across national borders. Instead, in this article I contend that the essential element for achieving this lies in the long-term cultivation of interpersonal trust among workers hailing from diverse local plant contexts. By nurturing trust, even in the face of potential conflicts of interest, islands of trust can gradually emerge amidst the sea of locational competition. These islands function as a foundation for collaborative action across the value chain and foster collective endeavors that transcend immediate self-interest. Ideally, to perpetuate the metaphor, these islands have the potential to evolve into archipelagos of trust through enhanced networking.

Nonetheless, the transnational strategies implemented by interest groups representing corporations within value chains are, at most, nascent. Trade unions primarily prioritize their traditional *core business* of organizing at the national level. Moreover, cross-country interconnections of issues at the corporation and plant level are infrequent (Varga 2021). In summary, the local and national representation of workers seems inadequately equipped to address the global complexities and fragmentation observed within value chains.

This is where the International Network Initiative (German: *Internationale Netzwerkinitiative*, NWI), initiated by the German metalworkers' union *IG Metall*, comes in. The NWI aims to establish enduring networks among workers' representatives from different countries within the same corporation (IG Metall 2016; Varga 2021). The primary objective is to facilitate direct transnational networking among these representatives.

In the subsequent sections, I leverage participant-observational research conducted within several subprojects of the NWI since 2016. As part of this research framework, I participated in various networking meetings both in Germany and abroad. Additionally, my colleagues and I conducted more than 50 interviews with union officials and individuals on the shop floor, employing semi-standardized and anonymously standardized questionnaires. The forthcoming discussion will present some of the observations derived from this research. After providing theoretical insights into concepts such as uncertainty, solidarity, and trust (Section 2), I will commence by presenting a general overview of *IG Metall's* NWI (Section 3). Subsequently, based on

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6 interviews in this specific case as well as participant-observational research, I will delve into several cases studied, focusing particularly on a noteworthy example – the NWI project at Lear Corporation, a tier-1 automotive supplier (Section 4). The main argument of this article posits that the endeavor to charting islands of transnational trust in the turbulent waters of locational competition is an ambitious undertaking fraught with the constant risk of failure. Nevertheless, it is a pursuit that remains within the realm of possibility.

2. Trust in Contexts of High Uncertainty: Building Solidarity in Global Value Chains

2.1 Global Value Chains as Catalysts of Uncertainty

Trust is needed when uncertainty prevails. For if there were one hundred percent certainty about the future, trust would be rendered redundant. Why trust when you *know*? However, in the absence of comprehensive knowledge regarding future behavior, trust becomes essential in reducing the complexity inherent in social relationships (Luhmann 1994 [1968]). Global value chains serve as a particularly compelling subject for examining the interplay between uncertainty and trust. They are not only catalysts for poverty and inequality (Selwyn 2016; Ludwig and Simon 2021), but also for uncertainty.

The profound restructuring of work and its organization, particularly characterized by the dissolution of production boundaries on a global scale, has been a primary driver of uncertainty within global value chains (even if recent supply bottlenecks have sparked discussions about potential reversals of these processes). Value chains not only exhibit a global "fragmentation of the factory" (Durand 2007; see also Marchington 2004) but also witness a "competition-driven land seizure" (*Landnahme*, Dörre 2019) by transnational corporations. Klaus Dörre's land seizure metaphor aptly symbolizes the forceful expansion of power wielded by global corporations within global value chains, which currently serve as the foundation for approximately 80 percent of global trade (Fichter 2015:3; Hübner 2015; Teipen et al. 2022). In the realm of global value chains, this concentration of power enables global corporations to participate in "flexibility competitions" (Dörre 2018). They exploit their dominance to foster competition among locations and workers across local, regional, national, and global levels, all in the name of advancing "competitiveness". Concurrently, labor standards are often denounced as barriers to trade (Scherrer 2014; Monaco et al. 2023). Workers bear the burden of competitiveness as the costs are shifted onto them and externalized particularly to the Global South (Lessenich 2023).

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The ongoing economic transformation serves to reinforce the consolidation of power within corporations. While the notion of a 'second great era of transformation' was once optimistically envisioned as an intentional and self-dynamic process leading towards a market-regulated democratic society (Reißig 2009:42), such optimism has since dwindled. History has not reached its culmination; instead, significant social and ecological inequalities, along with accompanying de-democratization effects, have become evident. These effects are amplified at the global level (Selwyn 2016; BHRRC 2017). Plants and workers find themselves locked in fierce competition for orders and investment commitments on a global scale, perpetually under the looming specter of 'competitiveness'. As a result, pressure mounts on models and reference frameworks that prioritize employee rights to a relatively greater extent. For example, the German concept of *Industry 4.0* faces competition from Chinese and US-American models and transformation concepts (Butollo and Lüthje 2017). The German M+E (Metal and Electrical) sector, being the industrial heartland of Germany, is particularly strained to undergo transformation (Wietschel et al. 2017; Dörre et al. 2020).

This competition within value chains can be further intensified and exploited by multinational corporations, particularly Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs). These corporations wield significant epistemic power, deriving from a fundamental power asymmetry and the simultaneous enforcement of transparency and opacity: they unilaterally develop investment strategies that leave workers along the value chain vulnerable and at their mercy. This power dynamic begins with the allocation of contracts within the corporation itself, where production sites are pitted against each other in a competitive manner. For instance, many corporations solicit multiple offers from their various production sites for a new product, without providing any promises or ensuring planning certainty. Instead, the aim is to exert pressure on plants to offer the lowest possible prices. In Germany, this often accompanies corporations' demands for supplementary collective agreements (*Ergänzungstarifvertrag*, Erhardt and Simon 2014). If the corporation deems production at a particular location too costly, it may opt to relocate it abroad. Such practices underscore the vulnerability of workers and production sites, as they become subject to the corporation's cost considerations and the pursuit of maximum profitability. Unanchored and devoid of a guiding compass, they find themselves adrift in the tumultuous sea of locational competitiveness.

The interplay of distribution and control power can be observed more clearly in the behavior of OEMs towards suppliers. Some corporations adhere to a so-called *open-book philosophy* where suppliers are required to disclose the cost factors of all components when applying for an investment. Wage costs quickly emerge as the only

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negotiable variable: according to a works council member from a German supplier, approximately 80 percent of a product's costs are comprised of material costs, which are directly determined by the OEM and remain beyond the supplier's control (Ludwig and Simon 2021). As a result, the supplier is left with a mere 20 percent of production costs that it can directly influence, mainly by reducing wages. To increase productivity, time allowances are tightened, placing workers under heightened physical and psychological pressure or requiring them to work longer hours.

The immense distribution and control power of OEMs is evident in their capacity to conduct audits and deploy their own experts to assess the efficiency of production at supplier plants. Furthermore, OEMs have the authority to categorize suppliers as A, B, or C, with A suppliers considered capable of handling nearly all production tasks according to customer requirements, while C suppliers are only utilized in cases of supply bottlenecks. This classification system grants players at higher levels of the value chain, particularly OEMs, extensive power to discipline their suppliers and penalize any behavior that deviates from their expectations. As noted by a works council member, suppliers have increasingly become the "extended workbenches" of their customers (Ludwig and Simon 2021). Workers have limited insight into the opaque decision-making processes and investment strategies developed by the corporation at its headquarters. This situation evokes thoughts of Bentham's well-known panopticon, where a single guard in the watchtower can observe all inmates due to the fully transparent walls of the cells, while the inmates themselves cannot see the potential observer. Ideal-typically speaking, there exists complete transparency on one side and complete opacity on the other. Or, to take the metaphor of the sea further, corporation is perched atop a commanding watchtower, overseeing the navigation-less ships adrift in the vast expanse, while remaining unseen itself.

The aforementioned examples already demonstrate the emergence of significant knowledge imbalances and "zones of uncertainty" within value chains, highlighting the disparity between corporate management at headquarters and employees stationed at local plants or suppliers. The concept of "zones of uncertainty", as elucidated by Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg (1979), illuminates power dynamics in terms of formal and informal capabilities of action among various actors. While originally conceived to analyze organizations, this concept can also be applied to examine the network of actors within value chains (see also Sydow and Wirth 1999), e.g. in relation to the management of expert knowledge as well as the control of information and communication channels by corporations.

In line with the perspectives of Crozier, Friedberg, or also Michel Foucault, the management of zones of uncertainty and knowledge can be understood as a

manifestation of relational power. Those individuals or entities possessing a relative *surplus* of the power resources required for control wield greater influence in the power dynamics within an organization. Crozier and Friedberg delineated four distinct zones of uncertainty: 1) expert knowledge, 2) control over environmental relationships, 3) management of information and communication channels, and 4) utilization of organizational rules. In the context of the aforementioned examples, the control of information and communication channels assumes paramount importance in determining corporate power within global value chains. As postulated by Crozier and Friedberg (1979:13), the exercise of power lies in the ability to control and mitigate uncertainty. This is a zero-sum game: the certainty of some is the uncertainty of others.

2.2 Workers' Solidarity and Resistance in Global Value Chains: Charting Islands of Trust

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the panoptic nature of corporations within global value chains is not an immutable condition. The essence of Crozier and Friedberg's theory of power lies in the recognition of the inherent clash of rationalities and the potential incentives for resistance, originating both from above and from below. While non-transparent communication from corporate headquarters may be perceived as a means to ensure competitive efficiency in contract allocation, it inevitably gives rise to tensions and disruptions within the value chain.

In sociological analyses of value chains, it is crucial to shift the analytical focus towards social conflicts and micro-political power dynamics. Organizations are inherently intertwined with politics, as their decision-making processes are inherently political and their actors function as micro-politicians (Küpper and Ortmann 1988:9; my translation). Consequently, in the context of value chains, there is an ongoing struggle for control over the zones of uncertainty, which are caused or intensified by power asymmetries. When workers at local plants express discontent with the dominance of corporate headquarters, whether their own or that of OEMs, as has been vividly portrayed in several interviews conducted in this project, their dissatisfaction and lack of trust towards the corporate powers can potentially contribute to the emergence of informal transnational trade union networks. These networks, which can be conceptualized as "transnational social spaces" (Pries 2001), foster the development of alternative rationalities, interests, and communication cultures that challenge the prevailing norms and values of the corporation.

But how can these networks materialize? Primarily, the emergence of such networks necessitates a readiness among workers to engage in cross-border networking grounded in solidarity. Rainer Forst (2021:3) defines solidarity as a collective commit-

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ment that surpasses individual interests. For solidarity, understood with Rainer Forst (2021:3) as

> *a particular practical attitude of a person towards others (...) involves a form of "standing by" each other (from the Latin solidus) based on a particular normative bond with others constituted by a common cause or shared identity.*

Solidarity is *not* a one-sided aid, but presupposes reciprocity, according to Forst (2021:3). Much in this vein, Bodo Zeuner (2001) has argued that "solidarity has to do with morality, with interests, with reciprocity, that is, with mutuality that is expected but not measured in money." (my translation) Interactions in transnational networking processes would accordingly not be successful if only one of the actors had a vested interest in building lasting relationships with the other.

In other words, the basic condition for *transnational solidarity* is the creation of a common political and social consciousness. There is a need to experience the respective realities "on the ground" in order to foster "felt solidarity" (Jungehülsing 2015). "Solidarity," Zeuner (2001) argues, "means that otherwise isolated people come together or are invited to come together because they see the same interests, perceive the same damaging factors, have the same opponents." Solidarity, however, is conditional, Zeuner (2001) continues:

> *Solidarity does not come about by itself, but arises through reflection and contemplation about what my interests actually are and how important they are to me. Shared values, insight and information about which social conditions run counter to my interests and what can be done about them must be added in order for solidarity to emerge.*

To foster the formation of networks, it is essential to identify shared interests and political stances. However, it remains uncertain whether this rational aspect alone is sufficient to address the potential competition among employees from different national backgrounds. The development of transnational solidarity requires, as my second argument suggests, the deliberate establishment of trust-building initiatives along the value chains. These initiatives serve as focal points where alternative rationalities, interests, and communication cultures can emerge in opposition to those promoted by management. Cultivating solidarity-driven counter-resistance, therefore, relies on the cultivation of solidarity-based cultures rooted in "experiences, learning processes, communication and trust" (Zeuner 2015:59).

In essence, networking facilitates the convergence of workers hailing from diverse national backgrounds, enabling them to recognize their shared experiences and

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establish a collective identity.[3] Within this framework, networking serves as a conduit for cultivating transnational "social capital" through "bridging and bonding processes" (Morgan and Pulignano 2020, drawing on Putnam 2000). Ideally, individuals who were once strangers, grounded in seemingly disparate national reference frames, can identify common interests (bridging) or even forge a collective identity (bonding), thus fostering various degrees of thin or thick trust in one another. Evidently, the construction of trust is best understood as a social practice that, through reciprocal exchange of information and signals, promotes the construction of a shared identity. The process of building interpersonal trust, in turn, bolsters the cohesion of the social group, playing a pivotal role in nurturing transnational solidarity.

If we consider trust, then, as a central element in the formation of solidarity, the question arises of what we mean by trust in the context of transnational workers' networks. In sociological research, given the multifaceted nature of trust, there is no singular definition that applies across disciplines such as political science, psychology, and philosophy. Nevertheless, a fundamental definition prevails despite interdisciplinary variations. Trust can be understood as a positive expectation of A towards B, whether they are individuals or institutions, in a situation characterized by uncertainty. In such situations, A is vulnerable and potentially exposed to the risk of betrayal or, at the very least, the disappointment of expectations by B.

This understanding of trust, which I contribute to the ConTrust Research Initiative at Goethe University and Peace Research Institute Frankfurt,[4] also suggests that conflicts need not necessarily hinder the development of trust. In contrast to conventional trust research, which views trust and conflict as opposites (Schilcher et al. 2012), it can be argued that trust actually emerges *within* conflicts, and for several reasons: first, conflicts provide an opportunity for A and B to gain a deeper understanding and assessment of each other. Second, A and B can find common adversaries in the conflict, thus becoming allies by sharing a mutual enemy ("the enemy of my enemy is my friend"). Third, it is the conflict itself that prompts A and B to engage and interact with one another. Drawing on insights from conflict sociology (Simmel 1992 [1908]), we can highlight the productive power of conflict.

3 Engler 2015:48; see also Seeliger 2018:432, Lohmeyer et al. 2018; Ludwig and Simon 2021; Simon 2022; López 2023.

4 For more information, see https://contrust.uni-frankfurt.de/en/

When applied to transnational workers' networks, this perspective suggests

- that it is through workers' conflicts with management that the foundation for shared transnational solidarity among workers is established;
- that it is precisely the conflicts that arise among workers who find themselves in (potential) locational competition, navigating persistent socio-economic challenges and micro-political uncertainties, that drive them to engage and interact with one another;
- and, furthermore, that it is within the context of these various levels of conflict that workers are motivated to develop trust in their own abilities, their colleagues in both local and foreign workplaces, as well as their representatives, organizations, and institutions (such as transnational labor rights). In this way, trust becomes an essential element in fostering and sustaining transnational solidarity among workers.

Building trust in transnational networks is a complex and ongoing endeavor – not least due to political, socioeconomic, and epistemic inequalities that necessitate a de-colonial perspective on the formation of trust between actors of highly unequal contexts.[5] However, as the forthcoming empirical evidence will demonstrate, it is fundamentally achievable. In the subsequent sections, I will examine how the pursuit of trust-building processes is manifested in the practical transnational workers' representation, focusing on the case of the NWI of *IG Metall*. Specifically, I will delve into the exemplary case of *Lear NWI*, which serves as a best-case illustration.

3. 'United and Stronger Together'[6]: The Example of *IG Metall's* Network Initiative (NWI)

The Network Initiative (NWI) of *IG Metall* was officially launched in 2012 and subsequently solidified in 2021. This initiative serves as a platform to foster and sustain long-term collaboration among workers' representatives within multinational corporations (IG Metall 2016; Varga 2021). With its innovative approach, which has already facilitated over 15 network projects, the NWI seeks to forge new paths in transnational union organizing. What sets this initiative apart is its emphasis on directly networking corporation interest groups involved in value creation networks within the organization. The objective is to establish transnational cooperation at the grassroots level of the trade union within the corporation.

5 For a de-colonial work program on epistemic inequalities and labor, see Zeleke et al. 2021.

6 This was the title of an *IG Metall* conference on the topic of, among other things, transnational networking at the *IG Metall Bildungszentrum Berlin*, 9–11 March 2020.

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The NWI navigates the dialectic between local and transnational cooperation, as well as the distinction between corporation-specific and corporate policy matters. Concrete workplace issues, ranging from working time regulations and safety and health concerns to the challenges posed by digital transformation, are addressed within transnational trade union networks (Varga 2021:241). This collaborative effort is firmly rooted in the trade union's core operations. In an interview conducted by me, Jochen Schroth, Director of the Transnational Department at *IG Metall* HQ in Frankfurt am Main, argues

> *that we as IG Metall must link and interlink corporation and corporate policy issues to a greater extent – nationally and transnationally. (…) [We must] take note (…) that corporate strategies and decisions that have a massive impact on the living and working conditions of our colleagues in the local area are made in the corporate headquarters, while our corporation structures or trade union structures are very strongly nationally oriented. (JS 1; my translation)*

In contrast to traditional solidarity work, which often involves one-sided offers of assistance, the NWI aims to prioritize the mutual interests of both internal and supra-corporation workers' representatives. This emphasis on interest-based reciprocity in transnational cooperation is actively communicated by *IG Metall* to its members. The union argues that only through strengthening global labor standards via transnational cooperation can the concept of *decent work* be upheld in Germany (IG Metall 2016). This approach acknowledges the need to convince skeptical union members of the strategic value of transnational networking strategies. It also navigates the perceived tension between the "logic of influence" and the "logic of membership" (Schmitter and Streeck 1981).

The NWI goes beyond bringing together workers' representatives from different plants within the same corporation, including those that compete for orders. This aspect is crucial to establish real transnational counter power and counteract the strategies of corporate headquarters, as emphasized by Marika Varga, a trade union officer at *IG Metall* HQ (Varga 2021:241). The aim is to prevent or at least mitigate the global competition and fragmentation of trade union interests through direct communication among the actors. This objective aligns directly with the theoretical observations made earlier regarding the creation of transnational social spaces, where workers can gain insights into their colleagues' experiences, exchange ideas, and foster a shared consciousness, trust, and genuine sense of solidarity (Jungehülsing 2015; my translation).

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Unlike purely trade union networks comprised of functionaries, the central participants in NWI projects are ideally the corporation representatives themselves, such as works councils and shop stewards. Their role is to take the lead in initiating, shaping, and maintaining their NWI project, and to establish clear objectives. The full-time union officials of *IG Metall*, along with their counterparts in partner unions abroad, provide financial, content-related, and administrative assistance to support these efforts.

Nevertheless, the presence of unions is indispensable, serving as a framework for the projects and often assuming even more significant roles. Notably, empirical research demonstrates that the success of an NWI project is particularly enhanced when it is built upon pre-existing collaboration between two robust trade unions. These union networks also play a crucial role in initiating an NWI project. In the four-stage model of the NWI, the initial priority lies in establishing and strengthening trade union structures abroad (1., an activity that might overlap with non-plant-specific forms of organizing in the transnational work of *IG Metall*), which paves the way for the subsequent formation of actual network structures (2.). Subsequently, the focus shifts towards addressing transformation issues (3.) and ultimately developing fields of action for trade union policies (4.). While the objective is to collaborate with strong trade unions, the empirical analysis of NWI reveals that this ideal is not always fully realized, particularly in countries of the Global South like Morocco or Mexico, which have become central to automotive value chains. In these cases, *IG Metall* provides support for the development of essential trade union organizational power abroad, leveraging its high level of organization, membership figures, and associated financial resources.

The empirical research confirms the intuitive impression that establishing trade union networks is more challenging in relatively weak trade union contexts, such as in Morocco. The lack of a common understanding of trade union work and limited *professional* union resources (at least compared to bureaucratic German DGB unions) contribute to these difficulties. Indeed, conflicts can arise in transnational trade union networks due to the differing interests and working cultures of partner unions. In some individual networking projects, which I have analyzed in the last years also beyond the NWI, criticisms were raised regarding the perceived dominance of the German actors while the latter argued that *professionalization of certain work practices* (concrete examples: taking notes in processes of qualification; putting agreements with management in writing), was necessary for success.

In the case of the NWI, power asymmetries also do exist, and it is not uncommon that *IG Metall* takes the initiative and establishes contacts, aiming to elevate them to

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a higher NWI level based on the stage model mentioned above. However, in situations where there have been obvious power imbalances and epistemic inequalities between *IG Metall* and the foreign trade union (and in the cases I have accompanied), the NWI team of *IG Metall* has actively sought to understand the interests of the other side and adapts its own agenda accordingly. In some instances, trade representatives of weaker unions from other countries initially approached the formulation of their own interests with caution and politeness, possibly to avoid causing offense or tension with their German counterparts.

However, if they could trust that their German partners were genuinely interested in a substantive and open exchange, they were all the more willing to clearly articulate their own interests. Without being able to overcome systematic inequalities in partly neo-colonial socio-economic settings, this is where one of the strengths of NWI's plant-focused approach becomes apparent: By involving workers' representatives of the same corporation in Germany and abroad, the NWI approach offers the potential to mitigate existing power asymmetries. In some observed cases, German works councils and foreign trade unionists on the plant level chose different areas of collaboration than initially proposed by *IG Metall*. This flexibility allows for more symmetrical cooperation on an equal footing, even in situations of *de facto* power asymmetry and socioeconomic as well as epistemic inequalities. It cannot be overemphasized: The degree to which these power asymmetries are played out or an eye-to-eye encounter is possible depends on the actors involved in the process. An important prerequisite for a successful NWI project is therefore the selection of individuals on both sides who are open to intercultural exchange. It may therefore not be by chance that the NWI also benefited enormously from existing contacts in South Africa or Mexico, for example, via academics or other networks, and that synergies could be created here.

In collaborations with strong unions, these obstacles are less pronounced (which does not mean that they do not exist). An example of a successful collaboration is *IG Metall's* partnership with the *National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa* (NUMSA), which has over 300,000 members and actively promotes value chain organizing (NUMSA 2013; see also Mashilo 2010). This collaboration is facilitated by existing contacts through German partners. The NWI leverages these connections between union officials, e.g. by joint workshops organized by *IG Metall* and NUMSA in South Africa in 2017 and 2022. These workshops brought together matches of German works council members and South African shop stewards from the same corporation, providing a platform for them to exchange ideas, gain insights into each other's perspectives, and discuss common challenges and issues. These interactions took place in both formal meetings and informal settings over coffee or beer, fostering

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bonding and interpersonal trust and laying the groundwork for new NWI projects. It became clear that intrinsic motivation among workplace stakeholders played a crucial role in the success of these collaborations. While many German and South African participants expressed a fundamental interest in cooperation during the workshops not all encounters resulted in further cooperation, and only a very limited number led to the initiation of NWI projects.

Why has that been the case? One works council member recalls in an interview that building trust is elementary and that not all participants on the German side succeed in shedding the German perspective. Sometimes, he says, German trade unionists had a prevailing opinion that 'the German way' of co-determination is also best for workers in other national contexts. Based on his long transnational experience, the works council members highlights a concrete example beyond the NWI workshops. During a transnational meeting of worker representatives from a German OEM, the German works councils displayed dominant behavior, leading to an *icy atmosphere* and a lack of interest in understanding the perspectives of their South African colleagues. Such arrogant and distant behavior undermines the trust-building process and inhibits the development of solidarity. To address this challenge and foster trust, the interviewee emphasizes the importance of taking the other side seriously and demonstrating genuine goodwill (OT 1).

The works council's statement highlights a common challenge in transnational collaborations involving workers from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. It underscores the importance of being highly attuned to the similarities and differences in systems of industrial relations, economic circumstances, and labor rights. The NWI, with a context-sensitive approach, might be well positioned to address this challenge by facilitating the emergence of shared preferences and trust. This, in turn, enables deliberative discussions on an equal footing, which cannot be taken for granted in transnational trade union cooperation (Seeliger 2018). One significant hurdle in transnational networking, particularly when one partner possesses significantly more power than the other, is striking a balance between offering support and avoiding the intimidation that can arise from an imbalance of power. Trade unionists operating in the transnational sphere must possess intercultural competencies to effectively build enduring bridges between different stakeholders. By recognizing and respecting the diverse cultural and contextual aspects at play, trade unionists can navigate the complexities of transnational cooperation and establish lasting connections. These intercultural competencies are crucial for fostering understanding, trust, and collaborative relationships in the pursuit of common goals.

NWI projects are therefore highly ambitious in terms of organization and content. Their success depends on the power resources of the corporation actors and their ability to interact with each other on a transnational level. Marika Varga (2021:245; my translation), highlights that "[transnational cooperation between union members] needs more time and financial resources because we are dealing with different languages, industrial relations, and ways of working and thinking." However, the following NWI project on transnational union organizing in the Lear Corporation in Europe and Africa demonstrates that, if successful, they offer promising approaches to building transnational union power – and mapping islands of trust in the vast sea of locational competition that characterizes global value chains.[7]

4. 'Working together, winning together as ONE Lear': The Emergence of a European-African Network through Trust

With a workforce of 169,000 employees and annual sales of $21 billion (in 2018), the Lear Corporation, based in the United States, is one of the largest automotive suppliers worldwide. Moreover, it serves as a prominent example of a corporation that creates "zones of uncertainty" (Crozier and Friedberg 1979), as discussed in the theoretical framework above (Section 2.1). Lear's corporate strategy is established at its headquarters in Southfield, Michigan. As part of this strategy, Lear instigates competition among its global operations, often leading to precarious working conditions in pursuit of increased efficiency. Elijah Chiwota (2021:246), Communications & Research Officer at IndustriALL Sub Saharan Africa in Johannesburg, explains that "precarious employment conditions are a (...) major problem for Lear workers in South Africa."

In line with the observations made by his South African counterpart, Jochen Schroth from IG Metall highlights instances of labor rights violations at Lear Corporation:

> *In some cases, this is taking on downright perverse features, there's no other way to describe it: in East London [a city on the east coast of South Africa, HS], employees have had leaking roofs for years, have been subjected to massive reprisals, violations of occupational health and safety and non-compliance with corresponding standards, there is a lack of public transportation systems, and there are [massive] wage inequal-*

7 This is the continuation of a project on Organizing Global Value Chains, which I co-coordinated together with Dr. Carmen Ludwig in close cooperation with *IG Metall* and NUMSA, see also Ludwig and Simon 2021.

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ities. Despite massive criticism from the workers, Lear has so far failed to make any changes. Last year, it finally came to wildcat strikes, in which colleagues once again protested against the concrete grievances and Lear's inaction. The corporation reacted to these justified protests by the plant manager calling the police, who then shot the way clear with rubber bullets because it was a case of wildcat strike action. Subsequently, two hundred colleagues were dismissed and replaced by temporary workers. To train the latter, German strikebreakers were flown to South Africa. Such a flight costs many times more than what the colleagues earn there per month. But the corporation prefers to fly in ten people instead of using a fraction of this money to ensure that the actual working conditions in the plant itself are improved. The corporation only ever does this if they are forced to. That's ultimately how capitalism works, if you will, in its purest form. (JS 1; my translation)

In response to the corporation's reluctance to improve working conditions at their South African sites, a NWI project of IG Metall and NUMSA was initiated in 2017 with the aim of promoting transnational unionization within the Lear Corporation. Conflict with management dialectically led to the fostering of cooperation and solidarity among workers, as they were able to bond with each other and to draw on shared "experiences, learning processes, communication, and trust" (Zeuner 2015:59). As an example, German Lear works council members and South African Lear shop stewards participated in a workshop organized by *IG Metall* and NUMSA in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in May 2017, which was followed by another workshop in June 2018. Holger Zwick, General Works Council Chairman and member of Lear's European Works Council (EWC), a key member of the Lear NWI project, reflects on this collaboration:

The exchange with colleagues in South Africa gave us the opportunity to talk not in the abstract about problems in the industry, but very specifically about the problems in the corporation. Another positive aspect is the opportunity to get to know each other intensively, which grows trust. The trust gained is the basis and, in our opinion, the secret of success of good cooperation and conducive to a mutual exchange in both directions. (HZ 1; my translation)

Zwick adds with regard to the working conditions of the South African colleagues:

The exchange has sharpened our view of the conditions of our colleagues on site. Regulations that are enforceable or seem self-evident in Germany do not exist in South Africa, and arrogant behavior on the part of management is the order of the day. It's a completely different world – in the same corporation with the same management. (HZ 1; my translation)

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Zwick's report exemplifies the development of trust relationships between workers, which can be seen as almost ideal-typical. Despite being potentially in competition and conflict with each other, the joint development of shared perceptions and certainty enabled the emergence of trust. This trust was built in the face of potential locational competition and against their common opponent, Lear's management. As a result, a sense of "felt solidarity" (Jungehülsing 2015; my translation) was cultivated through trust. Much in this sense, Kenny Mogane (2018), IndustriALL Regional Officer for Sub Saharan Africa, argued that "we welcome the Lear network in the motor sector as it will build solidarity between workers in Africa and Europe, as well as improve working conditions."

In the interim, the transnational trade union organization within the Lear Corporation has been strengthened. One of the initial objectives was to establish a direct and transparent flow of information between the trade union interest groups at the German and South African sites. This was achieved through regular workshops and, particularly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019/20, primarily through digital communication across national borders. Jochen Schroth provides a summary of these efforts:

> *The core concern is (…) that we inform and involve, because the corporation will not to do that without us. (…) First of all, this is important for the exchange of information and for creating transparency in the corporation's strategy, which is often lacking. For example, German colleagues can pass on information to their South African colleagues via short official channels or vice versa. (JS 1; my translation)*

And Schroth concludes that the emergence of transnational trust is central for building up a 'chain of co-determination':

> *We therefore need a chain of co-determination that extends from the shop stewards and works councils in the local corporation, through the general and group works councils and our workers' representatives on the supervisory board, to the co-determination options at the European level, in the European Works Council, and with which we can discuss corporate strategy issues and their impact on individual countries in a networked manner. In other words, local and transnational trade union counter-strategies are needed to oppose the global corporate strategies with which we are confronted. The NWI of IG Metall is an important basis for this. (…) In short, it is a matter of familiarizing as many colleagues as possible in the Lear Group with the effects of changed value chains, products, and processes, of forcing communication between the employees at the various sites and strengthening cooperation in solidarity. If we know how capitalism works at Lear, it is important that we ensure trans-*

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parency, exchange, and also mutual trust at the union level through our networking structures. (JS 1; my translation)

As part of this trade union political counter-strategy of the formation of a "chain of co-determination" (JS 1) – or rather a network of co-determination – the Lear-NWI has meanwhile also invited a South African *NUMSA* colleague to the meetings of the European Works Council (EWC) in order to discuss Lear's corporate strategies together. According to Schroth, the specific objective is to modify the rules of procedure of EWC to ensure that colleagues from non-EU European countries and Africa will have full representation in the future (JS 1). From a legal standpoint, this is feasible, as the European and African sites, comprising approximately 60,000 employees (with around 45,000 in Europe and 16,000 in Africa), constitute a unified organizational entity within the corporation. The African colleagues of NUMSA agreed to this proposal and sent a representative to Valls for the full body meeting of the EWC. For the management, however, the invitation of an African colleague was a provocation. Schroth reports about the resistance of the management:

At the last EWC meeting in mid-May 2019 in Valls/Spain, two elected Lear employee representatives from South Africa and Serbia had been invited by us to learn more about the working conditions at Lear in their respective countries. The Lear management asked the members of the European Works Council to exclude these employee representatives from the exchange with the management. (JS 1; my translation)

However, according to Schroth, this did not happen. Instead, solidarity-based resistance was expressed based on the existing transnational networks among Lear workers:

The European Works Council unanimously rejected this, whereupon management left the meeting without a report. To me, the unanimous decision in the EWC was a great sign of transnational solidarity that we are not willed to let ourselves be divided. What's more, a German plant rejected a request for overtime over Whitsun as a result of management's appearance at the EWC meeting. Both shows: Lear workers will not be played off against each other. Lear management advertises worldwide with the slogan "Working together, winning together as ONE Lear". The employee representatives in the EWC show what that means. (JS 1; my translation)

The establishment of trusting relationships among potential competitors has played a significant role in fostering concrete solidarity. Consequently, the shared conflict experienced with management in Valls has further strengthened the sense of community and solidified the workers' opposition against management. This highly

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emotional conflict, particularly impactful for the African and Serbian participants who were excluded from the meeting, has served as a catalyst for building future trust and solidarity: as of 2023, members of Lear-NWI report that the relationships formed with their African counterparts since the 2017 workshop in South Africa have continued to thrive. German works council members and South African shop stewards frequently engage in (digital) information exchange, demonstrating a sustained and steady connection between the two groups.

In addition to sustaining transnational communication regarding corporate strategies and amending the rules of procedure for the EWC, the members of Lear-NWI are actively seeking negotiations with management to establish a global framework agreement that includes minimum working conditions aligned with the corporation's Code of Conduct. Moreover, they aim to leverage union networks to enforce the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act (SCDDA), and vice versa (Monaco et al. 2023). Kathrin Schäfers, the NWI's coordinator at *IG Metall's* Transnational Department, emphasizes the significance of networks like the one formed within the NWI as vital tools for strengthening the SCDDA: "I believe that it is essential to establish contact with foreign trade unions and, above all, with the corporation representatives from trade unions in the countries. Because only if we know what is happening along the supply chain can we bring the law to life at all." (KS 1)

In addition, the aim is to include workers from other African countries, particularly Morocco, where a majority of African Lear employees are located, in the transnational organization. However, the Lear-NWI faces greater challenges in Morocco compared to South Africa. Morocco does not have similarly strong unions as the South African NUMSA. As part of this research, a Moroccan trade unionist has highlighted the precarious working and living conditions, which have been further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the insufficient efforts by the Moroccan government to effectively safeguard workers' rights (CG 1). Also, in workshops I have attended, Moroccan trade unionists have emphasized the difficulty of organizing in special economic zones in Morocco. Claudia Rahman, Head of the Division of Global Trade Union Policy at IG Metall, explains the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020:

> *With such zones, governments hope to attract foreign direct investment with various incentives. There is often free provision of infrastructure, five- to ten-year tax holidays, limited trade union rights, and low environmental and social standards. Jobs are created in these zones, but they often do not meet the standards of decent work – not even according to Moroccan standards (…) We would like to change this in Morocco, so that the workers there also have a genuine representation that campaigns together*

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with them for better working conditions. A German or European supply chain act, which is currently being discussed, would also help us. It would create legal regulations for the protection of human rights along the entire value chain of larger corporations, which would be punished with sanctions or penalties in case of non-compliance. (…) The current Corona pandemic further highlights the social fault lines within countries and between nations that globalization has created with its current economic model. It is time to rethink. We need better labor, not ever cheaper labor. (CR 1)

From a trade union point of view, Morocco is still "a different number than South Africa," says Zwick (HZ 2). And Schroth adds:

'We have been told (…) that workers from another automotive supplier who participated in a trade union workshop last year in Morocco were subsequently dismissed by the corporation. And this goes even further. We know from our trade union colleagues in Morocco: there are blacklists on which employees end up who are involved in trade union activities. This is to prevent them from finding work again in another industrial corporation.' (JS 1; my translation)

Despite the challenges in this highly precarious context, the trade unionists underline the importance of their engagement in Morocco. "Our actions are all the more important," says Schroth. "Because this is how we point something out. We are looking. We care and try to support through transnational solidarity." (JS 1; my translation)

5. Conclusion: Transnational Trade-Union Organizing in Global Value Chains – A Heuristic Process of Trust Building

IG Metall's NWI represents a challenging yet promising approach to networking workplace interest representation. NWI projects are crucial to build and enhance the capabilities of workers' within multinational corporations, but at the same time very ambitious. Alongside financial and time resources, as well as the willingness and sensitivity of the actors involved to embrace unfamiliar industrial relations and trade union cultures, patience and perseverance are paramount. The work involved is characterized not only by progress but also by setbacks that require continuous determination.

A key factor observed in the studied cases is the establishment of interpersonal trust among workers' representatives, which serves as a foundation for transnational solidarity. In this context, social capital emerges through "bridging and bonding"

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(Morgan and Pulignano 2020, drawing on Putnam 2000). Thus, transnational union networking across global value networks can be seen as a heuristic process of charting islands of trust and solidarity in a sea of intense location competition. The success of this process hinges on various factors, including intercultural sensitivity, realism, optimism, patience, and the ability to tolerate frustration. However, above all else, it relies on the personal dedication and commitment of the individuals involved. Where this reciprocal commitment exists, transnational solidarity becomes achievable, even in environments characterized by insecure and conflict-ridden working conditions. Solidarity, then, is a matter of trust.

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