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EDITORIAL

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Ilana Nussbaum Bitran[1], Marcus Franke[2], Philipp Gies[3], Heiner Heiland[4], Franziska Laudenbach[5] (guest editors of this special issue)

Keywords: workers solidarity, transnationalization, labor relations, digitalization, globalization

Work and employment are constantly changing. Most recently, globalization and digitalization bear particular responsibility for this. Over the past decades, the internationalization of the economy has led to a cross-border organization of value chains. But as Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) show, the world is by no means borderless. The result is rather a "multiplication of labor" that entails heterogenization, diversification and intensification for workers. Competition between companies and company units is increasing and, according to Wolfgang Streeck, national systems of industrial relations are losing their ability to "unify the regulation of labor relations in industries and companies for the sake of enforcing social equality and solidarity" (Streek, 1998:63; own translation). As a result, collective action by workers is forced to operate transnationally (Seeliger 2019). At the same time, new challenges arise in the course of the digitalization of the economy, which undermines established labor relations

1   Research Fellow at Institute Labour and Economy, University of Bremen, Wiener Straße 9, 28359 Bremen, Germany, nussbaum@uni-bremen.de
2   Research Fellow, Centre for Labour Studies and Political Education (zap), University of Bremen, Celsiusstraße 2, 28359 Bremen, Germany, MFranke1@uni-bremen.de
3   Research Fellow at Centre for Labour Studies and Political Education (zap), University of Bremen, Celsiusstraße 2, 28359 Bremen, Germany, philipp.gies@uni-bremen.de
4   Research Fellow at Institut for Sociology, University of Göttingen, Platz der Göttinger Sieben 3, 37073 Göttingen, Germany, heiner.heiland@uni-goettingen.de
5   Research Fellow at Centre for Labour Studies and Political Education (zap), University of Bremen, Celsiusstraße 2, 28359 Bremen, Germany, f.laudenbach@uni-bremen.de

and regulatory dispositives. Concentrated, this can be seen in the field of platform work. Precarious employment conditions tend to go hand in hand with increasing heteronomy and a deficit of employees' ability to shape labor policies (Heiland 2022).

As a result, the emergence and development of solidarity as an "independent determinant of human societies" (Alexander 1980:6) and as a starting point and resource of labor becomes precarious and workers' power resources are weakened. However, at the same time, the globalization of production together with the digitalization and the transnationalization of working relations open up new possibilities and spaces for collective action. In this special issue, we focus on the world of work and especially on the new forms of solidarity that are needed to counter the negative side of the current working world. The following pages present different perspectives and examples of transnational labor solidarity in the globalized world. Taking into consideration how working relations have been changing in the last decades, we ask how collective action has also changed and what it means for the concept of solidarity.

Usually understood within the national container society, solidarity has been called to play a new role beyond the borders of the national state. Both on the international as well as at the transnational level, new places and acts of labor solidarity have emerged to protect workers and to improve their working conditions as well as to fight back neoliberal transnational policies and practices. Solidarity may manifest itself in different forms and spaces. With the advent of globalization, it is also called to extend the scope it can reach. Workers' solidarity has had an international intention since its very beginning but only a few times it became real. Now, with the challenges imposed by this new era, there is not only the intention but also the need to trespass borders. One question still remains: Under what circumstances does transnational solidarity arise, and how is it organized? As we explore these intricate terrains, we are confronted with the pressing question of *when* and the equally important puzzle of *how* to do it.

Our contributors, hailing from diverse academic backgrounds and research perspectives, give insights into the multifaceted dimensions of transnational labor solidarity. Throughout the six papers, they dissect the mechanisms, and the outcomes of collective action that transcends borders.

Ilana Nussbaum Bitran and Irene Dingeldey extend the idea of solidarity developing a typology of acts of solidarity at the transnational level and applying it to the European Minimum Wage Directive. They show the different positions of the social partners and the Member States when discussing the new directive. They conclude that

the Directive can be seen as a form of inclusive solidarity towards social cohesion, but which is only promoted by certain actors.

Franziska Laudenbach and Philipp Gies investigate transnational solidarity in times of the pandemic crisis in the European sectoral social dialogue by highlighting the work during 2020/21 in the two sectors commerce and social services. They show that during the COVID-19 pandemic, social partners engaged in crisis management at various levels and, inter alia, increased their activities at the European sectoral level. They interpret the European sectoral social dialogue as a platform for networking and lobbying, where bridging and bonding elements enhance acts of transnational solidarity.

In his contribution *Transcending Borders? Horizons and Challenges of Global Tech Worker Solidarity*, Valentin Niebler analyzes three examples of transnational workers solidarity of tech workers. Hereby, he outlines existing hurdles and opportunities of transnational collective action within the field of global tech companies. The paper proves that transnational collective action by tech workers is possible although with a limited continuity. The three examples provide evidence that, within the challenging field of tech work, unionization and transnational coordination is feasible. By focusing on actors' collective and transnational activities that are typically not amongst those represented by trade unions, the paper takes up an under-explored dimension of transnational acts of solidarity.

Ladin Bayurgil, Claudia Marà and Valeria Pulignano investigate workers' solidarities in the platform economy. Through qualitative interviews of platform-mediated food delivery couriers in Italy and Belgium, they show how the structures of national labor markets lead to different dependencies on the platforms and thus to different solidarities of their workers. While inclusionary solidarities emerge in Italy, exclusionary solidarities prevail in Belgium, which also leads to different forms and manifestations of collective action.

Jonas Pentzien investigates in his article how alternative conceptions of exchange emerge and proliferate within platform capitalism. For this task he analyzes 18 interviews with founders of cooperatively-structured platforms and explores their strategies to gain legitimacy. Along the codes of identities, value proposition, resources and networks Pentzien systematically unfolds his findings and offers valuable insights on alternative organizations in the digital economy and their legitimation dynamics.

In *Islands of Trust* Hendrik Simon scrutinizes the question of developing transnational solidarity across national borders despite the situation that locations have to act in

competition with each other along the supply chains. Based on case studies, expert interviews and participant-observational research, he identifies "Zones of Uncertainty" within the industrial relations of fragmented workers. Therefore, the author places the element of trust at the center of his investigation to overcome the identified "Zones of Uncertainty". He elaborates the importance of transnational networks as structures to build up trust among the actors, which foster the development of transnational solidarity.

Finally, in an interview with Gianpaolo Meloni, founding-member of the newly formed Amazon European Works Council, we look at the role of unions and how they helped protect workers' rights during the four-year funding process. We "hear" the need to adapt to technological advancements and international collaboration. Furthermore, the interviewee discusses the importance of ethical consumer choices, the coherence in actions by unions and politicians involving workers in protection efforts and exposing the true nature of some companies.

As you navigate through the immersive contributions in this issue, we invite you to consider the ever-evolving landscape of transnational labor solidarity and the imperative of extending its reach across borders. The pressing question of *how* remains, and it is our hope that this collection of insights and analyses will contribute to shaping the answers.

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R E S E A R C H

Transnational solidarity in the world of work? Theoretical framework applied to the European Minimum Wage Directive

Ilana Nussbaum Bitran[1], Irene Dingeldey[2]

Abstract

Taking the European Minimum Wage Directive as an example of solidarity in the EU, we develop a theoretical framework showing different forms of solidarity action and on the transnational level discussing them. We reconstruct three types of solidarity-based form of actions that were present in the discussion of the Directive and ask which of this forms have been enacted by whom and which role played bridging and bonding elements. We conclude that these elements are important to form interest groups that pushed for the development (or not) of the regulation, which in turn serves as a solidarity measure in the EU.

Keywords: European minimum wage, solidarity, collective action, EU level, cohesion

1.   Introduction

Solidarity is probably one of the most undeniable concepts of the social sciences. It is present in almost any idea of group being it a family, an association or the nation state. Solidarity is at the core of our societies, of the possibility of living together and cooperating as a group. It contains various dimension that are located between opposing poles, as for example particularism and universalism (Lessenich, Reder and Süß 2020). When thinking about transnational solidarity, however, some acknowledged premises of solidarity are challenged, such as a shared identity, specific borders,

1   Research Fellow at Institute Labour and Economy, University of Bremen, Wiener Straße 9, 28359 Bremen, Germany, nussbaum@uni-bremen.de
2   Director at Institute Labour and Economy, University of Bremen, Wiener Straße 9, 28359 Bremen, Germany, dingeldey@uni-bremen.de

stabilisation mechanisms and a certain level of interaction within the group (Engler 2016). Morgan and Pulignano (2020), therefore, theoretically suggested that elements of bonding and bridging are even more important on the transnational than on the national level to overcome the named problems. While bonding elements emphasise commonalities and homogeneity within a group, allowing it to act together, bridging elements enhance common discourses, networks of collaboration and organisational structures.

In the following we want to work out a theoretical framework to solidarity and its preconditions of overall workers' organisations on the EU level. Although historically labour unions had ambitions to create an international movement, they have developed as member organisations creating particular organizational and governance structures, based on different cultures of mobilization, adapting to institutions bound to the respective nation state and different systems of labour relations (Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2014; Ferner and Hyman 1993).

This leads to a rather heterogeneous constituency for transnational umbrella organisations, especially the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) as well as sectoral federations at European level, being "associations of associations" (Platzer and Müller 2012:864). They can be seen as already institutionalised expressions of transnational solidarity joining power resources to represent workers' interests in the multi-level system of the EU (Mende 2021:182). As the Commission admits only organisations to consultation, which are able to speak for a broader range of constituents, it sets the field of influence by privileging umbrella organisations (Obradovic and Alonso Vizcaino 2006:1061; Mahoney 2004). Hence, the European (con)federations are not only supposed to represent workers all over Europe, but may also have a particular self-interest in policies and regulations of labour at the European level as this increases their particular influence and justifies their existence. In this respect the "logic of influence" (Scmitter and Streeck 1981) is a "reason to be" for these organisations. However, a problem of 'fragmented solidarity' may emerge when the assumed interests of the national constituency of single union organisations diverge from what is pursued by the transnational organization as a goal to achieve better working and living conditions within Europe. Hence, the question arises whether single union organisations give priority to the assumed interests of their (national) membership, or whether these are placed back to achieve an assumed improvement for all workers in the European Union.

In the following we differentiate various forms of solidarity according to the type of organization (individual members) or (con)federation (associations as members), respectively to the level at which they act. We further distinguish goals pursued,

different motives and forms of action. In general, the improvement of living and working conditions are seen as a solidary goal of all unions. Differences may arise whether this is pursued giving priority to a sectoral or the national constituency, or with a European perspective.

According to the literature, we see a threefold explanation for the specific manifestation of transnational solidarity. First, transnational solidarity goals are supported, if they go along with an improvement of the own (national) position. Second, when a conflict of interest with respect to concrete issues emerges between national and transnational solidarity, we would expect a successful process of bridging and bonding to overcome (national) particularism and exclusionary forms of solidarity. Bridging may include internal negotiations and compromise, while bonding would include an assertion and prioritizing of common values. Third, this process is successful, when primarily opposing organisations can be convinced (by changing the original proposal for a regulation by compromise) to also gain an advantage for their national constituency via the transnational regulation.

This theoretical framework is applied to the process of establishing the European Minimum Wage Directive (EU 2022/2041) that came into force in 2022. On a very first view, the support of the Minimum Wage Directive would be 'natural' to unions' solidarity at the European level – but this is far from reality. With respect to this empirical topic, we, therefore, ask: Which forms of solidarity have been enacted by whom? We may also ask which measures of bridging and bonding have been applied and why they did not succeed to convince all opponents within the group of the unions? Even if our approach may defect the glory of transnational solidarity, it nevertheless may provide insights to successfully negotiate a compromise to better working conditions at the transnational level.

The article proceeds as follows: A literature review introduces a multi-dimensional understanding of solidarity (section II). Then preconditions to national and transnational forms of solidarity are discussed (section III). Based on this literature review, we elaborate on how to distinguish different types of solidarity on national and transnational level (section IV). Furthermore, the minimum wage regulation as an instrument is sketched as a solidary goal, promoted by European entities (section V). After giving a brief introduction into the scientific discussion on the European minimum wage, focusing on the social partners' organizations, we analyse actors' constellations promoting and opposing the European minimum wage. This is to line out different goals, motives and interests and to display elements of bridging and bonding as (un)successful paths towards inclusive transnational solidarity (section VI). Our conclusion (section VII) is that the European minimum wage may be seen

as a result of solidary governance towards a common good, namely a further step towards 'positive integration' (Scharpf 1996; Scharpf 2014) and European social cohesion.

2.   A multi-dimensional understanding of solidarity

'Solidarity' is used in many different contexts with rather different meanings and purposes for a variety of actions (Wallaschek 2016). Accordingly, it would be a quite extensive task to provide a traditional literature review (as for example exists in Hondrich and Koch-Arzberger 1992). We therefore appreciate that Lessenich and his colleagues (2020)[3] have suggested a multi-dimensional understanding of solidarity, defining five central dimensions each of them to be understood as a continuum between two poles. We briefly summarise their – unfortunately only in German available – complex definition. It clarifies the multiple facets of solidarity related to different motives, forms of action and individual or collective actors – regardless concrete historical developments. Changing the original sequence of dimensions as introduced by the authors, we want to highlight some contradictions inherent to solidarity that may help us to understand particular problems of transnational solidarity.

According to the authors, the *distinction between social and political solidarity* overall sees the former pole as social practice that is rather altruistic, while the latter is related to political power and redistribution. Here, social identity achieved within the process of mobilisation or organisation based on reciprocity between members is of importance. Another distinction is between *solidarity as institutionalised form and as individual action*. The former includes mutual support governed by regulation that may nevertheless be founded in a rational self-interest (see explanation for the emergence of a welfare state by Rawls 1971 (2020)). Institutionalised forms of solidarity include a permanent commitment, but need a feeling of identity within an (imagined) community. In contrast, social behaviour and practices (of individuals) providing – material (money), physical (demonstration) or symbolic (greeting address) – support to any disadvantaged group is less conditional. This goes along with the dimension that distinguishes between *unilateral and reciprocal support.* Whereas unilateral support is close to charity, organisational structures and institutions based on reciprocal support create strong bonds between group members and are more likely to go along with political forms of solidarity aiming at social change. This leads to the dimension highlighting *the continuum between a stabilising or transforming mode of solidary interaction*. In line with Durkheim the authors see in solidarity

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3   Additional thoughts are marked by citations of other authors.

an element of social integration and stabilisation in modern societies. Transformative solidarity, in contrast, aims at changing structural conditions to better social conditions. Historically this was fuel to workers' movement and the formulated goal to change capitalist production, but it may also be linked to new questions of transnational action with respect to more global justice and redistribution or environmental protection.

The dimension of solidarity *between particularism and universalism* highlights both the inclusive and exclusive function of solidarity. The globalised world increases the understanding of a universal connectedness of all people, social movements may emerge to demand common goods with a universal impact, as for example international regulation for the protection of the environment. In contrast, particularism is frequent in organisations with strong reciprocal relations, a common identity and clear borders. They may emerge while defending common interest and opposing their (class) adversaries, but they also may defend their achievements against third parties – indicating the particularistic element of solidarity. Accordingly, Stjernø (2011:4) characterised working class solidarity as a fusion of self-interest with the interest of class.

For us, this last dimension of solidarity indicates a challenge to overall nation-based organisations to enact transnational solidarity, when transnational goals are expected to negatively impact the interests of their original constituency. The other outlined poles of the different dimensions of solidarity can help to describe different motives and applications of different forms of solidarity. As a next step, however, we very briefly sketch other definitions, and the preconditions of solidarity on national and transnational level.

3. From national to transnational solidarity – adapting forms of (inter)action

Based on Engler's idea of solidarity as "a particular social norm that applies to a specific collective, is reciprocally recognised by its members, translates into certain practices of cooperation and mutual renunciation, and is backed by sanction mechanisms" (Engler 2016:35 our translation)[4], we can conclude that the traditional idea of solidarity presupposes at least four criteria: (i) a certain level of homogeneity of

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4   When thinking transnationally, we confront the problem of having to expand the understanding of what is the scope of the group or collective as well as to come up with new forms of possible goals and (inter)actions.

the group to create an identity, (ii) specific borders, (iii) interaction processes and (iv) stabilisation mechanisms within the group (Engler 2016:54-56). Within the understanding of the concept in the national context, these four elements are more or less easily to be found and to be constructed in order to safeguard the internal cohesion of a given group or a country[5].

With the advent of globalisation and of individualisation, these conditions started to become blurry and became harder to define – even in the national context. Identity cannot be defined anymore as a high degree of homogeneity that emerges from common presuppositions of what means to share a space, namely (national) history and fate – so far working as one of the "action formation mechanisms that generate commitment to solidarity" (Gajewska 2009:39). Through structural change and individualization in combination with migration, we see an increase of heterogeneity of groups with different lifestyles and interests. As this goes along with rising social inequality within a shared space, it is creating problems of social cohesion. At the same time globalisation, economic and ecological crises raise the awareness of interdependencies beyond the nation state not only among governments, but in the broader citizenship. Group formation goes beyond the "national container society" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), and may exist at national, regional, sectoral or local level, but also may combine actors at each of these levels seeking for transnational collaboration.

Transnational solidarity, therefore, has to tackle the increased complexity of a multilevel system that blurs the borders of given (national) groups, but combines different levels of group demarcations. This may, on the one hand, create even more problems of cohesion of the wider group or movement, but on the other hand, it allows a greater number of members to be bounded, albeit by more complex interactions. Following Lahusen (2020:302) we could say that solidarity in modern societies is "organised and stabilised on various levels of aggregation and institutionalisation" (informal networks, civil society organisations, welfare states, all possibly being active at local up to transnational level). He points out that these different levels are interrelated, but stabilisation may be weaker and more fragmented when it comes to transnational solidarity. More concrete, Knodt and Tews (2017) distinguish between individuals and collective actors as well as a horizontal dimension of interaction that refers to solidarity within one government level, be it supranational, national or subnational, while vertical solidarity spans over different levels. As their focus is on

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5   About doubts concerning the "natural" homogeneity of the working class even before globalization and individualisation see Hyman 1999.

state interaction, a lack of solidarity, respectively selective solidarity is explained by missing long-term cost-benefit calculations of member states as well as reciprocity expectations linked to single instead of a cross-issue perspective.

Hence, we may summarise that transnational solidarity seems harder to be achieved. Moreover, solidary action seems to be motivated by both altruism and self-interest, respectively it depends on processes that enable the combination of different motives in order to overcome the problem of fragmented solidarity alignments.

A complementary approach to transnationalize the idea of solidarity, respectively the understanding of its emergence beyond national borders, therefore is to focus on what Morgan & Pulignano (2020) call the bonding and bridging elements. In their work, the authors come back to Putnam's idea of social capital highlighting, on the one hand, bonding elements as those that emphasise commonalities and homogeneity within a group while giving it strength and allowing it to act together. On the other hand, bridging elements require the development and maintenance of common discourses, networks of collaboration and organisational structures that can connect and bring together spatially disseminated communities. Bridging elements, thus, can provide strength of collaboration beyond relatively isolated communities even when bonds are weak. Therefore, solidarity between different groups can be constructed socially as well as it can be institutionally embedded (Morgan and Pulignano 2020:20). As bonding usually is stronger in a given local (work)place or community where face-to-face contacts are common, a more exclusive principle of solidarity may develop. Bridging activities on a higher level may even weaken intensive social bonding of local communities while, at the same time, developing broader solidarity-based (transnational) communities (Morgan and Pulignano 2020:21).

Taking together the preconditions Engler described and the idea of bridging and bonding from Morgan and Pulignano, we understand that transnational solidarity is to be build up in a process, where actors do not only defend solidary goals, but actively have to engage in bridging and bonding elements in order to stabilise group formation and cohesion on a transnational level (Nussbaum Bitran, Dingeldey and Laudenbach 2022).

4.   Different forms of solidary action

The literature displayed so far suggests that to trace transnational solidarity, we have to reflect the difference between individual and collective actors forming groups or engaging in coalitions, that pursue solidary goals within a multi-level governance system. In order to do that, we need a rather complex analytical tool set. We focus on

workers' and trade unions' solidarity in Europe. Ideal type distinctions with respect to actors, goals pursed and forms of interaction, we draw from general assumptions made in the literature on European trade unions and collective action research, but also on bridging and bonding processes named by Morgan and Pulignano (2020). Selectively, we also apply the concept to other actors, namely Member States and employers, albeit differentiating their possible goals. All in all, we emphasise the political pole of solidarity, admitting, however, that sometimes social forms of solidarity may also play a role within this arena. We make use of different dimensions of solidarity developed by Lessenich, Reder and Süß (2020) to sketch different motives and applications of different forms of solidarity.

Differentiating according to the type of relevant actors, their motives, more or less concrete goals pursued, and the dominant forms of interactions, we define three types of solidary action with respect to the national and transnational level. We differentiate an *instrumental form of solidarity to increase the individual or organisational power position* by creating a network or an organisation based on reciprocity of members' actions (as a type zero). When concrete goals within this spectrum only reflect interests of the (core) members of the respective group or of the original constituency, we refer to it as a *particularistic form of solidarity* (type 1). In contrast, we see a more *inclusive form of solidarity* (type 2) when goals pursued go beyond the direct interests of the original constituency (i.e. core workers or national members) to support others or to create a common good.

We have to admit that solidarity of type zero may be enacted also for non-social goals, as for example among employers to prevent the cost of social policy. In the case of workers, respectively trade unions' formation, however, this it closely linked to the advocacy of solidary goals.

Table 1: Three ideal type functions of solidary action in national and transnational labour relations

	National Level			Transnational EU Level		
	0. Functional Solidarity: *collective action to increase power position*	**I. Particularistic Solidarity:** *to achieve social improvement for members*	**II. Inclusive Solidarity:** *to achieve a common good*	**0. Functional Solidarity:** *collective action to increase power position*	**I. Particularistic Solidarity:** *to achieve social improvement for national members*	**II. Inclusive Solidarity:** *to achieve a common good*
Kind of Actors	• Individuals • Members of organisations	• Collective actors (different principles of organising members)	Collective actors	European (workers') movements National organisations (unions)	National organisations EU-level organisations (for example ETUC)	National organisations EU-level organisations (for example ETUC)
Concrete goals	• To increase (individual) power resources • Political participation and co-determination	• Demanding redistribution • Improvement of working and living conditions for (core) members	• Combatting crisis of nation state • Benefit all citizens	• Joining organisational power resources • Political participation on (trans)national level	• Improvement of working and living conditions for national members – for European members	• Improvement of social protection for broader group on transnational level • Commitment to more transnational regulation/ European cohesion
Motives	• Joint feeling of suppression or injustice • In opposing to (class) adversaries • Reciprocal action combined with self-interest • Altruistic support for the needy	• Members' interest • Class interest • Power oriented self-interest of organisation	• Improve (economic) development of nation state • Self-restrain to achieve Common good and self-interest Of organisational power	Political calculation and coalition building. Reciprocal action of organisations within umbrella organisations "Morality: doing the right thing"	• Self-interest improvement of social protection for national members via transnational level • Rational, power oriented self-interest of transnational organisation	• Defending European members' interest (new identity) • Short term self-restrain in combination with long term self-interest of national organisation
Kind of (inter)action	• Mobilisation • Participating in strikes • Creating/affiliation with union organisation • Volunteering	• Campaigning, strike • Acting within institutional settings: negotiation with employers (and state) on wage and working conditions • Collaboration/ coalition building with others (political parties, NGOs, media, movements)	• Neo-corporatist negotiation • Exchange based on reciprocity with other actors	• Collaboration and coalition building of national unions to form transnational (umbrella) organisations • More or less spontaneous mobilisation, i.e. social action days and transnational support	• Negotiating compromises between national interests of labour organisations • Influencing commission, employers' organisations, etc.	• Compromising on common rules • Accept compromises • Based on long term reciprocity (?)

4.1 Functional Solidarity: collective action to increase power position

Feelings of injustice or opposition to (class) adversaries may motivate individuals to join and mobilise at local/workplace, sectoral or national level as group formation increases their power resources. A common identity is built on the (imagined) homogeneity of the group (social status) (Hyman 1999), common experiences and a shared aim. These bonding elements may lead to the formation of organisations, such as trade unions, institutionalising solidary action based on reciprocity. Motives are self-interest to increase (individual) power resources and the expectation of reciprocity within the organised members (Olson 1965). Derived goals to increase power resources are to institutionalise political participation and co-determination, respectively rules of collective bargaining – as the power of trade unions not only consists of the number of members, but also of institutional and societal power (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster 2018).

Acknowledging that also at the national level group homogeneity of the working class has never fully existed and is lately decreasing (Hyman 1999), we see an even bigger heterogeneity at the transnational level[6]. As in European decision-making processes "representative organisations" to participate are demanded (Taylor and Mathers 2004:271), creation of (con)federations, such as the ETUC, is the most common way to increase national organisations' power resources at transnational level – reflecting again a kind of self-interest of national organisations. Although the (con)federations are governed on the basis of reciprocity (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2020), single national organisations differ according to ideological foundations, traditions of mobilisation and different economic and legal contexts, and have different power resources (Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2014). Such heterogeneity of the group requires processes of bridging in form of coalition building, discourse and compromise to come to joint positions and to come to joint positions AND to be able to be able to pursue common goals. Joint actions of mobilisation such as European action days are of minor relevance, but are nevertheless relevant processes of bonding to form a European identity.

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6   Although the motives of European Member States to form the EU were primarily of economic nature, the group formation between different countries may have worked on similar conditions, exercising solidarity among the Member States to increase their power position within a world market and jointly bear the challenges of globalisation (Steinvorth 2017).

4.2 Particularistic Solidarity: to achieve social improvement for members

Collective actors are formed to pursue common goals, which in the case of unions may be summarised as to achieve redistribution and/or to improve working and living conditions of their members. This is done through conflict (strikes), but even more often trough negotiations with employers and other actors such as the state, respectively by coalition building also with political parties or social movements. As membership is heterogeneous, interests of core members may be prioritised at the cost of most vulnerable workers[7]. This may go along with self-interest of the organisation to maintain or increase its influence. Both motives, however, would lead to a particularistic form of solidarity.

To pursue solidarity-oriented goals in form of redistribution or social improvement becomes more difficult on a transnational level as it is more likely that different national or sectoral unions may have divergent interests. Some issues therefore may trigger fragmented solidarity, and national organisations may defend the interests of their national constituency abstaining to support the joint position negotiated at the European level. On the other side, also representatives of the transnational organisations may push for European regulation to increase their role and power resources as negotiator on transnational level (Taylor and Mathers 2004). In both cases a kind of self-interest dominates action at the transnational level and can be termed as particularistic solidarity.

4.3 Inclusive Solidarity: to achieve a common good

Solidarity has also been understood as a particular mode of governance in (welfare) state theory (Kaufmann and Majone 1986). Particularly neo-corporatist arrangements – between state and social partners – are supposed to pursue common goods that benefit all citizens, respectively the nation state (Streeck and Schmitter 1985). Often this includes a kind of self-restrain of social partners to support policies that go beyond the core interest of their members – possibly combined with (long-term) expectations of reciprocity among the participants. These interactions are based on mutual trust and exchange, cooperative negotiations. Concrete aims to participate in such arrangements may differ by situation and again include rational, power- oriented and by organisational self-interest driven motives, but also the responsibility for the good development of an enterprise, a sector or the society as such may be relevant.

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7   Within national confederations – similar to the transnational level – interests of strong sectoral organisations may dominate.

In spite of group heterogeneity on transnational level, joint positions may be easily found as a position of opposition, as for example to criticise neo-liberal policies of integration, respectively to "negative integration". "Positive integration" (Scharpf 1996; Scharpf 2014; Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023) towards a Social Europe, steps towards more or less joint rules and institutions for all Member States, may signify a kind of a common good. Support is easy for national organisations that expect direct advantages by integration, namely strengthening of their national position and power. For those who fear that the "own" national models or interests are blurred – both for Member States, unions and other collective actors – support requires self-restrain, respectively the expectation of (long-term) reciprocity to achieve advantages for members in the future, a moral conviction to do the right thing or both. To achieve this kind of inclusive solidarity that goes beyond the direct national group interest, strong bonding elements such as symbols and narratives (i.e. combatting poverty or "equal pay for equal work at the same workplace"), but also bridging via (direct) interaction, negotiation and compromise within the umbrella and third parties determining the final regulation are necessary. When Directives are transposed into national laws, in the long run they may work as stabilizing elements and even may create more homogeneity between Member States – and finally work as bonding mechanism all over.

As already lined out, the collaboration between (nation-based) organisations on particular issues may face the problem of fragmented solidarities and the (national) membership logic may nourish a particularistic form of solidarity. Our main focus is, therefore, to explore the conditions and the process of how this may be overcome and inclusive solidarity be enacted at transnational level. As mentioned in the literature, we assume that bonding and bridging is necessary, but can only be successful, when final demands are framed in a way that also satisfies the self-interest of the national members within the transnational organisation. Additionally, a position of self-restrain needs expectations of reciprocity in the future (possibly an exchange with other issues).

Understanding the European Minimum Wage Directive as a step towards a Social Europe – out of unions' perspective it can be seen as a common good. National union organisations easily may support it motivated by self-interest, when it helps to increase the national power position in wage negotiations. If these motives are not central, but legal regulation of wages is in contrast seen as a threat to national forms of collective bargaining and social partners' identity, organisations may fall back to particular solidarity in this issue.

In order to give evidence to this thesis, we use secondary analysis, analysis of documents such as position papers, answers to the consultation rounds, etc. We start displaying the different positions held by relevant actors in the European Union when the initiative of the Commission started. We identify different forms of solidarity enacted by collective actors promoting or neglecting the European minimum wage proposal. Moreover, we line out how certain appeals and changes of the original proposal have been used as bonding and bridging in order to create support for the Minimum Wage Directive and to overall convince the opponents among the trade unions, respective single member countries. Although the approval of the Directive may easily indicate that these efforts were successful, our analysis underlines that some actors could not be convinced, but stuck to self-interest, respectively solidarity with their national or class-based constituencies.

5. Minimum wage as a form of solidarity and its 'coming out' in the EU

In the last two decades, minimum wages and their regulation have become an important issue (Dingeldey, Grimshaw and Schulten 2021). They help to ensure a fairer wage distribution and to create a floor narrowing the possibilities employers have to state low wages (Peña-Casa and Ghailani 2021:140). They also contribute to protect vulnerable workers and help to prevent wage dumping where collective bargaining is weak (Furåker and Seldén 2013:515). Additionally, employment is usually seen as a solution to problems related with poverty and social exclusion, but very low wages and in-work poverty is a reality that contradicts this understanding and undermines the full-employment model that is regarded as a guarantor of wellbeing in Europe (Peña-Casa and Ghailani 2021:134). Individualisation, deindustrialisation and the deregulation of the national labour markets have contributed to the undermining of some collectivist workers' protection such as a strong collective bargaining, making statutory minimum wages more relevant as a national political measure as well as making it more visible as a mechanism to reduce inequality (Wilson 2017:250-51). It, therefore, also represents a relevant element of social policy (Dingeldey 2019) as an institutionalized result of solidary action to achieve social improvement – mostly promoted by workers' collective actors.

Globalisation has impacted national labour markets, and questioned the capacity of national welfare states to counteract these inequalities (Calhoun 2002). Thus, the instrument of minimum wages as a form of solidarity may also transcend the national state and 'go' transnationally. Overall with respect to the European Union as a supranational policy arena, we can argue that a European wage coordination can

complement the economic integration and create "a level playing field for competition" (Fernández-Macías and Vacas-Soriano 2016:4).

In reality, the proposal of the European minimum wage was a contested issue. Although the original idea was first put forward by a handful of trade unionists in 2004 (Schulten, 2014), the most recent policy process was initiated by the EU institutional actors. In October 2019 the European Parliament had adopted a resolution on employment and social policies in the Euro area calling on the Commission to put forward a legal instrument to ensure that every worker in the Union had a fair minimum wage. Ursula von der Leyen, already president-designate of the European Commission at that time, supported the idea of such a legal instrument. The proposal suggesting a level of 60 percent of gross medium national wages or 50 per cent of gross average wage, was expected to have most impact in countries that do not have a statutory minimum wage or where at present it is set at a lower level. Moreover, in sectors where low wage employment is more present, workers may expect significant pay rises, while employers will have to compensate for rising costs. Following this expected development, Central and Eastern European unions have been among the proponents of the idea. On the other hand, employers' organisations and some governments – mostly in low-wage countries – wanted to defend their international advantage through cheap labour and were, therefore, opposing the Directive, asking for a Recommendation only (see for example Jász 2021). At the beginning of the process also neoliberal governments of Austria and the Netherlands joint this view, while right-wing populist governments of Poland and Hungary were critical to the Directive more likely because of a general EU-critical position (Müller and Schulten 2022). Still, the strongest opponents of a binding European regulation were the Nordic (Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) countries, including their union federations, as they feared that the Directive would impact their national model of free collective bargaining, rejecting statutory minimum wage regulation also at national level (Seeliger 2017; Furåker and Larsson 2020). Hence, transnational interaction and compromise were needed at least within and between three groups of actors: first, trade unions, second, employers and their associations and third, between the EU entities, respectively the member countries. This overall took place within two consultation rounds between the EU authorities and the social partners. In order to explain the support for positive integration as an inclusive form of transnational solidarity, as well as its rejection by single actors, it is important to study in depth the process of policy making, including bonding and bridging elements as, for example, offered compromise overall with a focus on social partners, respectively trade unions.

6. Forms of transnational solidary action in place to promote the Minimum Wage Directive

Both trade unions and employer's associations at the transnational EU level have developed "multilevel structures of organization and representation" (Mende 2021: 182). These structures usually manifest in the form of umbrella organisations, which are "associations of associations" (Platzer and Müller 2012:864) with very different (national or sectoral) members in terms of size, resources, orientations and interests (Börzel 2010; Eising 2007). Bridging between national interests and creating bonding elements of identity, these umbrella organisations can be seen already as an institutional form of solidarity. To overcome national membership logics and self-interests, these organisations need to develop a way to frame demands in which all members satisfy their interests, but at the same time contribute to a more universalistic solidarity in the EU. We use the Minimum Wage Directive as an example to understand how the ETUC and employers' organisations developed different forms of solidarity in order to push their interests and eventually contribute to positive integration.

The introduction of the European Minimum Wage Directive can be seen as a turning point regarding social and wage policies in the Union. It follows after a neo-liberal approach regarding wage polices, which was marked by measures developed to tackle the crisis in 2008. Based on the decentralisation of collective bargaining and on the 'overall reduction in the wage setting power of trade unions' (European Commission 2012:103), these measures were contested with the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) (European Commission 2017) in November 2017 and the idea of a European minimum wage. Being it an unprecedented regulation, the negotiations with the EU institutions and the search for joint positions within the social partners' organisation at the transnational level was challenging.

For the European trade unions, the discussion within the ETUC was marked by two strong opposing positions: on the one hand, trade unions in countries where statutory minimum wages were already set, opted for the Directive (Schulten 2008) and, therefore, supported positive integration. Trade unions from western and eastern Member States pursued the same goal, namely, to push for the Directive, still having different interests to do so. Western trade unions, for example in Germany and France, saw in the Directive a protective measure that could help them to reduce social dumping within the Union. For the Eastern trade unions, the Minimum Wage Directive would help to increase their power position in order to rise the wages level in their countries. The self-interests of Western and Eastern unions – represented also by the ETUC interest as the umbrella organisation – followed a political form of solidarity which tends to redistribute power, in this case to give workers better rights. Their self-interest to the institutionalisation of higher minimum wages in the

Union and, therefore, to positive integration made it easier for them to support the Directive and, therefore, to push for more inclusive solidarity (Seeliger 2018; Furåker and Seldén 2013).

On the other hand, trade unions overall from the Nordic countries, where minimum wages are regulated through a bargaining system, saw a threat to their "Nordic model" of industrial relations and held up a position of negative integration (Furåker 2020; Alsos and Eldring 2021). Having a different goal – to avoid the Directive – they could not find bridging and boding elements with the rest of the unions represented in the ETUC resulting in an opposition to a more universalistic form of solidarity. Their self- interest of defending their model goes against the Directive's proposal and, therefore, they did not support it.

Looking at our typology, we argue that unions from Western and Eastern Member States developed a form of solidarity that goes in line with type 2, that was inspired by self-interest to improve the working conditions of their members, but also was inclusive in order to achieve a common good for all workers in the Union. While Nordic trade unions developed a form tending to a particularistic solidarity to protect their workers in their countries, which is represented by type 1 in our typology.

In order to bridge between these different self-interests, during the two-stage consultation process (ETUC 2020a; ETUC 2020b), the ETUC pushed for a new directive's draft that would include measures to promote sectoral collective bargaining as an important form to set minimum wages. In the first consultation document sent to the social partners, the issue of collective bargaining was not central. Still, it was present as the Commission stated that it will "respect national traditions, social partners' autonomy and the freedom of collective bargaining" (European Commission 2020:2) and that "collective bargaining is central to wage-setting as it sets the terms of employment and working conditions of a large share of workers and tends to reduce wage dispersion" (European Commission 2020:4). By pushing for a more central role of collective bargaining in the Directive, the ETUC intended to bring Nordic unions to change their position regarding the Directive as their (national) interest would be respected. As a bridging element the ETUC response to the first consultation round stated that "only a European initiative which ensures adequate statutory minimum wages, strong and autonomous collective bargaining systems and increases the ability and capacity of trade unions so that they can bargain for fair wages can fully deliver on the promise of fair minimum wages for European workers, thus contributing to build wider public support for the EU project as whole" (ETUC 2020a:4). But also bonding elements were used to reinforce and highlight a certain homogeneity and common experiences of the workers in the Union. Therefore, the ETUC in its

response to the second consultation round invoked old and shared demands as common narratives by pushing the Commission: "concrete actions [which] need to follow, in order to ensure that work is properly valued, that workers earn a remuneration from which they can make ends meet and that unions can bargain for fair and just working conditions" (ETUC 2020b:2).

The inclusion of measures to support collective bargaining in the final version of the Directive as an "offer" made by the ETUC and the Commission to the Nordic trade unions, taking into account their self-interest, was not enough to make them change their position towards an interest based on common good and a less particularistic form of solidarity. Other countries such as Germany, were also positively affected with the inclusion of these measures, as they give trade unions more power resources within their countries. Better bargaining opportunities and the recognition of collective bargaining as a core element of wage settings put trade unions in countries where collective agreements are not legally binding on all workers of a given sector in a better position to negotiate higher wages. As the Nordic unions achieve this still on organisational power resources without any need of legal extensions of collective agreement, the respective "offer" of the ETUC and the Commission was not attractive to make them change their mind.

Also, the European entities had different positions. While the European Council preferred a more flexible regulation to give room for national governments and to guarantee that the Directive was covered by the EU Law, the European Parliament supported the role of unions, the strengthening of collective bargaining and less variation concerning exceptions for minimum wage application (Müller and Schulten 2022). Nevertheless, there is a political intention towards positive integration and a solidary goal of furthering Social Europe tending to an inclusive solidarity. This intention is clearly stated in Ursula von der Leyen's "Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2019-2024", her agenda as a candidate for president of the European Commission. There she states that "within the first 100 days of my mandate, I will propose a legal instrument to ensure that every worker in our Union has a fair minimum wage" (Leyen 2019:9). Also, by highlighting the Principle 6 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, namely that "workers have the right to fair wages that provide for a decent standard of living" (European Parliament, Council of the European Union and Eruopean Commission 2017:15), most Member States were able to bridge their differences and to align with the idea of the Commission. The common discourse also may be seen as a strong bonding element to highlight the need to fight for more social integration to back up negative consequences of economic integration and to strengthen feelings of belonging to the Union.

Within the employers' organisations we find a form of collaboration that is close to type 1 solidarity in our typology: solidarity as collective action to achieve social improvement for members. With respect to the Minimum Wage Directive this was 'used', to promote negative integration. Defending a position of market integration by eliminating barriers for trade and competition, employers' organisations could easily unite in opposition to the Directive (BuisnessEurope 2020; SMEUnited 2020a)[8]. Maintaining the positon of negative integration, they wanted to secure the status quo that suited them well and gave them room for individual action, a form of cooperation between them that tends to the particularistic pole of solidarity. In spite of economic and national differences, employers thus had a high degree of homogeneity in their self-interests and shared a clear goal: to avoid the Directive at all costs. Bridging elements such as to collaborate in order to defend the EU internal market using the already existent legislation, allowed them to build a strong coalition. For example, in its response to the second consultation round, BuinessEurope (2020:2) stated: "we find that a directive would severely damage our role and therefore [would] be unacceptable for us". In the same line, SMEUnited (2020b:3) in its first (and second) response argued that "the adequate level of minimum wage cannot and should not be decided at European level", backing up the existing regulation regarding wage setting. Employers, thus, joined their power resources to effectively exercise political participation and take influence against the Commission's draft. Additionally, using direct lobby (Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023) to different EU institutions and writing joint position papers (European sector employers 2021), they were able to exercised collaboration that included national and sectoral organisations. However, they were not able to stop the Directive – as they could not convince their national governments, respectively the EU institutions in coalition with trade unions.

The final proposal of the Directive not only suggests to set minimum wage at 60 per cent of medium or 50 per cent of average income, but strengthens the position of unions as bargaining agents and demands measures to encourage collective bargaining, overall in countries where coverage is below 80 per cent. But also high flexibility was maintained as no country was obliged to introduce a statutory minimum wage at a certain level (European Commission 2022). Thus, the finally reached compromise through negotiations between the European Council and the European Parliament, mediated by the Commission, changed the initial proposal in line with union demands and the Parliament's position, but as bridging elements

8   One exception were French employers, who did support the Directive and together with the CGT, lobbied president Macron to implement it.

included 'offers' to all actors, giving opportunities to maintain national settings and procedures.

After the revision of the proposal the support for the Directive was huge. In the EU Parliament 505 members voted in favour, only 92 against, and 44 abstained. Also, in the European Council most countries supported the Directive. Only Denmark and Sweden as well as their unions highlighted their national interests and, therefore, a more particularistic form of solidarity, defending institutions of the nation state, respectively social achievements for their members and rejecting European integration in this point. The abstention of Hungary may be interpreted in the same direction, reflecting an overall critical view on European Cohesion.

When the ETUC, as an umbrella organisation, decided to back up the Directive (ETUC 2020b), the Swedish LO – as an extreme kind of protest – temporarily denied paying its fees (Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023), thus even questioned established forms of solidarity as collective action among unions at the transnational level. The internal discussion of the ETUC, however, shows a mainstream of transnational solidarity to achieve social improvement – type 2 in our typology. For most of the ETUC members this decision allowed to combine self-interest of improving national power position and legal regulations with an inclusive approach towards European social cohesion. In contrast, employers stayed united in opposition to the Directive (Dingeldey & Nussbaum Bitran 2023) – or to say – sticked to type 1 solidarity to defend class interest.

7.   Conclusions

The result of the discussion and the Directive itself show a way to develop positive European integration through the transnationalisation of group formation, using bridging and bonding elements. Political will of strong actors such as trade unions, and Member States' governments allowed to achieve compromise. Social values already anchored in the idea of national welfare states worked as bonding element in order to create a European social identity. But possibly also a critical discourse concerning the neo-liberal policy approach during the economic crisis and the resulting increase of social inequality - both within and between the Member States – gave ground for a change of policies towards a more social Europe. Particularly for the labour movement, it was not an unanimous decision and the feelings of belonging to a bigger unity promoting this change may have had bonding effects.

Even though we agree that the Minimum Wage Directive can be seen as a result of transnational solidarity within the European Union, different scales or graduations of solidarity predominate in the different groups. As we have shown, our three

groups of actors have different motives and self-interests to engage in transnational solidary actions. These motives and the form of solidarity that different actors pursue also confirm old lines of conflict. First, conflicts between labour and capital are clearly present: whereas the ETUC opts for positive integration, employers' organisations push for negative integration. Protection of workers versus liberalisation of the labour market divides workers from employers and leads to develop more inclusive or particularistic forms of solidarity. Second, different national interests create conflicts within the EU Parliament and the ETUC along fragmented solidarities. Member States are highly heterogeneous, which makes it difficult to reach agreements at the transnational level.

Trade unions, respectively the ETUC as umbrella organisation, back up the Directive at the European level, as it is a solidary goal strongly related to their constituency. However, trade union organisations that supported the Directive combined motives of self-interest to improve their national (power) position with the achievement of a more universalistic common good at the European level. Only the Nordic unions, which already have a strong national power position and high wages, could not recognise the strengthening of collective bargaining within the directive proposal as an element of reciprocity to the acceptance of European regulation. With respect to the issue of the minimum wage, therefore, the national trade union federations decided to protect the national sphere instead of aiming for transnational interests. With regard to this issue they remained loyal with a particularistic idea of national solidarity. Our second group, employers, reached a high level of transnational solidarity by developing strong bridging elements to more or less unanimously reject the Directive. Nevertheless, this truly transnational solidarity to increase power resources of their group is used to push for negative integration showing that they defend class interests. By doing this, instead of aiming for a model of neo-corporatism, where all actors are involved in order to reach positive integration as a way to regulate the Union's market, employers put their own interests in the foreground. Third, most Member States and the EU institutions found a shared position in order to defend the Directive, which was pushed forward by the Commission itself and enabled by compromises fostered by the European Parliament during the policy process. As an element of bridging, the progress towards similar regulation in all Member States, respectively social cohesion, may depend on the final commitment of Member States and how they implement the Directive – overall if it can be implemented by majority voting.

All in all, the advancement of the Minimum Wage shows that transnational solidarity is not easy, but it is possible. Applying our theoretical framework, this also indicates a form of inclusive solidarity towards social cohesion promoted by selective actors.

As a measure of a common European social policy it does not only help to control the conditions of the market operation, but also represents positive integration (Scharpf 1996; Scharpf 2014; Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023). It signals European solidarity, especially with those workers who struggle most to cope with globalisation and Europeanisation pressures (Schulten and Watt 2007:5).

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RESEARCH

Transnational solidarity in times of the pandemic crisis in the European sectoral social dialogues of commerce and social services

Franziska Laudenbach[1], Philipp Gies[2]

Abstract

During the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, social partners were involved into crisis management at different levels. Besides the company and the national level, social partners increased their activities at the European sectoral level. Considering this transnational collective action as an act of solidarity in European employment relations, this paper analyses bridging and bonding as processes allowing for transnational collective acts of solidarity. Based on empirical evidence of case studies of the sectors commerce and social services, the paper shows that the European social partnership serves as a framework allowing for trustful collaboration within which coalition building appears to be *a natural*.

Keywords: social partnership, transnational, crisis reaction, solidarity, sectoral social dialogue

1.   Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected everyday life at the individual level but also transnational working relations. At the same time, it has put the idea of solidarity at the center of attention at all levels as the claim for solidarity was easily been made and has been mentioned by different actors frequently during the outbreak of

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1   Research Fellow at Centre for Labour Studies and Political Education (zap), University of Bremen, Celsiusstraße 2, 28359 Bremen, Germany, f.laudenbach@uni-bremen.de
2   Research Fellow at Centre for Labour Studies and Political Education (zap), University of Bremen, Celsiusstraße 2, 28359 Bremen, philipp.gies@uni-bremen.de

the pandemic. On that background, it is of interest how this normative loaded ideal of solidarity is filled with life at the European level and how working relations develop as a playing field of acts of transnational solidarity.

These acts of solidarity exist at different levels within the European multilevel system in the form of social dialogue. Most importantly, social dialogue takes place every day at the level of companies across European countries (Mückenberger and Nebe 2019a; Pulignano 2010). Moreover, it appears through the interaction of social partners at the national level in the context of wage bargaining or public policymaking. These interactions often take place in national contexts framed by national legislation of the respective industrial relations system (Müller-Jentsch 2007). However, national boundaries of industrial relations are not as clear and delimiting as they seemed to be in the 20th century. The industrial relations system has established a transnational dimension (Keune and Marginson 2013). Within this transnational dimension it has yet to be understood, how collective acts of solidarity appear. A fruitful social partnership that fosters acts of solidarity at the transnational level conditions stabilizing mechanisms, established forms of interaction and the opportunity to form a common identity across national boundaries. Within a transnational social partnership, such as the European sectoral social dialogue, acts of solidarity rely on processes of bridging and bonding (Morgan and Pulignano 2020). Moreover, in this heterogeneous context, it is of high relevance to have a functioning working basis which builds on a trustful collaboration. Bridging entails processes of trust-building and establishes a common understanding, while bonding intensifies trustful collaboration and fosters coalition building even in heterogeneous settings.

When looking back to the outbreak of the pandemic, crisis reaction in general as well as in the context of industrial relations took place at the national level first and foremost (Brandl 2021; Meardi and Tassinari 2022). Nevertheless, during the pandemic, we have also perceived an increase of activities at the level of European sectoral social dialogues (Degryse 2021) while at the same time information and consultation of European Works Councils at the company level seem to have decreased at least temporarily and in individual companies (Hoffmann et al. 2020). In the case of the European sectoral social dialogue, we have a transnational crisis reaction that seems to be worth analyzing in more detail. The increase is especially of interest due to the fact that the number of social dialogue texts published in the pre-pandemic years has decreased since 2012 which indicates a loss of relevance within the European social partnership. Hoffmann et al. (2020) argue that during the critical early stage of the pandemic crisis, the sectoral social dialogue has intensified. They conclude that the crisis reaction "did not take place in a vacuum but through an interactive multi-level system" of social dialogue in which each actor has more or less played their role

to maintain social dialogue (Hoffmann et al. 2020:145). Hence, the European sectoral social dialogue (ESSD) has to be seen as one level of crisis reaction which is yet to be understood in more detail.

In general, the role and the impact of ESSD have not been undisputed amongst scholars (Keller and Weber 2011; Leonard 2008). Rather they have been perceived as mere "instrument of joint lobbying" and not as a means for the regulation of European employment relations (Keller and Weber 2011:229/230). However, empirical research has proved their capacity to influence European employment relations (Perin and Leonard 2016) as well as their added value to the European social partnership (De Boer, Benedictus and van der Meer 2005).

Based on the findings that the European sectoral social dialogue served as an arena of transnational crisis reaction in European employment relations during the pandemic, we aim to explain this sectoral transnational social partnership. Therefore, we analyze *how* the pandemic has affected activities at the level of sectoral social dialogue and which processes of bridging and bonding facilitated a transnational social partnership. This paper seeks to answer this research question by zooming into two cases of European sectoral social dialogue where activities at the sectoral level were reactivated during the pandemic (sector of commerce) and where activities proceeded for the first time in a more formal setting in a sense of a European sectoral social dialogue (sector of social services[3]). Based on these cases, we argue that due to political salience, the actors of social partnership joined their voices on the level of the European sectoral social dialogue in order to target the European institutions in a more coherent way. The two cases show that although with varying degree of institutionalization, bridging and bonding is possible and allow for transnational collective acts of solidarity in times of crisis. Likewise, they prove that the European sectoral social dialogue fostered increased activities at the transnational level during the outbreak of the pandemic crisis facilitating exchange of experiences and functioning approaches to tackle the pandemic challenges within the respective sector. It served as an arena of/for awareness raising for the specific needs of sectors heavily affected by the containment measurements but not defined as vulnerable occupation groups or sectors.

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3   The sector social services comprises child care, care and support for older people, care and support for people with disabilities, and social services for people with mental health problems, substance abuse and homelessness (Eurofound 2022).

The remaining part of the paper proceeds as follows: In section 2, we outline the state of literature and describe the functions and opportunity structures of the ESSD. Furthermore, we show the overall quantitative development of ESSD since 1998 and contextualize it with the socio-economic developments. In section 3, we describe our theoretical understanding of solidarity within the transnational social dialogue with the aim to understand which processes foster acts of solidarity. Hereby, we define our analytical framework for the case studies. Based on literature on solidarity in employment relations, we develop bridging and bonding as relevant processes to explain the activities of ESSD actors during the outbreak of the pandemic. In section 4, we describe our data and method which we used to analyze the ESSD. In section 5, we sketch the two case studies and elaborate on how social partnership has taken place at the European sectoral level during the pandemic and how this has differentiated between the two cases. In section 6, we draw conclusions.

2. The European social dialogue as arena of collective action

Before examining the sectoral social dialogue during the pandemic crisis, it is necessary to explain its framework conditions as well as challenges and opportunities shaping the European social dialogue. At the supranational level, European trade union federations, employer associations and the EU Commission form a bi- and tripartite dialogue. Within this social partnership they interact with each other and likewise are connected with EU policy-making and have hereby access to EU institutions as one instrument in the regulation process (Furaker/Larsson 2020, Gies 2018:42f., Rhodes 2015). Thus, the form is given via Art. 154 and 155 TFEU, predetermining the resources and topics of interaction. In this institutionalized context, we have the social dialogue where transnational employer associations and European trade union federations interact at cross-sectoral as well as sectoral level. This sets the context, which can facilitate collective agreements and can foster a European perspective of collective action (Lévesque and Murray 2010:241).

2.1 Functions and opportunity structures of the European sectoral social dialogue

The ESSD was established by the European Commission already in 1998 and serves as an arena of interaction for social partners representing the workers as well as the employers' perspective equally within an organized structure and a specific sector. In addition to the cross-sectoral dialogue, joint committees for industry-wide dialogues have emerged in Europe at the beginning of the 1990s. These did not yet have a concrete legal basis. The Commission Decision 98/500/EC setting up sectoral dialogue committees to promote dialogue between the social partners at European

level established secretariats for each sector. This decision is based on rules on the establishment, representativeness and functioning of the sectoral committees (Articles 1 to 4). Since its introduction, this form of dialogue has been regularly adapted by the European Commission to new political circumstances, such as the EU enlargement rounds. To date, 43[4] different sectors have emerged, which conduct a sectoral social dialogue with varying degree of intensity. Activities of the sectoral committee basically contain regular meetings, formal and informal exchange (e.g. the involvement during hearings, project-based collaboration, and informal talks) and the publication of joint texts with varying degree of outreach and legally binding nature. These publications mainly comprise joint positions, declarations, tools, recommendations, agreements and rules of procedure. Under Art. 154/155 TFEU, sectoral social dialogue has power to adopt sectoral agreements as proposals for directives and as autonomous agreements. The proposals for directives in particular create a very strong link to state enforcement mechanisms. Autonomous agreements, on the other hand, require a voluntary commitment by the partners. The results of the sectoral social dialogue are either targeted towards external actors, such as the EU Commission or governments of the member states or they comprise internal agreements for the social partnership at the European sectoral level (Degryse, 2015). As part of their activities, the sectoral social partners are also part of various negotiations and groups, such as the High Level Groups, and thus continue to shape the industrial policies of the EU and its member states. Further, it is also possible to start an inter-sectoral dialogue to negotiate regulations between individual sectors.

According to Kirton-Darling/Clauwaert (2003:248) the European social dialogue was seen as potential means to react to global challenges on a cross-national and European level in order to act more coherently. However, De Boer et al. (2005) argue that the success of ESSD highly depends on the willingness and voluntary cooperation of social partners. Often, the potential benefit of a sectoral social dialogue is the basis of decision-making of the involved actors (De Boer et al. 2005:55). Furthermore, the authors perceive the ESSD as "an alternative channel for lobbying" which is not a replacement of other channels of interaction but rather a broadening of the existing channels of interaction (De Boer et al. 2005:62). Hoffmann et al. (2020:158) already indicated a "joint lobbying" with the aim to increase the visibility of the needs of the respective sector. How this joint lobbying evolved within the two specific sectors will be analyzed in more detail in this paper. In this regard it is also necessary to under-

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4   The focus in this paper is put on sectoral social dialogue representing individual sectors, therefore multisectoral and cross-industry social dialogue are not considered.

stand that such a heterogeneous body of social partnership needs actors and inter-action to be able to cooperate.

When focusing on the actors within ESSD, Bechter et al. (2021) find that "frequent interaction between SSDC[5] actors can facilitate cooperation" and this is where the strength of collective action amongst social partners can be found. Although being autonomous actors in a network of the European social partnership, a certain degree of frequency and intensity of interactions can foster a common understanding and a common working base (Granovetter 1973). This network of interaction serves as a basis of collaboration which is especially relevant in times of crisis. However, the ESSD typically does not only comprise European trade unions and employer asso-ciations. The body also has a link to the institutions of the European Union. The EU Commission accompanies the ESSD as a process manager that offers infrastructure for the collaboration between transnational trade unions and employer organiza-tions (Rüb and Platzer 2018). This means, the EU framework serves as stabilization mechanism as well as a companion and institutional link for a transnational, Euro-pean social partnership.

With regard to the benefit of the ESSD, the involved actors tend to have different approaches and preferences. While the European trade unions aim to foster a European negotiating level, they still have to coordinate varying positions from the national level. The employer associations on the other side try to avoid legally binding agreements unless they expect EU regulations on the topic, as Bercusson conceptu-alized as bargaining in the shadow of the law (Bercusson 1992:185; Gies 2018:61; Smismans 2008). Overall, there are three functions that the ESSD could potentially fulfill at the transnational level: 1) a regulation function fostering the legal regulation of agreements, 2) a learning function through institutionalized and regular exchange between the social partners, and, 3) a lobbying function where the sectoral social partners transfer their joint positions to the EU commission and the EU member states (Rüb and Platzer 2018; Weber 2013).

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5   SSDC is the abbreviation of sectoral social dialogue committee which is the forum where European social dialogue actors get together regularly to discuss and tackle issues of European employment relations. The sectoral social dialogue committee consists of representatives of national and European social partners and the EU commission and represents the operational level of the European sectoral social dialogue.

2.2 The European sectoral social dialogue in times of crisis

"Never has an issue triggered so much joint discussion and collective bargaining in Europe." (Degryse 2021:97)

This is one conclusion that Degryse draws in his analysis of the European sectoral social partners during the Covid-19 crisis in Europe. He explains this finding, among others, with the fact that the crisis affected all economic spheres in their entire range of value chain and across all sectors. This is especially relevant in comparison to the financial crisis in 2008. He therefore argues that the pandemic crisis has proved the "vital nature of social dialogue" (Degryse 2021:98) and has fostered a revitalization of the European social dialogue. In an earlier study Degryse (2015) concluded that there was an "overall trend towards gradual strengthening" of the ESSD especially with a focus on the covering of more sectors. Nevertheless, Degryse finds that there was a low impact by the financial crisis in 2008 on the ESSD. Overall, he concludes that between 1999 and 2009 most agreements within the sectoral social dialogue were reciprocal undertakings, but since 2010 social dialogue rather focused on joint lobbying instead of negotiating more substantial agreements (Degryse 2015:44-45). Consequently, the sectoral social dialogue is evolving but with varying breadth and impact. Likewise, we can conclude that the crisis context can have an impact on the ESSD but it is not clear which impact.

To contextualize the activities within the ESSD during the outbreak of the pandemic in 2022, we will illustrate the development of the ESSD since its establishment in 1998. Already before the reorganization of the sectoral social dialogues in 1998, the first documents were produced and published. However, it is only with the directive decision that the framework for binding agreements was created. These include six substantive agreements and 48 procedural agreements, most of which establish sectoral social dialogue committees (Gies 2018:147).

In the following, we will present the development of the ESSD between 1998 and 2021[6] quantitatively by means of the number of publications that the involved actors have agreed on in all 43 sectors (Graph1). When we look at the continuous negotiations per annum, we can perceive a small peak during the financial crisis with 55 publications in the year 2007 and a significant increase to 82 publications in the year 2020. Compared to 2005, the number of publications in 2007 has more than doubled. Likewise, we see more than a threefold increase from 2019 to 2020. The financial as

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6   At the time of the data collection no publication in 2022 was available.

well as the pandemic crisis both have intensified the interactions between actors on the European level of sectoral social dialogue and hereby have resulted in more published social dialogue publications.
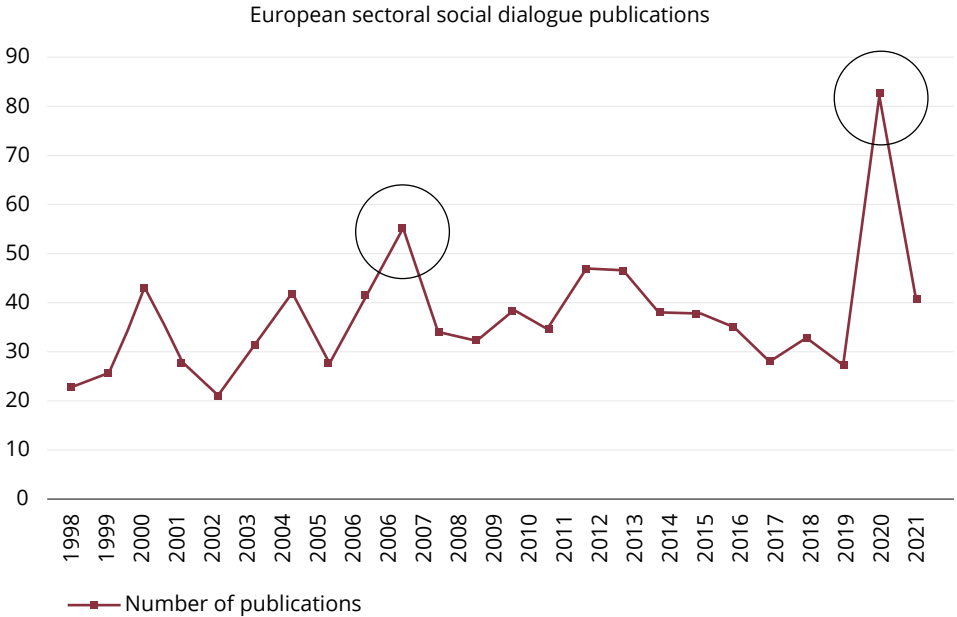
European sectoral social dialogue publications

Graph 2 shows the development of all negotiated documents within the ESSD compared to documents that have a legal binding nature (outcomes). Here, it becomes clear that binding outcomes continued to level off with the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, while non-binding documents, such as recommendations and statements, continued to increase significantly.

200
180
160
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
0

1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 1988 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014

----Outcomes
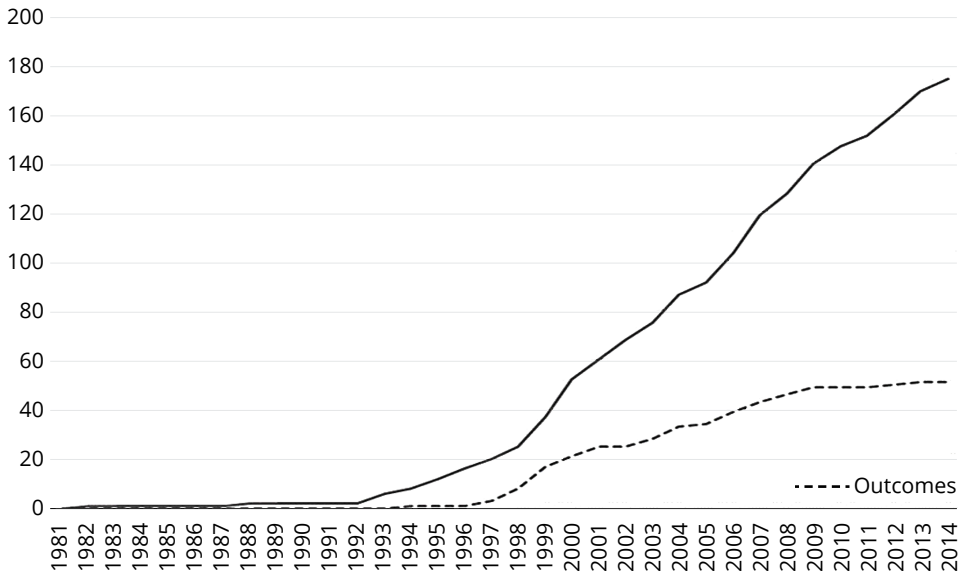
Graph 2: **Sectoral social dialogue documents with legally binding and voluntary nature**

In the context of the financial crisis from 2008 onwards, a shift has taken place from internal regulation towards more external lobbying. This shift is not synonymous with a general loss of the ability to regulate topics within a sector. Rather, it was during that time used as a method to approach the Commission and formulate proposals rather than regulations (Gies 2018:151).

The financial as well as the pandemic crisis both have intensified the interactions between actors on the European level of sectoral social dialogue and hereby have resulted in more published social dialogue documents – although with a non-binding nature. The graphs approve that the ESSD quantitatively gains relevance in times of socio-economic crises and indicates collective activities in general. But how do these activities look like in more detail? And to what degree does it steer an understanding for a common cooperation within the transnational social dialogue? This has yet to be scrutinized in more detail in the following parts of the article. Beforehand, we outline the underlying theoretical concept of solidarity in transnational collective action.

3. Solidarity in transnational social partnership in times of crisis: what does it need?

With regard to transnational social partnership in times of the pandemic crisis, it is necessary to understand processes, structures and circumstances that shape and foster social dialogue as acts of solidarity. With the need to react, social partners can aim for varying types of solidarity. This means in short, that as a first type of solidarity the aim is power allocation for a group. As a more far-reaching second type social improvements in a wider context are aimed for. And ultimately, striving for common good is the third type of solidarity. (Nussbaum Bitran, Dingeldey and Laudenbach 2022). We argue that transnational social partnership is set in a specific arena across European borders or across national company sites and brings along certain aspects of these types of solidarity.

This deems necessary as solidarity becomes even more relevant in times of crisis where questions of restructuration or redistribution have to be tackled. However, in such a fragmented industrial relations system as the European employment relations, transnational solidarity also conditions stabilization, functioning interactions and a certain common identity. It has yet to be elaborated how these preconditions are interwoven and can foster transnational acts of solidarity and to what degree.

When we read literature about solidarity, we can roughly distinguish two notions of solidarity, either in a sense of "altruism" or in a sense of "cooperation". The former is based on "conscience" whereas the latter relies on "reciprocity" (Voland 1999), often, the two are entangled. Accordingly, we argue that solidarity also entails both the motives and the capacity a specific group of people has to cooperate with each other as this defines the degree to possibly generate collective action. Further, solidarity may be more or less steady depending, among other things, on formal as well as informal rules created by the group in order to maintain cohesion. These rules regulate the cooperation in the group itself, the distribution of rights and resources and/or the contribution each member is expected to provide. According to this understanding: "solidarity is a particular social norm that applies to a specific collective, is reciprocally recognised by its members, translates into certain practices of cooperation and mutual renunciation, and is backed by sanction mechanisms" (Engler 2016:35 own translation). However, it is the altruistic motive of solidarity that enables solidary action beyond (collective) self-interest and thus allows to "cross" the borders of a defined group and to create a new understanding of a common identity as well as new forms of social action.

Hence, solidarity, traditionally presupposes a certain level of homogeneity of the group to create an identity, specific borders, stabilisation mechanisms and interac-

tion processes within the group. As in the transnational sphere new stabilization mechanisms beyond the nation state go along with new borders of groups, these two prerequisites are defined interconnectedly. The aspects of identity, stabilisation and interaction are briefly discussed in the following.

I.   Identity building to overcome heterogeneity

Traditionally, institutional solidarity is linked to the national (welfare) state (Prosser 2020:135). In this regard, it is also a matter of identity which entails questions of belonging and self-interest to promote acts of solidarity. In the context of social partnership, trade unions have established a way of common identity through their opposition to capital and with the aim to create an alternative social order. Hereby they were able to bridge differences within the workforce across sectors or occupations (Hyman 2004:37). Within the transnational context, such as the ESSD, a common identity has to be created across borders and varying nationalities as a precondition to solidarity. This has to be evolved throughout processes of strategic interactions and mutual understanding (Gajewska 2009:32). Although in the institutionalized context of the ESSD social partners are representing one specific sector, an aspect that also can foster a common identity, it has to be questioned to what extent and on which topics this is possible across classes (labour vs. capital).

II.   Seeking for stabilisation within blurring borders

Institutional and organizational structures can help to define an intersubjective social context in which workers are protected under the umbrella of the national demarcation and hereby function as stabilizing framework. In the context of social partnership this is constituted e.g. by different systems of industrial relations (Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2014; Ferner and Hyman 1993) often in conjunction with different types of capitalism and welfarism (Esping-Andersen 1990; Hall and Soskice 2001).

In the transnational sphere the EU is a special case as its foundation was fostered not only by the idea of free trade within a common market, but also by the idea of solidarity and peaceful cooperation (Knodt and Tews 2014; Mückenberger and Nebe 2019b:35-54). Moreover, the EU defines concrete borders by membership and has wider competences of rule setting than any other supranational entity. Thus, it contains more substitutes to national stabilization mechanisms than other transnational spaces providing opportunity structures for transnational or international solidarity and cooperation (Lévesque and Murray 2010:241). Therefore, it opens up a space to workers', respectively unions' solidarity as a group within the borders, or the different institutions of the European Union.

While forming organisations and networks on the transnational level can foster stability, actors can get stuck in internal struggles likewise (Bandy and Smith 2005:231-32). This also affects the allocation and use of resources that highly influence their capacity to act. This comprises not only financial resources that are necessary for travelling, translation and campaigning, but also the discursive capacity of trade unions and/or the commitment and willingness of national trade unions to foster transnational action (Lévesque and Murray 2010:240) as hierarchies among their decision making processes have to be compensated (Gies 2018:41). The institutional structures of the ESSD serve as a framework of coordination which hereby stabilize transnational social partnership. However, representatives being part of the sectoral social committee also belong to national trade unions or employer associations and are shaped by their national industrial relations system. This diversity can still lead to a social partnership that is situated within a very heterogeneous context and impede functioning cooperation (Mitchell 2014).

III.   Functioning forms of interaction

Another condition for solidarity is the existence of interaction processes within the group. We can assume that once these interactions are dense, e.g., when members of a group have increasingly more interaction experiences with each other, a strong consciousness of interdependence can be developed boosting solidarity within the group. Trade union organisations promote their goals by campaigning and mobilising, coalition building as well as negotiation and exchange with other political actors or employers – albeit to a different extent according to the traditions of the respective countries (Crouch and Streeck 2006).

For European trade union federations within the ESSD, the question is, whether forms of interaction can be created that are able to bridge gaps of established national forms of organization and action shaped by different ideological ideas and national institutional contexts and experiences. Thus, a central prerequisite for transnationalization is to engage in frequent interactions, develop a common discourse, create networks and organizational structures and institutions as well as to mobilise for collective action.

Bridging and bonding as processes of transnational acts of solidarity

By analyzing the two ESSDs during the outbreak of the pandemic crisis in 2020, we aim to understand how transnational social partners are cooperating in order to lobby jointly and how it affects their internal commitment to ideally go beyond the rational considerations and act more in solidarity. We argue that it is necessary to find a common understanding and ideally to define a common identity to create a fruitful

working base at the level of European sectoral social dialogue (Nussbaum Bitran, Dingeldey and Laudenbach 2022:11). This is even more necessary within a social dialogue where antagonistic perspectives (labour vs. employers) get together and have to find a common working base. As already mentioned above, especially in contexts where legal regulations are weak, it is even more relevant to increase interaction and foster a common understanding in order to be able to act in solidarity. Following Morgan and Pulignano (2020), we perceive processes of bridging and bonding as highly relevant at the transnational level in order to enable acts of solidarity. *Bridging* requires the development and maintenance of common discourses, fostering topic-related exchange, (establishing) networks of collaboration (formal and informal exchange) and (developing) organizational structures that allow for an exchange among the members of the group to build trust. *Bonding*, as a more far-reaching step, emphasizes the similarity within the specific, in our case transnational, group and the strength it draws from this similarity. This similarity is perceivable through a common identity among the members of the group and expresses itself as trust. In the case of the ESSD, we could expect a common identity in representing a specific sector. Especially, as social improvements cannot be achieved without both partners as it needs two to tango. However, whether it is possible to continually define a common identity across class-borders (labour vs. capital) between European trade unions and employer associations has to be examined critically.

As starting point within the respective network of collaboration we expect that a certain degree of trust has been established and facilitates a more profound regular interaction. Concretely, these heterogeneous groups have a given structure for (regular) exchange of experiences and in addition, are able and willing to form coalitions if needed. Their work relies on the power of rituals, such as regular (in)formal meetings, commonly defined work programs as common ground or rules of procedures. They use a certain language of morality, relating to a common understanding of which commonalities the group members share and what distinguishes them as a "we" in relation to those who differ from "us" (Morgan and Pulignano 2020:21). Even when bonds are weak in a sector, bridging can be expected to provide strength of collaboration also beyond relatively isolated moral communities. As a result of this continuous exchange kinds of cooperation, (seemingly) solidary acts and solidarity exist as they are socially constructed and institutionally embedded (Morgan and Pulignano 2020).

4.   Data and Methods

Our analysis is based on 9 expert interviews that have been conducted with experts from European federations of trade unions, employer associations and the EU

Commission (see list in the annex) in early 2022. All interviews were conducted online and transcribed afterwards. For the analysis of the social services sector, expert interviews have been conducted with three European trade unions and three European employer associations which have been active and published joint statements in 2020 within the sector social services[7]. According to the Eurofound representativeness study, EPSU and UNI Europa have the highest levels of repre-sentativeness across the EU member states social services trade unions (Eurofound 2022). Hence, they both can claim to represent the European social services sector strongly. EFFAT, by contrast, focuses on domestic workers and is officially recognized as social partner e.g. in the sector of hotel, restaurant and catering. They have not been considered in the Eurofound representativeness study and thus play a minor role in the sector of social services. However, they have been involved in several interactions and in joint statements at the early stage of the pandemic. On the employers' side, the Federation of European Social Employers represents employers in the field of social services (including all care and support services) at the Euro-pean level and can be seen as the most representative employer organization in the sector of social services (Eurofound 2022). Moreover, the European federation for family employment & home care (EFFE) was involved in the interactions and joint statements. This organization is one of the main actors involved in the personal and household services (PHS) sector at EU level. And, finally, the European Federation for Services to Individuals (EFSI) is representing federations and companies across Europe that are involved in the development of personal services.

Table 1:   Actors in the sector social services

Involved actors in the ESSD social services	
EPSU	European Public Service Union
UNI Europa	European Trade Union Federation for Service Workers
EFFAT	European Federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Trade Unions.
EFFE	European Federation for Family Employment & Home Care
EFSI	European Federation for Services to Individuals
Federation of European Social Employers	Federation of European Social Employers

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7   The selection of interview partners/social partner organizations was based on the definition of the sector by Degryse (2021).

For the sector commerce, interviews were conducted with one representative of UNI Europa, EuroCommerce and the EU Commission respectively, which is responsible for the sectoral social dialogue commerce.

Table 2: Actors in the sector commerce

Involved actors in the ESSD social services	
EuroCommerce	EuroCommerce is representing retail, wholesale, and other trading companies.
UNI Europa	European Trade Union Federation for Service Workers.
EU Commission	DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Unit C3: Social Dialogue

The interview partners have to be seen as experts within the respective ESSD as they have been part of the sectoral dialogue committee during the outbreak of the pandemic crisis, which served as the place of interaction of the representatives within the ESSD. Consequently, they can deliver relevant insight knowledge (technical, process and context knowledge) that cannot be found in written documents but might be important to understand the interaction process (van Audenhove and Donders 2019). Moreover, we include data from policy reports and policy documents. The data was analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis using deductively developed categories (Kuckartz 2016; Mayring 2015). Following the theoretical definitions, we analyzed our data along the above-illustrated definition of bonding and bridging with the aim to understand how the involved actors interacted. Concretely, with regard to bridging we aim to understand which/whether networks of collaboration within the respective sectoral social dialogue were prevalent, which organizational structures shaped the interactions, whether there has been a topic-related exchange and a common discourse that paved the way for a trustful collaboration and bonding. When focusing on bonding, we aim to understand processes that fostered a trustful collaboration. This entails a focus on the use of power of rituals, symbols and rhetorical appeals which help to create a shared identity across national borders. Likewise, we focus on a language of morality that is being used by the involved actors. Besides this, we analyze how exchange of experiences and coalition building structured the collaboration and fostered identity building within the respective sector.

5. The ESSD as an arena of transnational crisis (re)action

In this section, we will describe two cases of transnational crisis action during the pandemic which were especially outstanding due to their specific situation within the pandemic crisis. Both, the sector of commerce and the sector of social services were particularly affected by their direct contact with potentially infected clients but also by their strong restrictions due to health and safety regulations such as lock downs or strict access requirements. The two sectors are not part of the health sector which was defined as vulnerable sector; however, workers were exposed to the virus likewise. Moreover, the two sectors vary with regard to their degree of institutionalization and history. While the sectoral social dialogue commerce has a long history of transnational collective action and is officially recognized as ESSD since 1998, the sectoral dialogue committee for social services was only recently officially recognized in July 2023 - after our investigation. The comparison of these two historically and currently different sectors gives us an idea of the expectations of the actors involved towards the ESSD. Furthermore, it gives us more detailed information about the role of the ESSD in crisis situations, since we already know that there has been a quantitative increase with regards to publications.

5.1 En route to the sectoral committee: the case of the social services

The social services comprise around 9 million employees of whom 82% are female. Overall, the sector is characterized by insufficient funding, which has even increased in the last two years through additional costs caused by the pandemic. Moreover it has a relevant lack of qualified personnel and a high fluctuation with personnel leaving for other sectors where working conditions and/or pay were deemed more attractive (Eurofound 2022; Federation of European Employers/EPSU 2022). During the early stages of the pandemic, this sector also suffered from a decrease of employees presumably due to the working conditions where personnel was rather exposed to the virus (Vanhercke and Spasova 2022) but also as a consequence of lack of recognition as essential workers (EPSU European Public Service Union and Federation of Social Employers 2021). Altogether, the sector is of high relevance for the European society albeit lacking recognition and valuing. One pathway to address this discrepancy is the attempt of European sectoral social dialogue actors to „[s]trengthening industrial relations and capacity building, recognising collective bargaining and social dialogue [...]" which they perceive as key elements to improve working conditions but also the attractiveness of the sector (EPSU European Public Service Union and Federation of Social Employers 2021:3). Therefore, several European federations of trade unions and employer associations put effort in transnational social partnership in order to establish official and recognized structures of social dialogue.

5.1.1 Bridging: projects and networks in the social services

The European sectoral social dialogue in social services is based on structures that have developed since several years. Although this social dialogue was just officially recognized by the European Commission in July 2023, it comprises a broad network of actors involved in transnational social partnership. Due to their activities and their mutual recognition as social partners, they can be seen as equivalent to a longer standing, officially recognized sectoral social dialogue (SSD_A_1; SSD_A_3). The above-mentioned actors representing workers as well as employers in the social services at the European level have a common history of interaction and thereby a common interest to act collaboratively. For instance, within project contexts, they have been collaborating since more than a decade (e.g. FORESEE project, PESSIS I/II/III, Ad-PHS[8]). Within these projects, all actors have established common goals and structures for social dialogue. E.g. in PESSIS III, the involved actors have developed and published a "Common Declaration on the Contribution of Social Services to Europe" already in 2017. This declaration includes the aim to facilitate exchange, promote the development of social dialogue structures and to collaborate on topics such as digitalization or decent work (PESSIS 3. Promoting employers' social services in social dialogue 2017). In June 2020, in the middle of the struggle for political relevance and recognition across Europe, a network of 12 organizations (amongst them the Social Employers and EPSU) published a Joint Position Paper with the claim for more recognition of social workers as being directly at the frontline of the pandemic and "essential to Europe's social market economy" (EASPD et al. 2020). However, the variety of actors entails a fragmentation of the sector and weakens the effectiveness of the involved collective actors (SSD_A_6). Coalition building at the European level thus seems to be challenging not only due to the lacking legal power and external stabilizing framework of a potential sectoral dialogue committee, but also due to the diversity of the sector.

When scrutinizing the activities during the beginning of the pandemic in more detail, we can see two developments in parallel. Overall, activities with different thematic priority and different actors are recognizable: 1) The dialogue between EPSU and the Social Employers covers residential care work and social work. Both actors are informally recognized as actors in the ESSD through a recently published representativeness study by Eurofound (2022). Within the sector of healthcare, EPSU is formally recognized as actor of the ESSD. The dialogue between EPSU and the Social Employers is based on a process of collaboration for more than ten years. During

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8   For more information on the projects, see: https://socialemployers.eu/en/projects/foresee/, https://socialemployers.eu/en/projects/previous-projects/, http://www.efsi-europe.eu/projects/ad-phs/.

several projects, the two federations have established common working structures, a common understanding and a common goal for their collaboration within the sectoral social dialogue. The aim was e.g. to establish a European network of social services employers which was accompanied and supported by EPSU. This culminated in the application for official recognition by the EU Commission as sectoral social dialogue (which implies the establishment of a sectoral social dialogue committee) in the year 2021 (SSD_A_2; SSD_A_4).

2) Moreover, there exists a dialogue between EFFE, EFSI, EFFAT, and UNI Europa which covers personal and household services. These actors have also been in collaboration before the pandemic. Within a project on personal and household services (Ad-PHS) they have built a platform covering relevant stakeholders in the field and hereby have established their co-operation within the context of social services. These actors do not (yet) strive towards official recognition by the EU Commission, they are rather focused on capacity building (at the time of the interviews) (SSD_A_1; SSD_A_5). Besides, they especially bring in their expertise in the European care strategy, which was being discussed at the time of the data collection (SSD_A_6).

These existing networks and collaborations served as bridging mechanism for a rapid collective action at the transnational level. Common experiences following project-related cooperation fostered trust among the actors and paved the way for deeper collaboration. In this context, the involved actors could build coalitions and develop their own mechanisms to foster bonding.

5.1.2 Bonding: Regular exchange fostering coalition building
Both networks within the sectoral social dialogue reacted to the situation at the early outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to frame their sector as relevant and severely affected by the pandemic. They used the window of opportunity to bring their topics to the political attention and to establish their collaboration with several timely public statements. One quote from an expert sums it up: "[Y]ou know positions are much stronger, if they come from both employers and workers" (SSD_A_2). Even without official recognition by the European Commission, the actors of the social dialogue in the social services sector built coalitions (SSD_A_5) and developed their own working structures, e.g. by a work program in which the respective actors have clearly allocated topics and responsibilities. Accordingly, EFSI has the leading responsibility in terms of undeclared work, while EFFE focuses on the European Care Strategy and UNI Europa and EFFE collaborate with regards to professionalization (SSD_A_1). Regular meetings related to specific topics, e.g. the improvement of the PHS sector (SSD_A_6) served as power of rituals and hereby fostered the common understanding and the internal structure of the social dialogue (SSD_A_1).

Throughout informal and semi-formal regular exchange within the two networks of dialogue, the actors used the forum to up-date each other in terms of on-going developments, policy reactions and consequences for workers and employers across the EU (SSD_A_4). In this case, the sectoral social dialogue offered a forum of exchange. Further "coordinated actions" with other actors to reach out to a network of actors (EU, collective actors, NGOs) were initiated, such as an open letter, a social media campaign and joint statements addressing the EU and member states (SSD_A_4). Together with other actors in the field of social services (e.g. EASPD), the European Federation of Social Employers initiated the campaign #SocialServicesAreEssentialServices which had the aim to increase the awareness and better the working conditions of workers in the social service sector (SSD_A_4). On a discursive level (language of morality), the actors used the pandemic to put the focus on the needs of social services to be recognized as "essential services" in the same way as the healthcare sector (SSD_A_3). Both Social Employers and EPSU organized an online summit with the aim to address the EU with needs and claims to improve the situation of social services workers during the pandemic. Especially the #IAmEssentialWorker which was added to the announcement of the summit indicates a sense of a "we" towards the EU/national authorities as those who need to recognize social services as essential. This example shows that discursively and in such an organized context as the social dialogue, the creation of a common identity as essential worker and a sense of solidarity also by the employers association – at least for the moment – seems to be possible. However, this has to be seen in the context of the pandemic crisis as an exceptional situation in which the social dialogue actors tried to do as much as possible for their members that are traditionally not very good represented and organized in collective agreements.

In this sectoral social dialogue, regular interaction paved the way for coalition building and hereby fostered bonding among the involved actors. This allowed for a sharing of experiences and good practice in times of insecurity regarding the appropriate reaction to the pandemic. Moreover, bonding appeared on a discursive level by means of a common campaign and awareness raising within the joint statements.

5.2   Occasional interactions relying on a long tradition: The sector commerce

The sector commerce is characterized by labor-intensive work which relies on low skilled and often part-time work. Likewise, gig-economy and self-employed work are relevant in the sector. Overall, it can be described as a very heterogeneous sector with employees that often are not covered very well by social protection measures and were directly affected by the security measures (lockdown) during the pandemic

(Degryse 2021:56)[9]. Overall, according to EuroCommerce, around 26 million individuals are employed in the sector[10]. The sector has undergone several changes such as internationalization, deregulation and technical innovation, in the last decade (2018). This especially is evident in the "rise of e-commerce", which comprises online marketplaces and rather "traditional retailers" and is dominated by Amazon, Zalando and others (Eurofound 2018:9). Altogether, these developments influence the already heterogeneous sector and have an impact on a common crisis reaction within the sector.

5.2.1 Bridging: Transnational organizational structures with a long history

The ESSD commerce has a long history. Already in 1983 EuroCommerce and Euro-FIET (predecessor of UNI Europa) have established a sectoral social dialogue which was officially established in 1998 after the Commission decided to create a legal framework for the establishment of sectoral social dialogue committees (Eurofound 2018:4). Since then, UNI Europa and EuroCommerce represent the social partners and collaborate actively within the committee. Since its establishment, the social dialogue produced joint statements, guidelines, position papers and recommendations on varying topics related to the sector (overall 36 since 1988, see social dialogues texts database).

The sectoral social committee provides organizational structures that are pre-defined by the EU Commission but are implemented by the social partners. In this regard, the EU Commission with its respective policy officer in the Unit on Social Dialogue serves as coordinator, bringing the social partners together and, if necessary, providing the sectoral committee with information e.g. regarding activities of the EU Commission (SSD_B_2). Within this committee, national and transnational actors get together in order to collaborate and exchange with regards to specific issues and topics as a "standing way of communication" (SSD_B_2). Moreover, social dialogue is being described as a forum where social partners "can learn from each other and try to understand each other" and hereby form a common understanding and a common discourse. Not only do they have a common discourse on relevant issues but they also collaborate in common projects (SSD_B_3). The social dialogue therefore is a forum where social partners get to learn and understand each other's perspective on specific topics. However, it does not necessarily lead to joint agree-

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9   The sector comprises classifications of economic activities in the European Community (NACE) codes 45 (wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles), 46 (Wholesale trade) and 47 (Retail trade).
10 https://www.eurocommerce.eu/about-retail-wholesale/ (as of 13. April 2023).

ments. At this stage, bridging provides a first working base, creates mutual under-standing and sets a framework in which a trustful collaboration is developed.

5.2.2 Bonding: A common working basis fostering transnational crisis reaction

In general, the ESSD commerce takes place in a trilateral context with EuroCommerce, UNI Europa and the Commission. However, during the early months after the outbreak of the pandemic, there was also bilateral interaction with the aim to up-date each other regularly and to be able to react coherently and quickly (SSD_B_1). In order to intensify collaboration within the sectoral social dialogue, the power of rituals was significantly relevant. Relying on a long tradition of collaboration, the rules of procedure provided a functioning framework to react quickly. Regular meet-ings, at the beginning of the pandemic "on a weekly basis at least" (SSD_B_3) helped to update each other, exchange information, experiences and good practices. Histor-ically established formal and informal structures simplified the interaction and hereby facilitated the exchange of experiences and good examples to tackle the pandemic challenges from the different perspectives and actors across EU member states that are amongst the committee members (SSD_B_1). The work of the sectoral social dialogue committee is based on a common work basis which was established through common rules of procedure, but also by two-year work programs that are regularly updated and agreed on by all committee members (SSD_B_2). The sectoral social dialogue committee had agreed on a work programme for the years 2020/2021 in which they had put an emphasis on digitalization and the future of work as well as health and safety. Overall, they agreed to strive towards an "interactive and innova-tive Social Dialogue" in which they exchange examples of good practice and involve expertise to generate new perspectives on the relevant topics (EuroCommerce/ UNI Europa n.d.). Although these planned topics became less relevant due to the pandemic crisis (SSD_B_3), it defined the functioning of the sectoral social dialogue committee and hereby established a working basis for the collaboration within the sectoral social dialogue committee. One expert summarized it as follows: "So I think it was just a natural to reach out to each other" (SSD_B_1). This quote shows that coalition building in this case was nothing special. Instead, their activities were based on the common interest to tackle the pandemic situation.

With regards to language of morality, press releases were shared by the social part-ners to announce their common statements and to increase the outreach of these statements (SSD_B_1). Discursively, the social partners referred to the common chal-lenges that all actors in the social dialogue faced due to the pandemic crisis. For instance, they stated that:

"Europe must act effectively and in solidarity in facing this emergency by protecting all its affected citizens, workers and businesses. The European social partners in the retail and wholesale sector remain committed to protecting employees and their jobs, suppliers and customers, and maintaining this essential economic activity during this crisis." (EuroCommerce/UNI Europa 2020)

In this statement, they define the pandemic situation as an emergency which hits everyone equally and therefore needs a special reaction in a sense of solidarity. They hereby define a certain similarity between everyone who might be affected by the pandemic within the sector commerce. However, this similarity does not lead to a common identity consequently. It is rather shaped by the crisis-driven circumstances as well as the institutional context of the social dialogue. Overall, within two common statements in 2020 the social partners framed the pandemic as a dual risk for employees in the sector. Employees in the commerce sector were exposed to the virus while at the same time being threatened by unemployment due to lock downs and potential shop closures. The sectoral committee used the statements to raise awareness for the exposure of employees in the sector and their recognition as particularly affected. Likewise, they demanded protection measures to be implemented as well as financial support for shop owners and (re)training opportunities for employees.

5.3   What can we learn from the two cases?

When comparing the two case studies, we can draw several conclusions with regards to processes of bridging and bonding with implications for solidarity in transnational social partnership during the crisis. During the outbreak of the pandemic, the social partners involved in the two sectors clearly had a common interest. They aimed at tackling the pandemic crisis, raising awareness with regard to the vulnerability of the workers in both sectors and improving their working conditions. In both sectors, the social partners were able to easily establish an exchange and find a common understanding of what needs to be addressed. Especially the case of the social services shows that the ESSD can provide a framework in which social partners interact more or less officially. By means of mutual recognition amongst the social partners (a first step of bridging) and hereby establishing the framework for a common working basis, the social partners manifested the foundation for trustful collaboration (bonding). Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that these processes of bonding can only be seen as selective identity building which takes place in a crisis driven context where the circumstances fostered identity building through sectoral affiliation. A substantial common identity between European trade union federations and employers associations is not perceivable – these examples show rather a selective occurrence of transnational solidarity mostly on a discursive level.

Table 3 shows how the two sectoral social dialogues differed at the time of the outbreak of the pandemic with regards to bridging, bonding and the concrete crisis reaction (output). The rather heterogeneous sector social services lacked an external stabilization mechanism due to the missing official recognition as sectoral social service. However, the involved actors were able to interact and find a common ground. Bridging in this case entailed the mutual recognition and project-related collaboration, which established a first basis for mutual trust – at least within the respective network of actors. By means of regular meetings, exchange of experiences and coalition building they were able to speak with one voice.

Table 3:   Bonding and bridging in the European sectoral social dialogue

Sector	Social Services	Commerce
Bridging	Project-based collaboration, Topic-related interaction, Parallel structures by different network-related actors	Constant network of actors, Defined organizational structures with rules of procedure
Bonding	Semi-formal & informal exchange, Coalition building with rhetorical appeals	Formal & Informal exchange, Common work program, Regular meetings, Coalition building with rhetorical appeals
Crisis reaction/ output	EPSU & Social Employers: • Statement on COVID-19 outbreak: the impact on social services and needed support measures (25-03-2020) • COVID-19 and social services: What role for the EU? (25-06-2020) • EFFAT/UNI Europa/EFFE/EFSI: • Statement on the Covid-19 pandemic in Personal and Household Services (01-04-2020) • Statement on Personal and Household Services – Workers require priority access to Covid-19 vaccine (14-12-2020)	EuroCommerce & UNI Europa: • Joint statement EuroCommerce/UNI Europa on the impact of Covid-19 in the retail and wholesale sector (08-04-2020) • The social dimension of A European Pact for Commerce: Recovery priorities for the retail and wholesale ecosystem (16-10-2020)

The sectoral social dialogue commerce, by contrast, could rely on the already existing organizational structures and reactivated their channels of interaction easily. In this case, the actors could build upon a constant network of actors which was accompanied by the EU Commission. Their working basis was already defined by organizational structures (bridging). Based on these existing structures and an already developed

work program, the involved actors could interact easily and frequently. Coalition building amongst the social partners was "just a natural" (SSD_B_1) (bonding).

6.   Conclusions

Summarizing the above described cases of transnational social partnership, we can draw several conclusions with regard to transnational crisis reaction and solidarity. Firstly, transnational solidarity needs (internal & external) stabilizing mechanisms and a strong common understanding to act collectively. The two cases are examples of interest representation which was possible due to a (semi)institutionalized context of consultation and negotiation. External stabilization was and is given by the framework of the ESSD and further existing structures of European social partnership. Internally, the ESSD is stabilized by instruments such as rules of procedure, work programs and commonly defined goals (project/content-related). Secondly, in these two cases, frequent and intense interaction facilitated a prompt and coherent co-operation during the pandemic crisis. Thus, bridging and bonding were fundamental for transnational crisis reaction. Topic-related interaction as well as coalition building resulted in common rhetorical appeals which were published in joint statements. In the case of social services with semi-formal structures, bridging was more prevalent than bonding. The sectoral committee in the commerce sector could rely on a long history of interaction, existing internal structures and a more defined common understanding of transnational social partnership. Bonding in this case was possible easier. What remains open is the question whether these are really examples of transnational solidarity. Within the context of the EU social dialogue (Social Europe) they could also be seen as examples of enacted solidarity which were mostly possible due to the crisis driven political salience on all levels of social dialogue.

The case of social services is especially of interest in terms of the motivation to act in solidarity across national borders. Without having an official institutional framework and linkage as ESSD, this social dialogue (re)acted on a transnational level to the pandemic, defined common positions and published joint statements to address the EU Commission and the national governments. This serves as an example of high motivation and commitment to European social partnership during the outbreak of the pandemic, without being fostered externally by the EU Commission. In the case of the bilateral co-operation between EPSU and the Social Employers, this even fostered the intensification of their institutionalization and resulted in an official application for the recognition as ESSD social partner in the sector of social services.

However, these activities fostering bridging and bonding among transnational social partners have to be seen within the context of the crisis. Although we can prove

activities of bridging and bonding in both sectoral social dialogues, it still has to be questioned whether these can be seen as acts of solidarity or whether they are driven by common interest only. Having in mind the assumption that solidarity typically does not go beyond class borders, we have to challenge the finding that trade union federations and employer associations interactions can be understood as acts of transnational solidarity. This can be merely proved selectively and as a reaction to the crisis-driven circumstances shaping the scope of action of the social partners at that time.

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Appendix

List of conducted interviews

Institution	Position	Abbreviation	Date of the interview
EFSI	Representative of EFSI	SSD_A_1	26.04.2022
EPSU	Policy assistant for social services and youth	SSD_A_2	15.03.2022
EFFAT	Political secretary in charge of the domestic work sector	SSD_A_3	21.03.2022
Federation of European Social Employers	Project and policy officer	SSD_A_4	23.03.2022
EFFE	Representative of EFFE	SSD_A_5	30.03.2022
UNI Europa	Director – Property services and UNICARE	SSD_A_6	31.03.2022
UNI Europa	Director of commerce	SSD_B_1	07.06.2022
EU Commission	Representative of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion/Unit C3 Social Dialogue	SSD_B_2	24.06.2022
EuroCommerce	Representative of EuroCommerce	SSD_B_3	30.06.2022

R E S E A R C H

Transcending Borders? Horizons and Challenges of Global Tech Worker Solidarity

Valentin Niebler[1]

Abstract

While the reach of tech firms has become planetary, the counterpower of their workforces often remains local. The article explores the challenges and opportunities to transnational solidarity among tech workers, the higher-paid employee strata of tech companies. Based on three recent cases of local and transnational organizing (Google walkouts, Tech Workers Coalition, 996.ICU movement), I argue that three markers stick out in the efforts: informal organizing instead of institutional power-building, the importance of labor mobility and the surprising lack of executing structural power. The article concludes with a consideration of what can be learned from low-wage worker organizing in this context and from institutional developments geared toward transnational worker representation.

Keywords: Labor, Collective Action, Tech Workers, Transnational, Trade Unions

1.   Introduction

Big tech corporations such as Google or Amazon have become powerful actors in the contemporary economy, generating immense profits, concentrating power and reaching infrastructural capacity (Kenney and Zysman 2020). The controversies around this profound reach have in recent years given prominence to tech workers, the company's most cherished labor force of software engineers and other white collar professionals (Jaffe 2021). Although often considered as the *labor aristocracy* of tech, considerable parts have been engaged in labor activism, unionization and other political activity in the last years, using their strategic positions in value chains and

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1   Doctoral Researcher at Institute for European Ethnology (IfEE) and Institute for Migration Research (BIM), Humboldt University Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, valentin.niebler@hu-berlin.de

visibility (Tarnoff 2020). *Walkouts* by tech workers as well as their interference into political debates have had increased impact in the last years (Tarnoff 2020). However, in contrast to the global reach of its corporations the scope of tech worker activity often remains local or national and does not reach transnational levels.

The issue of the global reach of capital in the world market and the local reach of worker power is an issue as old as the capitalist development. National legislation has limited the reach of unions specifically since the internationalization of value chains in the 1970s (Harvey 2011), an issue that has become even more pressing in the age of global tech companies. The goal of this article is to situate the challenges of tech workers within global tech corporations in this history and to systematize the existing hurdles and opportunities. More precisely, I ask when and how transnational forms of organizing have evolved within this field in the last decade. The underlying assumption of this article is that the global reach of tech corporations comes along with opportunities for workers in some field that deserve more attention – namely grassroots action, labor mobility and increased levels of structural power for certain worker groups. While those dynamics and potentials remain far from shifting the power dynamics in the industry, they present noteworthy phenomena that deserve scholarly attention. I also argue that tech workers can learn from the coordination of warehouse logistics and gig workers in other companies.

In this article, the term tech work relates to occupations such as software engineers, technical writers, UX designers and other employed white-collar staff at tech companies (Rothstein 2022). In my understanding, tech workers are wage-dependent employees who work predominantly on cognitive tasks, earn middle- to higher-ranged salaries and often possess (relative) secure employment status. Tech worker organizing has gained some attention in the last years. Even before the current wave of firings and crash of investment banks, tech workers have been able to challenge management and capital holders in the political arena (Molinari 2020). With 2022 as "the worst year that the tech industry had experienced […] since the financial crisis of 2008" (Mickle and Grant 2023)[2] and the degree of conflict in the industry rising, it appears timely to assess the power structure and capital-labor contestations in this field. The article is structured in five sections. Following this introduction, the relevance of tech workers and their labor conflicts are explained and embedded into the recent history of transnational labor organizing. Then, an overview of local and national efforts of worker organizing in tech is given. This is

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2   According to reporting, the US tech giants Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, Microsoft and Meta lost around $3.9 trillion in market value in 2022 (Mickle and Grant 2023).

followed by a section that describes three cases of existing or achieved transnational alliances of tech workers and their opportunities and hurdles. A concluding chapter elaborates on possible future developments and further research opportunities.

The analysis in this article is based on three sources. The main part stems from a review of academic literature, news reporting and grey literature on the issue (strategy papers, event announcements and event reports). To a smaller extent and with focus on the second case of this article (Tech Workers Coalition), the analysis draws from the analysis of ten qualitative interviews with tech workers active in current organizing efforts in Germany, as well as informal exchange with tech workers in the United States and Italy between 2021 and 2023. The analysis is also informed by ongoing ethnographic fieldwork on strategic events of organized IT workers (conferences, workshops, campaign events) alongside with trade unions, activists and other stakeholders in the same time period. As part of this fieldwork, I have also spoken to labor lawyers, unionists and other stakeholders in the industry. The article reflects first findings of this research in an explorative manner, and is an effort to map out the relatively unchartered field of contemporary tech worker organizing.

2. Labor Conflicts in Tech: Global Power, Local Counter-Power?

Although to different degrees, the history of capitalism has always been one of increasing integration between world markets and corporations (Marx and Engels 1978; Arrighi 2010). Especially through the waves of industrialization and financialization in the 20th century, the grip of globally operating firms on local economies and their value creation, labor processes and consumption patterns has increased. Following a series of crisis in the 1970s, the largely national production system of industrial capitalism was superseded by a more global system of long-distance value chains and increased capital mobility based on management patterns such as lean production (Brenner 2008; Harvey 2011). Following a wave of investments after the global recessions of 2001 and 2008, a new regime of global tech companies such as Amazon, Google or Uber has sped up and transformed these patterns once again (Srnicek 2017, Staab 2023). Along with them came the widespread implementation of accumulation models fueled by venture capital and based on remote tracking technologies, cybernetic management and new legal loopholes to undermine formal employment, evade taxes and concentrate market power (Dubal 2017, Altenried et al. 2020, Cooiman 2021). As part of this process, production and value chains have become even more intertwined than before (Butollo et al. 2022). The tech industry with its complex net of production, logistics and labor is an illustrative example of such transnational capital mobility.

The capacities of organized labor stand in conspicuous contrast to this planetary reach. Despite continuous efforts and some achievements on an institutional level, unions and related associations still rarely operate globally but remain confined to the national, regional or shopfloor level (Bronfenbrenner 2007). Although globalization has created more favorable conditions for the creation of global union foundations such as UNI Global, coordinated collective action through such organizations has remained rare to this date. In fact, the inability to organize beyond national labor law and organizational nationalism has been considered a major Achilles heel of the labor movement since the 1970s (Silver 2008:1-40), and has manifested in decreasing union density, rise of anti-union legislation and deteriorating labor standards around the globe (Evans 2014:259). Notable exceptions include the campaign against Shell's involvement with apartheid South Africa in the 1980s and also cases of cross-border alliances by trade unions against companies such as Russell Athletics, G4S and several automobile manufacturers in later decades (Bronfenbrenner 2007:2; Evans 2014:259ff.).[3] In the aftermath of the anti globalization protests in Seattle and Porto Alegre, visions of a "new labor internationalism" (Waterman and Wills 2001) evolved arguing that labor movements could make use of transnational organization in similar fashion as corporate actors. The Euromayday movement in Europe used a similar momentum in public and transnationally coordinated protests against precarity in the 2000s (Fahlenbrach et al. 2014). On an institutional level, the cooperation between unions in the course of *European integration* within the EU has led to an array of strategic alliances such as the *European Trade Union Council* (ETUC) and even to political unity on issues such as a European minimum wage (Seeliger 2021:38f.). Tools such as the European Works Council are products of this development (Spiegelaere et al. 2022). Other recent, legally binding results of global power-building have been the *International Domestic Workers Federation* (IDWFED) in the case of domestic workers, the *Maritime Labour Convention* (MLC) for seafarers as well as successful collective agreement struggles in the aviation industry (Boris and Fish 2014; Adăscăliţei 2014; Spiegelaere 2020). Despite these success stories and improvements, it remains to be said that labor organizations have not been able to "match the other side's speed and mobility and capacity to change" (Yussuff 2006) and have largely failed to mobilize significant counterpower against global capital.

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3   Some examples include transnational alliances between United Steel Workers (USW) and United Autoworkers (UAW) in the United States with Brazilian unions, a transnational campaign against the security company G4S in 2008 or a campaign against the transnational company Russel Athletics in cooperation with anti-sweatshop initiatives (Evans 2014).

The rise of a global tech industry, alongside with its high degrees of power concentration, deregulation and rent extraction has raised the question of power resources and (transnational) struggles within the labor movement once again (Basualdo et al. 2021). While the influence of the IT industry on global markets dates back at least to the 1980s (Kushida 2015), the status and influence of contemporary tech firms has been elevated in ways that today qualify them as a "leading sector" (Silver 2008:75) of capitalist development. Some aspects that qualify them as leading sector will be explained in the following: their degree of capital concentration in the overall economy, their function as governors of (critical) infrastructures, and their transformation in the world of work (see e.g. Srnicek 2017, Kenney and Zysman 2020, Staab 2023). Most visibly, the degree of capital concentration and global reach of contemporary tech firms is unprecedented. As of 2021, the seven most valuable public traded firms worldwide were tech companies (Kenney et al. 2019). Equally important appears the reach of these companies into social life, as many of them have evolved into "infrastructures of everyday life" (Barns 2019) from underwater sea cables to traffic data, public health or federal elections (Burgess 2022). This has increased the (geo)political and social relevance of these companies. Thirdly, tech companies have transformed the world of work in profound ways. Through various forms of deregulation (employment law, taxation, antitrust), firms often remain out of reach to both workers, unions or government authorities (Dubal 2017). Through the implementation of remote work technologies and data-based performance control, the grip of management in many fields (both low-wage and high-wage occupations) has risen or at least transformed itself. This is for instance reflected in the working conditions of IT workers in international teams who are often subject to informal or technologically mediated competition dynamics (comp. Boes et al. 2012), but also in gig work arrangements ranging from fields as different as social media creation, taxi driving and domestic cleaning (Niebler and Kern 2020, Altenried et al. 2020).

Deriving from these observations are two aspects that make the role of tech workers and questions around their organizing relevant. Although tech workers are bound by management directives, their role often comes with forms of "primary" power (Molinari 2020).[4] This goes both for the workplace itself and possible subsidiaries, but also concerns political issues (*code is law*) due to the increasingly infrastructural character of this work (Chun 2016). Secondly, their position in the production process makes them a somewhat ambiguous category of workers. While the privilege and reluctance of tech workers is emphasized in some debate positions (Roy 2021, Dorschel 2022),

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4   In labor conflicts, structural power is perceived the crucial "primary" power resource and a major lever
     of workers to stop or hinder the production process (Wright 2000).

others have highlighted processes of proletarization and collective action (Steinhoff 2022, Rothstein 2022). Reflecting on these aspects, Tarnoff remarks from a Marxist perspective that "the class condition of tech workers is a combination of bourgeois and proletarian elements, which means they are pulled in two directions" (Tarnoff 2020). He sees a contingency towards different political horizons, where white collar workers in tech "can focus on the ways in which they are bourgeois, and identify with the capitalist class; or they can focus on the ways in which they are proletarian, and forge alliances with the working class" (Tarnoff 2020). This interesting ambiguity, along with the aforementioned structural importance of tech firms, make it relevant to take a closer look into transnational organizing efforts of tech workers. The argument underlying this article is neither that transnational collective action is particularly easier or more difficult for tech workers, nor do I take a process of economic degradation or elevation of tech workers for granted. Rather, my observation is that both the tech industry as a leading sector of contemporary capitalism and white collar tech workers in it play a structurally important (and interestingly ambiguous) role and that their labor conflicts therefore deserve attention.

Some early forms of transnational coordination in tech have taken place in recent years. Most well-known are transnational mobilization efforts by low-wage workers, by logistics workers such as *Amazon Workers International* or the *Transnational Federation of Couriers* (Cant and Mogno 2018, Transnational Social Strike Platform 2019). Unions like the *Alphabet Workers Union* in the United States indicate a certain degree of unionization of tech workers in the industry (Jaffe 2021). Still, apart from reports of early efforts and single cases, not much structured knowledge exists about the dynamics of cross-border organization. The aim of this article is to fill this gap by providing an overview of transnational efforts by tech workers as well as on their hurdles and further possibilities.

3. Tech Workers Organizing: Recent Developments and History

According to statistics from 2020, tech workers made up around 4,6 percent of overall employment in the European Union, equaling around 9 million workers (Rothstein 2022). While many tech workers are employed in standard labor relationships, a considerable number also work as temp workers or contractors. The term tech worker is itself a signifier of the conflicts around the role of white collar *professionals* in tech, who have often been appealed to not as workers, but as entrepreneurial or creative subjects. The term was also employed with the idea of connecting the power of different workforce layers within the tech industry with each other. The employment of the term "was premised on a fundamental irony: that by recognizing

that they were workers like anybody else, the most privileged tech workers would become able to exercise their special power within their firms for common good" (Tan and Weigel 2022:216).

According to Tarnoff, workplace conflicts of tech workers tend to fall into three categories: issues around wages and working conditions, concerns for safe and equitable workplaces, and discontent about the social harms of company products (Tarnoff 2020). An additional challenge, it can be added, lies in the volatile and venture capital driven corporate culture, which is susceptible to job losses and fundamentally opposed to collective bargaining (Niebler 2023, Sheehan and Williams 2023). Tech workers have taken collective action around these issues in several ways, most visibly through walkouts, petitions and unionization. Public walkouts have been performed at firms such as Google and Amazon to protest the lack of proper conduct with sexual harassment or lack of environmental responsibilities. Petitions have been a common way to scandalize issues on a company level or beyond, with some of them addressing corporate involvement with defense or border surveillance agencies, and others challenging workplace issues such as exhaustive working hours (Wakabayashi and Scott 2018, Lin 2020, Tan et al. 2023). In the United States, workers launched successful unionization campaigns at companies like Kickstarter, Activision and Alphabet. In India, a wide variety of regional and industry-wide unions and associations for tech workers have been formed (Bhat 2023).[5]

Organizing workers in the IT industry is not a recent phenomenon as such. In the United States, unions such as the Communication Workers of America (CWA) organized for the interests of technical workers in the Bell system and later. Unions of engineers or technical workers have existed across the world and experienced stark growth in the mid twentieth century (Hyman and Price 1983:147-281). In several European countries, the participation of employees in companies like SAP or IBM as works councils or shop stewards is an established practice since several decades. On a more movement oriented level, groups like the IBM Black Workers Alliance in the United States organized collectively against their firm and engaged in political campaigns against the company's relationship with Apartheid South Africa in the 1970s (Ford 2019; Haeyoung 2022).

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5   Tech worker unions in India include the All India IT Employee Union (AIITEU), Nascent Information Technology Employees Senate (NITES), Karnataka State IT/ITes Employees Union (KITU), and Forum for IT Employees (F.I.T.E.) in Chennai (Bhat 2023).

However, among the recent structures that workers and unions have developed so far, little were able to address and counter the transnational leverage of tech corporations that dominate contemporary economies. While local responses to lay-offs or other contested management decisions can be fought off in some countries, the global reach of corporation enables them to re-direct many of those decisions to other regions, especially Global South or BRICS countries. This has become evident during the recent wave of lay-offs across the world, which has left employees to their national branches and often hindered coordinated responses (Cassauwers 2023). Additionally, some recent research has also pointed to the reluctance of tech worker organizing deriving from their perceived privilege or to their competitive status in the labour market (Roy 2021, Lazar 2023:135). In contrast to this observation, three counter-examples of transnational tech worker organizing will be described in the following. Based on these cases, main indicators and obstacles for transnational tech worker organizing will be reflected on.

4. Transnational Solidarity – hurdles and opportunities

Google: International Walkouts and Unionization Approaches

The most prominent moment in recent tech worker organizing took place in November 2018, when circa 20.000 employees at Google staged a public *walk-out* in the company's headquarters and around the world. The protest, initiated as a campaign against the company's non-disclosure policy that protected perpetrators of sexual harassment, was coordinated worldwide: from Tokyo to Singapore over Haifa, Berlin, Zurich and London to several cities in the United States, employees left their offices to demand changes in the company management (Weaver et al. 2018). This protest, described as "one of the largest international labor actions in modern history" (Tarnoff 2020) emphasized the scale and power of organized labor in tech. Main demands consisted of ending forced arbitration in cases of harassment and discrimination, an end to pay and opportunity inequity, a sexual harassment transparency report, inclusive processes for reporting sexual misconduct and accountability structures for a lack of diversity (Tarnoff 2020; Jaffe 2021). The protest was unprecedented both in scale and format, and highlighted the grievances of tech workers on a global level – specifically the issue of gendered inequality and sexualized violence in the workplace. The transnational coordination of the walk-outs was preceded by exchange on the company's internal platforms and forums, which during this process were shut down in parts by management. Concrete preparations then took place through other communication platforms such as Slack and between personal networks of tech workers. Through the format of the walk-out,

employees broke with the anti-union tradition of their trade and industry. To some extent, the action also took place in contrast to established trade union strategies. Although the outcomes were relatively modest (only one of the five demands were met to a sufficient extent), the action set in motion a change of paradigm in the tech industry towards increasing contestation of management and business models even by higher paid workforces (Molinari 2020).

The walkouts at Alphabet, which triggered a wave of labor organizing among software developers and other tech workers in the industry, led also to more coordinated efforts at the company itself. By January 2021, the establishment of the Alphabet Workers Union (AWU) was announced, a cooperation with the union Communication Workers of America (CWA) in the United States. Shortly after, AWU announced a cooperation with the global union federation UNI Global Union. However, this effort appears to have not been fruitful and was tarnished by communication issues (Coulter 2021). From an official side, no further actions were announced after the announcement of the alliance. While the union work at Alphabet in the United States has reached some success despite its small size (see e.g. Jaffe 2021), transnational relations could not be upheld on this formal level.

Tech Workers Coalition: Organizing on an Industry Level

A group that grew in momentum during the Google Walkouts has been the *Tech Workers Coalition* (TWC), a group of tech workers organizing at the industry level. Founded in 2014 by a software engineer and a cafeteria worker in a tech company, TWC is a network with chapters around the world including New York, San Diego, Seattle, Austin, Berlin, Milan and Bologna as of 2023. Former chapters have existed in Bangalore, London and in countries such as the Netherlands and Brazil. The goal of the group is "to build worker power through rank & file self-organization and education" (TWC 2023), guided by a "vision for an inclusive & equitable tech industry" (TWC 2023). Some of the chapters have also merged with unions, such as *United Tech and Allied Workers* in the United Kingdom. While most chapters operate on a city level, some (such as TWC Italy) are more oriented towards the national level. Although the group consists largely of tech workers in the sense used in this article (higher paid white collar staff), the group retains a wide understanding of tech worker and sometimes actively aims to support struggles of maintenance, logistics or gig workers (Kraus 2022; Niebler 2023). While some chapters have remained loose networks, others have formed governance structures and operate as strategic organizations.

The transnational character of the Tech Workers Coalition manifests in two ways: first, through membership exchange on a local level and secondly, through explicit coordination on a global level. *Local-level membership exchange* on transna-

tional issues happens through the mobility and exchange among members. Tech workers transferring cities for new employment often then bring knowledge from one city to another, including knowledge on corporate strategy, organizing practices and legal tactics. For instance, tactics of a firm might differ from country to country but can have similar implications when it comes to layoffs. One example for such an initiative is the Open Salary Initiative created by HelloFresh employees in Germany, a campaign to establish salary transparency through a digital platform (HelloFresh Employees 2023). Besides the more informal exchange between local chapter members, also *explicit coordination on a global level* takes place at the organization. This happens through the global chapter of TWC, an effort to strategically exchange on experiences and strategies in each chapter. The exchange includes support of campaigns and knowledge sharing through monthly online meetings and a common Slack channel. One part of this includes support with infrastructural or advertisement work for new chapters. As one interviewee told me, "for instance we have people in [city] who can do layout and graphic design, so we connect them to other chapters who need it" (Interview, May 2023). On the groups' communication patterns and structure, Tan and Weigel (2022) state that "TWC has used Slack to facilitate conversation among members of far-flung chapters. Even though the TWC remains a leaderless and decentralized organization, the TWC Slack – with nearly 3,000 participants – acts as a centralized space for its members to collaborate on projects, share knowledge, and host events." (Tan and Weigel 2022:220). The elaborate use of agile office management tools like Slack for such purposes indicates that white collar workers in tech also make use of those tools in subversive ways.

Generally, the leverage of the TWC approach on both a local and transnational level appears to lie in its grassroots and pragmatic strategy towards organizing in tech. Asides from their communication platforms and regular meetings, the group maintains no institutionalized structure in the form of registered associations or other entities. This provides a low threshold for people to join (compared to unions) and enables members to socialize quickly, which is a main objective of the group. The obvious disadvantage of this form is the lack of "institutional power" (Schmalz and Dörre 2014) which requires some TWC chapters to work together with established trade unions and other institutions. Examples for this are the cooperation of TWC in Silicon Valley with unions such as Unite Here to mobilize Facebook cafeteria workers in the company's headquarters (Weigel 2017), the cooperation of TWC in Germany with verdi and IG Metall to defend works councils (Bulkeley 2020), or matchmaking activities between workers and CGIL unions in Italy to ensure appropriate legal aid and support. Despite setbacks in some chapters, the approach of TWC appears to be the most vivid and long term network of tech worker organizing and an important starting point for labor activists in the industry. At least in the case of Germany, this

appears to also stem from the fact that TWC sees itself not as a union: "The attractive thing about TWC is exactly that we are not a union. It is already difficult to explain to people what structures and subsection of verdi would even be responsible for them. So they are happy to not have to deal with that" (Interview, March 2023). While TWC has so far not launched transnational campaigns itself and has mostly just supported ongoing cases of collective action (such as the ones mentioned before and in the following), its value lies in the facilitation of a transnational tech worker network, a form of global and political community building that remains rare in the contemporary labour movement.

Countering Geopolitics of Tech: China/US Alliances on Github

A third and instructive example of transnational collective action among tech workers took place during the evolvement of the 996.ICU movement, a protest movement against the excessive working time culture at tech companies in China.[6] The rise of tech firms like Tencent, Alibaba or Baidu has created employment opportunities for knowledge workers across the country, who had accepted their company's over-work culture "as a tradeoff for higher salaries in a prospering sector" (Lin 2020:54). However, this turned around when the industry's growth slowed down and exchange on grievances among workers expanded (Li 2019). The movement against 996 gained momentum in March and April of 2019 and spread quickly, gaining national recognition and new reporting besides the lack of free press in the country.

The campaign, which mainly spread on the open source development platform Github, consisted of three parts: first, a crowdsourced blacklist of tech firms who maintain 996 rules to warn potential applicants, secondly, promotional material for anti-996 software in China that would make it possible to report violations against article 36 of China's labor law which states that workers should not work more than 8 hours a day. Thirdly, it consisted of an online forum where workers discussed their own experiences with excessive working time. Additionally, a Slack workspace helped the group to coordinate and served as a "private space to congregate and strategize" (Tan and Weigel 2022:213).

The use of Github site as a platform for protest and communication was done strate-gically to prevent censorship in China, as the platform is "used as critical engineering infrastructure by Chinese Tech companies" (Tan and Weigel 2022:213). However,

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6   According to the initiators, the term 996.ICU refers to "Work by '996', sick in ICU", an ironic saying among Chinese developers, which means that by following the "996" work schedule, you are risking yourself getting into the ICU (Intensive Care Unit)." (GitHub 2023).

some of the companies blocked the platform and after a while, concerns grew that the platform owner Microsoft might be pressured to shut down the 996 site. This was noticed by groups of organized tech workers, most notably by members of TWC, who launched a "support.996.ICU" campaign on Github and mobilized counter-pressure in order to prevent the shut-down of the website. In their analysis of this transnational cooperation, Tan and Weigel highlight the importance of "preexisting relationships between Chinese labor organizers, US-based Chinese academics, and Chinese immigrants working in the US tech sector" (Tan and Weigel 2022:219) as basis for the cooperation. Specifically, a member of TWC who had attended informational events on labor organizing in China at a university conference in the United States and who worked at Microsoft at the time drew the attention to the issue at the company and the need to build up pressure (Tan and Weigel 2022). Tan and Weigel maintain that although it is unclear whether Microsoft in fact considered putting the project site offline, efforts by Chinese corporations to pressure the company did indeed exist.

The transnational cooperation between Chinese and US tech workers appears remarkable in contrast to the unsuccessful efforts by institutional actors in the United States and China, specifically unions, to advance cooperative action on a transnational level in recent years. Lin (2020:57) remarks that "[d]espite years of both high-level union exchanges and people-to-people discussions, actual communication and solidarity actions in support of one another remain uncommon." (Lin 2020:57). Although the de facto impact of the action remains difficult to evaluate or quantify, the case suggests that informal coordination through tools such as Github or Slack as well as coordination through non-union groups such as TWC can serve as powerful tools to mobilize worker power against corporations.

The public recognition of the 996.ICU campaign and its methods had several repercussions in both China and other countries. In China, a "freedom of information campaign" was launched in order to make it able for employees to report breaches of employment laws accordingly (Lin 2020). Some Chinese companies banned the specific site on Github on their networks but a countrywide ban was never established. Generally, tech workers around the world have since made use of Github as a tool or platform for organizing efforts, for instance against the US company Palantir or by software developers from Iran to protest sanctions of their work on Github (Tan and Weigel 2022).

Common Denominators for Success and Challenges
Overall, the three cases laid out here show that despite a lack of institutional arrangements, transnational solidarity has been present in some of the recent organizing efforts among tech workers. Notably, it can be said that some of them have led to

the establishment of the (current) tech worker movement itself. While institution-alized successes remain rare to this date, it has been possible to build up public awareness and momentum (Google Walkout, 966.ICU) as well as sustained pro-labor networking (Tech Workers Coalition), building associational power resources and the public attention necessary to build up and accelerate collective action in tech.

One apparent aspect of all cases described here concerns the *grassroots character, informal networking and direct action tactics* that workers have used in these exam-ples. The non-existence of any representative bodies in the highly deregulated tech sectors is surely one reason for the development of this "decentralized and networked model of organizing" (Lin 2020:58). However, even their existence in the form of conventional modes of unionization, which the case of (the so far inactive) cooperation between Alphabet Workers Union and UNI Global Union, do not appear successful on transnational level so far. This is different from the national level, where groups such as the AWU have reached some success even in their position as a *minority union* at the company. The high density of tech worker unions in countries like India (see section 3) also speak to this contrasting success potential between unionism on a national and on a transnational level.

In the cases shown here, the issue of *labor mobility and migration* appears to have played an important role. The networks between tech workers across the world, which have been established through the transnational mode of the industry but also actively through the workers themselves are based on (and accelerated by) the steady movement of workers in tech and help to circulate critical knowledge on organizing tactics. The Tech Workers Coalition is the clearest manifestation of this, and its potential reveals in concrete campaigns such as the Google walkouts and the transnational support at Microsoft during 996.ICU campaign. Of course, migration movements are not always of transnational nature but also exist in domestic labor markets.

Furthermore, it appears notable that although tech workers have made use of public attention and have built associational power through communication platforms and campaigns, they have made little use of their *structural power* as tech workers.[7] In a critical reflection on strategies of the tech worker movement, the organizer Carmen Molinari (2020) refers to this when remarking that "[s]urprisingly small groups of tech workers have the power to halt Uber pickups, prevent shipping of items from every

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7   In labor conflicts, structural power is perceived the crucial 'primary' power resource and a major lever of workers to stop or hinder the production process (Wright 2000).

Amazon warehouse around the world, or disrupt services like Google Drive that busi-nesses in other industries rely on" (Molinari 2020) This argument holds even more true for forms of transnational organizing (and the disruption of global tech infra-structures), but it appears not to have been put into practice so far. Such reluctance is surely connected to the severe legal and material consequences workers face for such actions. Still, it remains unclear why the potential of disrupting the infrastruc-tural power of tech has not been a more substantial part of the debates around organizing in tech so far.

Lastly, given the fact that tech workers are not the only group of workers organizing in their industry, a consideration of other transnational collective action in tech (as mentioned in section 2) might be insightful. Although organizing in the tech industry has generally remained experimental and often temporary, low-wage workers have been able to build up transnational organizing campaigns. Most notably, the *Amazon Workers International* organizing network has been able to mount quite sophisti-cated cross-border organizing campaign (Transnational Social Strike Platform 2019). The group, which was founded in 2015, connects Amazon warehouse and logistics workers from the United States, Turkey, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, France and other countries to coordinate collective action (Transnational Social Strike Platform 2019). When planning strikes and protest actions for symbolic, internationally advertised days such as *Prime Day* or *Black Friday*, the group coordinates with warehouses in other countries so that the company is not able to reroute its deliveries. Such tactics have led to the improvement of conditions, increase in wages and in the case of Italy even to a collective agreement. Organizers and activists highlight the novelty of such organizing that does not follow "an already established model to be followed" (Trans-national Social Strike Platform 2019:5) and how they challenge unions while working together with them at the same time. In several countries, workers of the network were able to cooperate with trade unions, while at the same time challenging their national focus: "Amazon workers are […] very clear about the need to push trade unions beyond their limits as national structures, in so far as they can be obstacles rather than tools to produce and maintain a political communication across borders" (Transnational Social Strike Platform 2019:5). Since 2022, Amazon workers in the European Union have also formed a European Works Council, which provides slight degrees of corporate transparency as well as training and time resources for works council members and collective meetings.

The *Transnational Federation of Couriers* was a transnational federation of platform delivery couriers founded in 2018 (Cant and Mogno 2020). While the group appears to be not active anymore, it has held several international physical meetings, launched a media campaign to highlight the rising number of rider deaths connected to the

working conditions of platforms, planned coordinated protest actions and produced political information material for workers (Cant and Mogno 2020). Amongst other things, the meetings have helped riders across countries identify market strategies of their companies. This last aspect appears particularly relevant, since tech firms in the gig economy follow specific scripts of market entry (such as a period of attractive conditions in the beginning to secure market dominance) that are crucial for the situation of workers and their leverage against the company. The importance of such physical, strategic and transnational meetings remains visible in the form of similar and more recent formats, such as International Gig Worker Congress in 2023 by the service sector union SEIU in Los Angeles.

For tech worker mobilization, three insights appear relevant here. First, the possibility to interrupt production processes on a cross-border level and to prevent companies from rerouting production processes is also a possibility for white collar workers. While it remains easier for firms to reroute cognitive labor to contractors or offshore destinations, developing cross-border labor networks between workforces in different countries can result in material counter-power for workers and unions. Those can be a starting point for campaigns around wage justice, a demand that Amazon workers have formulated in the course of their transnational efforts. Horizontal and bottom-up networks like TWC appear to offer a fertile basis for such strategies. Second, challenging unions while working with them is something that appears useful for tech worker groups as well. Both low-wage workers and high-wage workers in tech share grievances (capital-heavy market entries, remote control, data-based surveillance, new work ideologies) and counter-tactics in their struggles that have been hard to comprehend for traditional trade unions. To reflect on learned lessons from other groups in the same industry could be benefitting in this context. Third, the possibility to join forces with the efforts of low wage workers can pose an attractive opportunity in some cases. This has happened already to some extent in the form of exchanges between groups like Amazon Employees for Climate Justice and Amazon Workers International (Amazon Employees for Climate Justice 2020), and appears especially useful if concrete interests overlap, such as in the fight against corporate surveillance or during large-scale layoffs. In some corporate contexts (global firms with low-wage workers and high-wage workforces), this can offer commonly viable targets for cross-status organizing.

5.   Conclusions

This article has looked at forms of transnational solidarity between white collar tech workers around the world. Building worker power across borders has been a challenge for the labor movement since its emergence, and the rise of a global tech industry has raised the question of how to tackle those hurdles once again. Although organizing and unionization have become prominent in local and national contexts recently, collected and structured knowledge about transnational solidarity networks remains scarce so far. On the basis of three cases and drawing from existing literature and background interviews, the article shows that transnational solidarity among tech workers has been an important element of contemporary tech worker organizing. While it remains easier to build power on the level of a single corporation or nation state level, transnational organizing can bear powerful momentum and even appears necessary in many cases to disrupt or pressure the operations of a firm. This has become clear through the walkouts at Google, which exemplified the disruptive potential and symbolic value of globally coordinated work stoppages. Additionally, continuous networking of tech workers on a local and global level within the Tech Workers Coalition has contributed to transnational ties within the movement. Concrete action such as the cooperation between Chinese and US tech workers for the 996.ICU campaign has been based on such ties and challenge both the prevalent mode of competition among tech workers as well as the assumption of a nationally siloed workforce. From all three cases of transnational action and networking introduced here, some common dynamics stick out: first, the grassroots character of the actions, second, the role of labor mobility for the circulation of knowledge and networks, and third, the surprising lack of structural power in these actions so far.

Although this article showed that early steps of transnational tech worker organizing have been made, the lack of longer lasting forms of power has to be highlighted. To address these issues, tech workers could learn from the campaigns of logistics workers or gig workers at companies such as the Amazon Workers International network, where successful cross-country coordination has taken place in the past and some institutionalization has taken place (Transnational Social Strike 2019). Furthermore, the use of regulatory frameworks and their reforms can be taken into account. One example in Europe is the reform of the European Works Council (EWC) system through a recent directive in the European Union, which could give works councils more power and some co-determination rights on a transnational level (Spiegelaere et al. 2022). In March 2023, a first agreement was signed to establish such a EWC at Google/Alphabet in the EU, UK and Switzerland (UNI Global Union 2023). However, the de facto leverage of such entities remains low and largely symbolic so far. Given the reach of global tech companies today, researchers and political actors are well

advised to expand their attention beyond the national level. Transnational actions and networks, such as the ones introduced here, contain important leverage within the globally entangled landscape of tech. The cases introduced here show that white collar tech workers can be powerful actors in such conflicts. Their power building efforts present a contrast to the perceived passivity, individualism or lack of worker consciousness often attributed to them.

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Appendix

Interviews

#	Occupation	Organized	Gender	Date	Location
1	Software Engineer	Yes	male	15.04.22	Berlin
2	Software Engineer	Yes	male	25.07.22	Berlin
3	Software Engineer	No	male	03.11.22	Berlin
4	Software Engineer	Yes	female	13.11.22	Berlin
5	Software Engineer	Yes	female	23.11.22	Berlin
6	Data Scientist	Yes	male	31.03.23	Berlin
7	Software Engineer	Yes	male	06.05.23	Berlin
8	Software Engineer	Yes	male	10.05.23	Berlin
9	Software Engineer	Yes	female	17.05.23	Berlin
10	Software Engineer	Yes	female	12.07.23	Berlin

RESEARCH

Bringing Labour Markets Back in: Inclusionary and Exclusionary Solidarities in Platform Delivery Work in Italy and Belgium

Ladin Bayurgil[1], Claudia Marà[2], Valeria Pulignano[3]

Abstract

This research showcases the ways in which the labour market informs the formation of different types of solidarities among platform workers. Building on qualitative research that focuses on the delivery sector in Italy and Belgium, we demonstrate diversity in forms of solidarities built among platform workers. While in Italy, in- and out-group boundaries, particularly those based on language and ethnicity, are successfully crossed by platform workers resulting in what we describe as inclusionary solidarities, in Belgium, they remain rigid resulting in exclusionary solidarities. Our findings demonstrate that two distinct forms of solidarity are informed by the functioning of labour markets, which shape workers' options for exit outside of the platform world and hence the degree of platform dependency. These processes contribute to the creation of variegated understandings of self and others at work and in the labour market at large that in turn inform the ways in which workers relate to one another and form solidarities.

Keywords: Platform Work, Solidarity, Labour Market, Symbolic Boundaries, Europe

1   Postdoctoral Resaercher at KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45 – box 3601, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Ladin. bayurgil@kuleuven.be
2   Fellow Researcher at KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45 – box 3601, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Claudia.mara@ kuleuven.be
3   Professor in Sociology at the Centre for Sociological Research (CESO) at KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45 – box 3601, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Valeria.pulignano@kuleuven.be

Introduction

Platform work has often been described as hindering solidarity, understood here as a shared sense of identification and belonging to an "imagined community" (Bild et al. 1997; D'Art and Turner 2002), and representing a prerequisite for collectivism and collective action (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996). For example, scholars explore the relatively high atomizing nature of platform work, where workers' labour belongs to various employment categories that range from "independent contractor" to direct employment, which in turn create a diversity of work identities and interests (Bellini and Lucciarini 2019). Additionally, studies report that the labour process in platform work is fragmented and individualized, considering that work is usually performed in isolation and geographical dispersion, which in turn can act as a barrier to collectivism and, consequentially, to collective action (Ferrari and Graham 2021). Yet, recent studies illustrate that the potential for solidarity and collectivism in platform work exists due to the persistence of structured antagonism in the platform labour process (Wood and Lehdonvirta 2019) and that platform workers can overcome individualization and achieve solidarity, for example, when they engage in day-to-day forms of mutual actions that reconstruct feelings of reciprocity (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Marrone and Peterlongo 2020).

Despite the existence of cross-country and -sectoral analyses exploring the formation of workers' solidarities (e.g., Cini et al. 2021; Tassinari and Maccarone 2019; della Porta et al. 2022; Cini 2022; Johnston 2020), insufficient insights are offered on the role of contextual underpinnings, such as national labour market conditions, in fostering the creation of different forms of solidarities among platform workers. In this article, we respond to this limitation and investigate the impact that national labour market settings, which come along with opportunities or constraints for local workers, can have on the emergence of different types of solidarities. Therefore, by binding workers' diverse claims to different institutional settings, we examine

how national labour markets inform solidaristic feelings (or lack thereof) related to perceptions of shared belonging and identification with an "imagined community" among workers. This research suggests that integrating examinations of national labour market conditions into practices of solidarity can enhance existing understandings of diversity in platform workers' solidarity formation.

Specifically, we have found discrepancies between solidarity built across delivery platform workers in Belgium and Italy, two countries with strong traditions of collective bargaining and union activity and, yet very distinct labour markets. In Italy, wage stagnation and productivity decline are two longstanding features of the national economy (Baccaro and Pulignano 2016), coupled with a high incidence of precarious employment (Tassinari 2022), and unemployment rates higher than the EU average (Eurostat 2023). Conversely, Belgium enjoys a rather healthy and stable labour market, with wage indexation and unemployment rates that stay below the EU average (ibid). To examine how differences in the national labour market settings explain the heterogeneity in workers' solidarities, we adopt the concepts of symbolic and social boundaries around which workers create understandings of self and others (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Molnar 2002). As we argue, these understandings of solidarities are framed through the distinctive shapes of the national labour market in which workers are positioned with certain opportunities and constraints.

In Italy, we observe what we describe as *inclusionary solidarities* among delivery platform workers that cut across existing boundaries and are representative of a wide range of workers. In Italy, the platform world is occupied by a large group of workers from all age groups and backgrounds who lack opportunities in the larger labour market, where high rates of unemployment and low wages exist. This situation has enabled solidarities to emerge around the common experiences of precarity among the reserve army of workers that allows for existing ethnic and language boundaries to be crossed. More specifically, workers' claims are grounded in shared experiences of precarities with attention given to the representation of a diverse set of workers, particularly those with migration backgrounds, who face heightened precarity.

By contrast, in Belgium, we observe what we describe as *exclusionary solidarities* among delivery platform workers that fail to cut across existing boundaries, particularly those built around ethnicity and language. Belgium enjoys a healthy formal labour market with rather stable unemployment rates, platform work remains highly segmented, serving either as an ephemeral job for Belgian students and native citizens or as the main means of subsistence for workers with migration backgrounds whose access to jobs remains limited. Thus, sharp segmentation in the Belgian labour market hinders the opportunity of bridging the symbolic and social bound-

aries between these two distinct groups within the platform world, with limited shared experiences between the two groups deterring common claim formation and inclusive notions of solidarity.

Our findings point to boundaries being successfully crossed by platform workers in Italy while remaining rigid in Belgium, resulting in different forms of solidarity. Building on our empirical findings, this research contributes to the literature on plat- form solidarities in the following ways. First, it displays the interlinkages between forms of platform solidarities and labour markets by demonstrating the ways in which the national labour market context shapes the configuration of the labour force and thus informs workers' heterogeneous understandings of the self and others at work and in the labour market at large, and in return, shape solidarity formation. Second, instead of studying solidarity by solely focusing on processes of coopera- tion, it also showcases its antipode, exclusion, considering that solidarity depends on the distinction between "us" versus "them" and thus is a form of identification with an "imagined community" and "as such is both inclusive and exclusionary" (Morgan and Pulignano 2020:20). Lastly, it brings in the issue of migrant labour in platform work and demonstrates how intersecting subjectivities, particularly along the lines of ethnicity and language, shape workers' identities and solidarity practices, in addi- tion to exacerbating experiences of precarity in the platform labour market.

In the following sections, we first discuss the literature on boundary formation and how it can contribute to existing understandings of solidarity formation in platform work. Then we present our findings showcasing how the national context of the labour market shapes platform workers' understandings of in-group identification and out-group differentiation which are the bases of the formation and inhibition of solidarities at work. We then conclude with what the formation of inclusive versus exclusive solidarities implies for the future of collective action.

Literature Review

Formation and Negotiation of Boundaries

The adoption of neoliberal socio-economic policies and the growth of the ideology of individualism in the late 20th century has been widely argued to result in a breakdown of collective identities and an erosion of social solidarity (Mijs et al. 2016). As a result, we have witnessed more pronounced definitions of symbolic boundaries, which can be described as conceptual distinctions made by actors to categorize objects, people, and practices (Lamont and Molnar 2002:168). Such categorization involves processes of similarity recognition and distinction building and behavioural patterns

of association of "us" versus "them", resulting in in-group inclusion and out-group exclusion (Morgan and Pulignano 2019). Thus, boundary formation is crucial in understanding how cleavages among different social groups are formed, maintained, and translated into inequalities in the labour market, with significant repercussions, particularly for ethno-racialized groups and religious minorities. Existing literature has examined the ways in which sociopolitical changes such as shrinkages in the labour market or waves of immigration inform the formation, negotiation, and contestation of boundaries drawn along ethnic and religious "otherness" (Alba 2005; Bail 2008). In return, boundary formation constitutes and reproduces the structure of inequality itself (Sherman 2005), as symbolic boundaries are translated into and solidify social boundaries, which are "social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" (Lamont and Molnar 2002:168).

The existing literature has looked into the boundary-defining practices of the privileged groups that have a distributive effect in determining the allocation of resources and thus maintenance of privilege (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Sherman 2018). On the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, a vast body of work has examined the ways in which low-income workers make sense of their identities and interpret and respond to their changing socio-economic structures, such as shrinkages in the labour market. Particularly, ethnographic studies have provided a rich account of how the urban working poor, who has unstable, unpredictable hours with little to no benefits, distinguish themselves from the unemployed poor (Newman 1999) or "street" poor (Anderson 1999), find dignity in their work (Lamont 2000), make sense of their opportunities for social mobility (Young 2006), and navigate their ongoing search for work (Purser 2009). Others have applied theories of symbolic boundaries to labour markets under transition and the changing world of work (Vallas 2001), as in this context, internal symbolic boundaries may become more pronounced, particularly along citizen-foreigner lines, as migrant and hence cheaper workers are perceived to be threatening and blamed for social problems, competition, and unemployment (Lamont and Duvoux 2014). Here, scholars have examined boundary formation within work organizations and the ways in which workers leverage social differentiation and distinction to tackle workplace inequality and gain control over their occupational status, working time, or tight management (Blair-Loy 2004; Nelson and Vallas 2021; Sallaz 2010; Sherman 2007; Osnowitz and Henson 2016).

Symbolic Boundaries and Solidarity in Platform Work
Examination of the configuration of symbolic boundaries is particularly relevant for discussions around belonging and solidarity at work, as boundaries drawn among actors highlight differences rather than establishing a sense of collectivity. The

existence and persistence of symbolic boundaries in the workforce can represent a serious hindrance to the formation of collective identity and solidarity at work. Especially since the industrial and occupational transformations started in the 1970s, scholars have discussed the decline of traditional forms of labour solidarity which coalesced around a shared feeling of identification and belonging to the working class (Valkenbourg 1996; D'Art and Turner 2011). Changes in the labour markets, e.g. the proliferation of new labour market identities and the progressive individualization of the employment relation, have contributed to dissolving the bonding power of shared identification in an "imagined community" of workers, fostering individualistic understandings of one's working life and working conditions (Beck 1987). The fading of labour solidarity, which is foundational and integral to the formation of collective action (Beck and Brook 2020), has had implications for the retention of power by organized labour and its hallmark institutions, namely trade unions (Valkenburg and Zoll 1995).

Transformations in the world of work have recently reached a new peak with the introduction of digital platforms in labour markets. Platform workers perform work in heterogeneous sectors ranging from creative work to on-site services, under variegated employment categories extending from flexible self-employment to full-time work, and under various statuses such as platform work as complementary activity or workers' main source of income (Bellini and Lucciarini 2019). In this variegated and highly individualized platform labour market scenario, scholars have pointed to these new forms of work as representing an existential challenge to traditional forms of labour solidarity and collectivism (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). However, studies have shown that solidarity can emerge also in the adverse conditions set by digital labour platforms, with workers able to overcome geographical dispersion and the existence of diverse work identities to effectively foster solidarity (Chesta et al. 2019; Heiland and Schaupp 2021; Stewart et al. 2020). Relatedly, other scholars have investigated the nature of the labour process in platform work and claimed that structured antagonism (Wood and Lehdonvirta 2019) and the cash nexus (Joyce 2020) underlie labour-capital relations also in this innovative form of work, thereby seeding the potential for the formation of workplace solidarity and collective resistance (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020).

Across the body of work dealing with solidarity in platform work, a strand of literature focuses on workers' practices of solidarity, which emerge through workers' shared experiences, ideas, and aspirations within and via workspaces, digital or spatial, as these shared norms are channelled into common interests, grievances, and claims (Lei 2021; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Vandaele et al. 2019; Wood and Lehdonvirta 2021; Wood et al. 2021). Others, particularly cross-country analyses, sought to

explain how local dynamics can account for subnational variation and the conditions under which heterogeneity of organizational forms in solidarity emerge (Borghi et al. 2021; Cini et al. 2021; della Porta et al. 2022). Here, scholars paid attention to the social and political features outside of the workplace that shape workers' identity framing (della Porta et al. 2022) or the traditions of local political organizing (Borghi et al. 2021) from which workers derive their repertoires of action (Cini et al. 2021).

Yet, in discussions around the role of specificities of the setting in which solidarity is formed, there is yet scope to examine the national institutional context, particularly the role of the national labour market in accounting for identity and boundary formation around class, ethnicity, language, and other identity category lines on which solidarities are formed. The embeddedness of solidarity in the national labour market is rooted in the national labour market's role in shaping the composition of the workforce, in addition to determining available exit options and workers' dependency on work, all of which contribute to the formation of work identities, workers' definitions of "self" and "others", and positionality vis-à-vis others in the labour force. These structural elements of the labour market are linked to the ways in which workers make sense of themselves and coworkers, and therefore inform notions around a sense of shared belonging and criteria of solidarity. Thus, this article contributes to the existing literature by bringing labour markets back in as a factor that constructs workers' understandings of in-group identification and out-group differentiation which are the bases of the formation and inhibition of solidarities at work.

Building on the above analytical frameworks, our analysis is informed by existing understandings of solidarity in relation to the identification of self and others through symbolic boundaries, which are similarities and distinctions built around cultural traditions and practices that contribute to the construction, manifestation, negotiation, and contestation of social boundaries around which are patterns of exclusion and segregation in terms of class, gender, and ethnicity are constructed (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Lamont et al. 2015). Building such group boundaries, symbolically and socially, informs collective identity formation and social network building, which in turn, shapes mobilization methods and strategies (della Porta et al. 2022). Hence, this research examines how workers draw and overcome boundaries in everyday life and what it tells us about solidarity at work. By adopting a lens that focuses on the formation of group boundaries and the development of self-identity in relation to others, this research underlines the importance of paying attention to workers' positionality, particularly within the national labour market context, in which platform workers are embedded and hence workers' interests, claims, and collective action repertoires are structured. The merit of displaying the embeddedness of solidarity

formation in the national context is pointing to limitations and pathways toward building inclusive solidarities.

Research Methods

This research adopts a comparative study of the forms of solidarity among delivery platform workers. We identified Belgium and Italy as our case studies because these two European countries have similarities in terms of trade unionism and collective action, yet discrepancies in terms of labour market conditions, particularly salary, employment, and productivity rates on the national level. We sampled around two international platforms, Glovo in Italy and Deliveroo in Belgium, with similar scales and market trajectories, in addition to employment and salary types. In order to account for the ways in which the national labour market context informs workers' experiences, we decided to hold the platform regulatory context constant. In both countries, self-employment is the main work status for platform workers active on the two platforms selected; similarly, both Belgium and Italy offer fiscally-advantageous work regimes (respectively called Peer-to-Peer status and Casual Service contract) for platform workers earning less than around 6,000 euros annually.

Our selection of Glovo and Deliveroo workers was motivated by the fact that both platforms are one of the biggest international platforms operating in the European region at large, the most prominent players in Italy and Belgium respectively, and thus allowed us to gain a representative perspective of delivery platform work at large. While Glovo, founded in 2015 in Spain, is operational in more than 1500 cities in 25 countries offering fast delivery services and expanded into Italy by acquiring Italian food-delivery startup Foodinho (O'Hear 2016), Deliveroo, founded in 2013 in the UK, operates in 200 cities in 10 countries and entered the Belgian market in 2015 and became one of the biggest food delivery platforms operating in Belgium (Sassard 2017).

This article relies on 31 interviews, in total, with (1) experts (n=9) and (2) platform workers (n=22). First, the expert interviews were conducted with trade unionists and platform managers, four in Italy and five in Belgium, and followed the semi-structured interview format. The expert interviews allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the regulatory and employment schemes, in which platform workers operate. Second, we conducted rich and detailed interviews with platform workers, 13 Glovo workers in Italy and 9 Deliveroo workers in Belgium. Respondents were selected to ensure a sample as diverse as possible in terms of age, work status, ethnic background, and gender. The interviews followed an in-depth biographical narrative structure (Schutze 1983), where workers were initially prompted to recount

the larger history of their working lives and share their recollections of job search and work experiences. The narrative main narrative part was followed by more specific questions about the interviewees' current work experiences in the platform world and relation and communication with coworkers. The narrative interview format allowed us to gain rich insights into the interviewees' work trajectories, personal socio-economic backgrounds, and relative positions in the labour market at large. The workers' narratives of their past work experiences were then followed up by specific questions about the interviewees' work experiences in the platform world and communication and relationship with coworkers. The depth and richness of narrative interviews and the focus on one single platform per country, allowed us to reach thematic saturation with a relatively small sample, in line with methodological positions that claim the variability of saturation threshold on the basis of the methods adopted (Guest et al. 2006).

The interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021 remotely via Zoom or Skype due to the pandemic. They lasted between 90 minutes and four hours, with delivery worker participants being compensated for their time. Interviews were conducted in Dutch, French, Italian, and English by interviewers fluent in these languages and working within the scope of the European project of which this research is part. The interviews were fully transcribed and translated by professionals and the interview data were analysed and coded by the first author. Rounds of open and selective coding were reiterated for all interviews to locate and connect themes that emerged from the data, coupled with discussions between the first and second authors that took place after each round of coding to maintain reliability.

Labour Market Conditions in Italy and Belgium

Belgium and Italy have various labour market commonalities, particularly in terms of trade unionism and collective action, as both countries share high rates of union membership, a large number of employees covered by a collective agreement, and a high number of working days dedicated annually to strike action compared to other European countries (ETUI 2016, 2020). Despite convergences in terms of the trade union movement, the labour market looks drastically different in the two countries, particularly in relation to salary, employment, and productivity rates. The 2022 unemployment rate in Italy at 7.8 percent stands above the EU average of 6 percent, and Belgium stands lower at 5.5 percent (Eurostat 2023). A similar trend is present in median gross hourly earnings in Belgium with 18 euros staying well above the EU average of 13 euros, whereas in Italy slightly below with 12.6 euros (Eurostat 2021) as Italy is long characterized by labour market difficulties, such as wage and produc-

tivity decline and stagnation. Particularly, the youth unemployment rate is high in Italy at 23 percent, whereas Belgium stays at around 17 (Eurostat 2023).

Longitudinal studies on Italy have highlighted that wage divergence between white and blue-collar workers has decreased over the past three decades and with significant compression of salaries across these occupations, while compensations in managerial positions and high-level professional services have been on a sustained increase (Cetrulo et al. 2022). Wage stagnation in middle and low-class occupations is not only the result of general productivity decline but also of a progressive decentralization of bargaining structures resulting from structural reforms implemented starting in the 1990s (Fana et al. 2016). Deregulatory reforms have significantly reshaped and flexibilized the Italian labour market through the introduction of new atypical contractual arrangements, such as voucher contracts and temporary work statuses while allowing for collective agreement derogations (Barbieri and Scherer 2009). The double-dip recessions of the post-2008 and the ensuing austerity measures implemented to contain the debt crisis, have intensified an already difficult labour market scenario, where so-called "the working poor" has reached double-digits figures, spanning all demographic groups (Saraceno et al. 2020). Young people seem particularly affected by the current conjuncture, as shown by the very high levels of youth unemployment in the country and the widespread use of atypical labour contracts among this age group such as unpaid or low-paid internships, on-demand work like platform labour arrangements, and significant levels of part-time work that is often "involuntary" due to the lack of other available options such as full-time work. The attainment of a degree from a high education institutions is no guarantee for gaining a better position in the labour market; research shows that also high-skilled young workers with university-level certificates experience high degrees of precariousness in the Italian labour market (Armano and Murgia 2013; Barbieri 2011; Murgia and Poggio 2014).

In contrast, the Belgian economy fares well in the European scenario, with one of the highest productivity rates in the EU (European Commission 2022). The solid sector-level bargaining system ensures a uniform coverage of collective agreements, allowing for *meliorative* conditions to be agreed upon at local and shop-floor level while limiting the possibility to derogate from national-level arrangements (Pulignano et al. 2016). Moreover, and in comparison to other European countries, Italy among others, Belgium presents a more limited fragmentation of contractual arrangements, with standard employment still representing the norm for the majority of workers (Doerflinger et al. 2020). In terms of labour market outcomes, however, some groups fare worse than others. It is particularly the case of second-generation young workers, namely workers whose parents migrated to Belgium from other countries,

who experience significantly lower and more precarious employment than their native peers (Corluy et al. 2015; Maes et al. 2019). Recent policies have attempted to incept new and atypical work statuses in the Belgian labour market, as it has namely been the case for the so-called De Croo Law, passed in 2017. Although the norm was presented as aiming at regulating volunteer work in Belgium, *de facto* it established a new employment status – the peer-to-peer (P2P) status – that allows Belgian citizens to work on a highly discounted tax rate (10% as opposed to the general high taxation on employee work) for earnings up to around 6,000 euros per year (Pulignano and van Lancker 2021). Importantly, the P2P status was also meant for digital platform workers, provided that platforms receive accreditation by the Belgian government.

With the regulatory frameworks that have accommodated and enabled the growth of the platform sector in Italy and Belgium, the number of gig workers increased rapidly as new platforms entered the market, platforms expanded their operations, and last-mile delivery services gained popularity with the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, in Italy, the number of platform workers doubled to half a million between 2019 and 2021 (Bacchi 2022). Similarly, Deliveroo has reported that in Belgium more than 43 thousand people have applied to work as a food delivery rider in 2020 (Cardi-naels 2021). This growth in operations and number of workers was also enabled through an increase in the number of workers with migration backgrounds, particu-larly those who lack access to the formal labour market, resulting in the emergence of a black market with workers subletting their accounts to workers with migration backgrounds (Alderman 2019). The next section discusses more in detail about the ways in which the labour market context shapes the composition of the workforce, which is increasingly migrantized, and how this segmentation contributes to the processes of identity and boundary formation among platform workers.

Labour Market Informing Formation of Solidarities

Our findings display the interlinkages between the labour market condition and the formation of different types of platform workers with variegated identities and work experiences. We showcase how these processes, in turn, inform the ways in which workers relate to one another and form bonding and solidarity. The national context of the labour market shapes the scope of workers' exit options, which are limited in Italy and ample in Belgium, particularly for native workers, in addition to the degree of workers' dependency on the platform income, which is high in Italy and low, again only for natives and less for migrants, in Belgium. As a result, in Italy, we observe collective experiences of precarity across heterogeneous platform worker groups that range from students to unemployed, migrants to bankrupt, in turn creating high degrees of inter-group solidarity, which we describe as the creation of inclusionary

solidarities. In opposition, in Belgium, we observe a highly segmented platform work field with a high turnover rate of native workers with available options outside of the platform, while workers with a migration background remain stuck to platform work due to limited opportunities. This in turn creates a more moderate form of solidarity, as limited shared experiences and inter-group communication hinder the formation of bonds, a process we describe as exclusionary solidarities. Below we explain how workers' variegated positions in the labour market inform their perceptions of self and others and hence notions around solidarity at work.

Inclusionary Solidarities in Italy

The national labour market at large defines job opportunities outside of the platform world and hence informs platform workers' exit options. In Italy, for platform workers, exit options outside of the platform world are very limited. This is embedded in the condition of the national labour market, which is troubled with high unemployment rates, particularly youth unemployment, coupled with low wages that restrain workers' opportunities outside of the platform world. For instance, Luigi, a 21-year-old university student applied for any open job position he could find in fields as diverse as elderly care, masonry, and bartending. He started working for Glovo full-time after he was rejected from every position, except for a piecework job as a street fundraiser for a major non-profit organization. However Luigi only kept the job for a few months because working conditions as a street fundraiser were "really really like slavery" and by far "worse off than us riders". This led him to turn to platform work as an option with better pay and conditions. Considering that in Italy job opportunities in the formal labour market offer payments and working conditions that are often worse off than platform jobs, workers, particularly new labour market entries with limited experiences resort to delivery work, although it does not offer a career trajectory, as described by Daniele, who is a 25-year-old Glovo rider: "it [this job] doesn't open you up to a career as a rider. I would contextualize it as a necessity, not as a career." Daniele, who was left unemployed after graduating from technical school and moving from one job to another that varied from dishwashing to photography, even relocating to Malta to expand his job opportunities, eventually resorted to working full-time for multiple delivery platforms. Similarly, Anna, a 22-year-old Italian Master's student explained how it was a necessity for her to work as a rider because her parents had multiple bank debts that led to her "forcing" herself to work for Glovo, although she "would like very much to find something else because this job is ungratifying, one hundred percent. Plus I have a degree and you know it kind of weighs on me. I'd like to do other things, but it's very difficult to find something else, especially in this historical moment." Here she is referring to the Italian labour market in a longstanding crisis that limits opportunities outside of the platform world even when for job seekers with degrees and skills.

As a result of limited exit options outside of platforms, workers' degree of depend-ency on platform work remains very high in Italy, exemplified by Francesco's case. Despite having a master's degree in chemical engineering, Francesco could not find a job in his field due to the even further shrinkages in the labour market during the pandemic, thus started riding full-time for Glovo. Fahrad, an Iranian migrant in Italy, was not only dependent on platforms to financially sustain himself, but also to secure a residence permit, which required a full-time, fixed-term contract, which he was not able to secure not only in the platform labour market due to uncon-tracted nature of platform work, but also outside of the platform market despite having multiple degrees in engineering and the experience of building and running a tech start-up. Thus, Fahrad resorted to registering for another Master's degree to secure a student visa, while continuing to ride for multiple delivery platforms to make a living. He explained how he is able to "survive little by little" with his platform income, yet lives only paycheck to paycheck: "We [migrant platform workers like him] always have to work to survive because it is not like we have a bank account full of thousand euros. So every month we always spend all the money to get to the next month with our salary. If we do not get it, we are dead." Although delivery platforms have claimed that delivery jobs are designed to top off other revenues as "a side job" for workers, who are claimed to seek flexibility, independence, and "just want to earn a little extra" (The Bulletin 2021) instead of being hired as full-time workers, existing research demonstrates that the majority of platform workers are fully or partially dependent on platform income to cover their basic needs, while a minority are supplemental earners (see Schor et al. 2020).

Dependency on platforms is not solely reserved for students, young workers, or immigrants who have difficulty penetrating into the world of the professional workforce due to shrinkages in the labour market in Italy, but also for high-skilled workers with vast experiences. For instance, Pierluigi, a 50-year-old rider for multiple delivery platforms, has been relying fully on platform income after his data entry business went bankrupt in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and he had to move back to his family home to live with his parents to be able to economically sustain himself. He underlined how the challenges he faced in his work life allowed him to be empathic towards struggling coworkers: "I always aimed at trying to obtain rights for those who don't have any." Platform workers in Italy consist of a heteroge-neous group of workers, ranging from student workers to recent graduates looking for work, from migrant workers to former business owners, all of whom share the experience of dependency on platforms due to a lack of opportunities outside of the platform labour market. This variety in types of workers, yet similarity in shared experiences best explained by Dino, an Italian Glovo courier with a university degree and union activist, who underlined that "within this sector there are fathers, it's not

true that it's only students. There are the fathers, there are the unemployed, there are the precarious, so those are people that need their rights to be acknowledged and protected." He added, "even if [the job is] temporary or seasonal, there's no reason why it shouldn't be protected like any other job."

At the bottom of the heterogeneous group of workers stand those with migration backgrounds, who are disproportionally represented in the platform workforce, considering that immigrants are more likely to hold jobs with poor working conditions than native-born workers. Fahrad expressed the despair the migrant workers like him are in: "In Glovo, the migrants who do not have any money or relatives, who do not have anybody, who work in that situation, they do not say anything because they need this money, don't they?" Also, Dino explained in detail the experiences of precarity of migrant workers, shared to a certain degree by other platform workers who are also deprived of work opportunities:

> The composition of workers and the organization of work changed radically. In the beginning, it was mostly students finding a way to make it to the end of the month or young people who still gravitated in the unemployment world between finishing university and starting their work career. Then there was a huge increase in the migrant component and weak subjectivities who couldn't have sustained themselves in any other way. Also so also many people who lost their job at 40 and 50 years old and many precarious workers from the culture sector. Basically, all weak subjectivities, but especially migrants.

Donato, another worker who is in his late 20s and works full time for three different delivery platforms to make ends meet despite having a law degree, described how workers from Pakistan and Bangladesh make up the majority of the fleet of Glovo, a phenomenon also described as "ethnic ghettoization" by Dino. Donato went into detail to explain how Glovo only requires a copy of an identity card while entering the platform, which in turn makes it easy for workers without documents to "cheat the platform". Here he is describing how he once saw the ID of a Glovo rider's profile, which did not match the identity of the actual rider. Yet, during our data collection, we were not able to reach any subletter or sublettee riders, most probably due to the illegal nature of such work and the workers' will and the necessity for anonymity.

Despite the increase in the number of migrant workers in the platform world is a shared reality in the platform world, including Belgium and Italy, it has dramatically different repercussions for platform workers' perceptions of association and solidarity formation in Italy compared to our Belgian case. When asked about if and when workers get into contact with other workers, our informants in Italy intention-

ally brought out the case of migrant workers and the effort they put into building bridges with workers from all backgrounds, particularly migration backgrounds, considering that precarity is perceived to be a shared existence among the heterogeneous groups of workers. Daniele, 25-year-old old rider who graduated from technical school but also decided to enrol at a university with the hopes of getting a degree would help him find better jobs, explained this situation as being *all on the same boat*:

> *You go and recreate a brotherhood almost. In the sense that when you're in trouble and you see a rider – sometimes there are communication problems because a good part [of workers], especially with Glovo, are people who still can't speak Italian well – there's a little bit of difficulty but you make yourself understood. Even maybe in English, but you make yourself understood... So you go to face other people, asking other riders, so you help each other. I had it happen to me once, I was in [city centre] doing nothing, I had a powerbank and this guy comes up to me and goes "Oh I have to make a delivery, I need it because my cell phone is running low, if it runs low clearly I don't know where I have to go" I said, "here, take it, you're welcome." And then we exchanged our numbers and he eventually said "I'll give it back to you." Very often this kind of stuff happens.* Anyway, we help each other because we are all in the same boat in the end *[emphasis added]*.

Daniele offers a detailed explanation of how shared experiences at work and in the labour market at large allow workers to build a wide and inclusive in-groupness, which facilitates communicating and bonding with one other. "Being in the same boat", which here signifies the feeling of togetherness and belonging to the same "imagined community" that comes from shared experiences of precarity and being stuck to platform work due to limited options in the labour market, is a common attitude we have observed among platform workers in Italy. Anna, a young rider who is continuing her master's degree, described her communication with other workers as "very nice" and "super", in addition to bringing the subject to lending a hand to particularly to migrant workers, to which she almost always has to speak in English because "the majority of people are migrants, Africans, [from] southern Asia, India":

> *A beautiful relationship stems from the fact that obviously we're all aware of what we're doing, and how everything works, so we try to help each other often. The majority of people aren't Italian so there's an issue with the language, the issue of understanding each other, so we help each other. Many times people have come up to me so that I could explain to them the road, to explain Google Maps, to explain all these things, so we, there's a lot of cohesion.*

When asked about relationship and communication with coworkers, similar experiences were shared by Tina, a 47-year-old woman, who went into detail to explain how she cherishes her friendship with migrant workers, who make up the majority of platform workers: "Ah, look I'll tell you the truth the most beautiful friendships I've made are all with foreigners, y'know my colleagues are all 'my blackies', I always say this. Oh and the Pakistani." Despite Tina's demeaning language, she continued to talk about the camaraderie built between workers and reflect the feeling of unity among coworkers:

> At the beginning and end of every shift, we meet up with all our Pakistani friends and we have so much fun. I'll tell you the truth, they're so friendly. Also, the Africans have incredible respect for women, sometimes they take my packages and put them in my bag. I swear, they help me a lot with wherever I can't do.

Tina delivers food from 11 am to midnight seven days a week to be able to make a living. She had to start working for Glovo when she and her husband lost their jobs due to serious illnesses while working as an administrative and accountant officer in a company.

The challenging labour market conditions result in creation of heterogeneous group of workers from all walks of life yet share experiences of precarity, which in turn allows for language and ethnicity based boundaries to be crossed and hence inclusionary solidarities to be formed in Italy. In the next section we demonstrate how a highly segmented platform labour market in Belgium, on the contrary, limits formation of shared experiences and hence sense of belonging between native and migrant workers.

Exclusionary Solidarities in Belgium

In Belgium, a healthy labour market with low unemployment and high unionization rates increases workers' options outside of the platform world and hence decreases their dependency on platform incomes. Yet, this is less valid for workers with a migration background, who often struggle to get good and stable jobs, and in some cases even lack documentation and access to the formal labour market. Thus, in Belgium, we observe segmentation in the platform workforce, with student workers who use platforms for short-term and fast economic gains, versus workers with migration backgrounds who are stuck to platforms, resulting in sharp separation and tight definitions of "us" versus "them". As a result, our findings point to the creation of what we describe as exclusionary solidarities that fail to cross language and ethnicity-based boundaries between two groups of workers.

Our findings demonstrate ample exit options for native workers outside of the platform world in Belgium, as many of our respondents have quitted working for platforms for better job market opportunities, particularly when faced with the heightened competition or diminished incomes on platforms. Student worker informants have moved on to their "careers" that match their training and skills, such as Hans, a Belgian industrial engineering student, who was looking for internships compatible with his future degree and intentionally reduced the amount of work he performed on Deliveroo when faced with diminished income as a result of competition among workers that was further heightened in the times of the pandemic. Max is a young rider who joined Deliveroo in 2017, while working on his master's studies, along with ten of his close friends because then the platform was offering referral bonuses of around 175 euros each to the referrer and the referee. Yet Max underlines that among this large group of friends, he is the only one still working for the platform, and "everyone else has stopped because I do have the feeling that most people are doing it as a short-term solution." Thus we observe a high turnover rate for student workers in Belgium, in which the labour market offers various options for exit from the platform world.

The condition of the labour market not only informs workers' exit options outside of the platform world but also workers' dependency on platform incomes, which is intrinsically linked to the former. Our findings demonstrate that platform workers in Belgium, particularly student workers, perform platform work occasionally in their free time and use platform incomes to top off other familial or public support mechanisms such as monthly allowances or scholarships. For instance, Hans and Dieter, both Belgian students in their early 20s who ride for Deliveroo when they have the extra time from schoolwork describe their work as "a hobby" and "paid fitness." Similarly, Aaleks, another Belgian student who lives with his parents, described platform work as "something to fall back on" that allows him to "never go beg for work from anyone". He described his job as "perfect for students" because of the flexibility: "If I want to work, then I can just work. If I don't want to work anymore, then I don't have to answer to anyone." Various Belgian student worker interviewees were not dependent on their income from platforms, but instead used their gains to supplement their extra costs, such as booking big holiday trips, purchasing of expensive electronics, or upgrading their existing belongings such as bikes. For instance, Aaleks, a student in his 20s who solely rides in the evenings after his classes, used his platform income to go on a large trip with his sister. Senne, another Belgian student in his 20s, started working for Deliveroo when he decided to move out of his family home and be more independent from his family in covering his student housing costs. He acknowledged that as a student job, the platform income "is a nice addition so it is a fair wage in my opinion, but for someone who really wants to live off it,

then it is not a fair wage." He explains in detail how platforms do not offer sufficient income because on "a top day" he earned 40 euros, which adds up to 1200 euros for a month's earnings, yet his average daily income almost falls short of it: "It is a nice sum, but that means that you have to have a top day every day and there is also the physical limitation that you have to cycle every day, which is physically hard and definitely won't work out. There will be days that you earn less. So I think it is a major challenge to work for Deliveroo every day and try to live off it."

Although delivery work appears as a source of pleasurable pastime and supplementary income for Belgian student workers who perform work at their own discretion, while continuing to rely on scholarships or family support, platform work takes a different shape for workers with migration backgrounds. This in return contributes to shape a segmented labour force and ensuing tight definitions of "us" versus "them" within natives and workers with a migration background in platform work. The latter group faces limited exit options outside of platforms and hence high rates of dependency on platform income, for instance, due to experiences of discrimination or difficulty transferring their credentials earned in their home countries to the Belgian context. For Mehdi, a Belgian-born Deliveroo worker with Moroccan origins, even moving working from one delivery company to another with better working conditions was a challenge. Mehdi has faced racial profiling and discrimination throughout his life, being subjected to police checks multiple times a day and being wrongfully accused and imprisoned. After being released from prison after three months of wrongful conviction, he received severance payment, with which he was able to buy a car and work as a driver for Uber, in addition to working as a rider for Deliveroo with his newly purchased bike. Yet he was repeatedly rejected working for Takeaway, a competitor of Deliveroo which is known for providing better working conditions such as by providing more stable work and insurance: "I have already asked several times to work on Takeaway. They've always rejected me… All messages I get from Takeaway are rejection messages. They've never told me why but, anyway I called and I told them 'it's not normal, I always get rejections, rejections, rejections.' And they don't care."

Different lived experiences of platform work between native workers and workers with a migration background is most visible when it comes to opportunities in the labour market in Belgium, which seem ample for native workers yet, restricted for migrant workers, whose residence permits are often dependent on their work or who lack any formal documentation. It has been widely reported in the media that around half of platform workers in Belgium are undocumented (Alderman 2019; Cloot 2021), for whom platforms remain the only option for work, as at the entrance, platforms do not require a work permit and allow the performance of work through

subletting accounts. Various informants also have reported how they have heard of rumours circulating around sublet accounts, such as Bashar, a 40-year-old Deliveroo worker in Belgium who is from Pakistan and has two kids, of whom he takes care with his platform income. He explained how UberEats "asks for you to take your photo. Face recognition or something like that. But Deliveroo doesn't have that system. Anybody can work on everybody's phone." Other workers have also underlined how the number of migrant workers has increased in the platform world, described as "a bit of an evolution" in type for workers by Max, a Belgian master's student: "Before there were really a lot more students and now it's only a quarter or maybe one-third is a student. [Nowadays] I think [there are] a lot of older people, like 30 or 40 years old who are doing it. I also think [there are] more refugees as well."

Such differences in exit options and dependency on platform income result in formation of rigid boundaries between two groups of workers, resulting in loss of communication and bonding opportunities. When asked about if and under what conditions our informants communicate with other workers, various student workers brought up the issue of the increase in the number of workers, particularly those with migration backgrounds, in accounting for diminished contacts and association between workers. For instance, when asked about his relationship with his coworkers, Max expressed his disinterest in bonding with them:

It [the work] has become more anonymous. Before you would see people you would know or had already run into a few times, or would wait for orders together or something. Now it's not the case anymore. I think it is like that because there are a lot more [workers], probably, so you just don't know everyone anymore. I wouldn't know how many hundreds of people there are in [his city]; every time I go to work, I see foreign people I have never seen before. So there has to be a lot of people... Such a group or a certain connection or something...that's not the case anymore. But I also don't really mind it. I also don't do it for social contact or something, so it's just because I like to bike and you're also earning a bit with it.

Similarly, Hans explained in detail how he thinks with the increase of workers with a migration background with whom he claims to have limited similarities and feeling of group membership contributes to a loss of communication between workers: "In my opinion, it [communication] was more personal, I mean the contact was more social back then. Now it's less because of the change of who's working for Deliveroo." He continued:

There is definitely an evolution in who's working for Deliveroo. So when I started to work there were mainly, how should I say this... there were more white people so to

say. And now it's 70 percent, or something like that, 75 percent of other descents, from Turkey or Morocco or something like that, those kinds of colours... And they also often don't speak Dutch. When you're waiting at McDonald's there, usually, isn't that much talking but sometimes you do have a talk and they talk Arabic then, or something like that, I don't know. And they don't speak Dutch that well so then I usually also don't begin to chat because of the language barrier.

As described by Hans in a highly racialized manner, restrictive understandings of in-grouping and out-grouping based on ethnicity and language result in boundaries between native and migrant workers not being crossed and a lack of bonding between the two groups. Particularly for the former group, platform work appears as an ephemeral job and thus the formation of solidarity among workers is not a significant aspect of work for them. When asked about bonds with other workers, participation in workers' meetings, or union membership, native workers almost always stated that they have not engaged in such activities, as building solidarities did not contribute to their job outcomes. For instance, Hans initially joined the Whatsapp group formed among workers, yet he did not check the messages and participated in solidarity building: "I think that the WhatsApp group disappeared, or something like that. Or I got a new phone, or something like that, and I wasn't in the WhatsApp group anymore. I didn't put in any effort to get into it again because it didn't have any added value to me." Similarly, Aaleks expressed how he is not committed to solidarity building: "I won't say 'hello' or go talk [to coworkers] or something like that. It's not like they're my best friends or put my hand in the air to wave or something. I don't do that."

The labour market that allows for native workers to only shortly and occasionally work for platforms, whereas that traps workers with migration backgrounds to platform work results in formation of boundaries developed particularly by advantageous groups like student workers to separate from others. In addition to ample exit options in the labour market at large and hence low degree of dependency on platforms for native workers, association and stigmatization of platform work with migrant labour also contribute to the formation of rigid language and ethnicity based boundaries and hence exclusionary solidarities.

Discussion

This article displays the ways in which the condition of the national labour market determines platform workers' opportunities in and outside of the platform world, which in turn informs how workers make sense of their and others' identities and

relate to one another. This article examines labour market factors that contribute to boundary making and hence formation of solidarities in delivery platform work.

Although Italy and Belgium share a history of strong trade unionism and labour mobilization, in addition to similar patterns of platform operations of Glovo and Deliveroo, we observe different trajectories and forms of solidarity building. In Belgium, the first wave of workers, who are mostly white citizens and particularly student workers have ample exit options and hence low dependency on platform work, whereas workers with migration backgrounds, particularly those who lack documentation, are stuck to platform work. The high segmentation in platform work creates limited shared experiences and, symbolic boundaries particularly those along the ethnic and language lines not being crossed, resulting in exclusionary forms of solidarity building in Belgium. Whereas in Italy, employment experiences in and outside of the platform world shared by native and migrant workers are perceived to be associative, as for both groups exit options are limited and hence platform dependency remains high due to the condition of the labour market at large. The shared experiences of precarity contribute to inclusive solidarity building between heterogeneous groups of workers and the crossing of existing boundaries along the lines of ethnicity and language.

We explain how solidarity formation, inclusionary in Italy and exclusionary in Belgium in our case, arises from workers' positionality in the labour market in terms of available exit options and dependency on income from work and hence is embedded in the structure of the labour market at large. Whereas the impact of long-term industrial transformations has contributed to unravelling of solidarity among workers who were previously bonded by a shared identification with an "imagined community" of worker (Valkenbourg 1996; D'Art and Turner 2011), a new sense of belonging can emerge in contexts where labour market failures plunge very different categories of workers – with different origins and also occupations and levels of education – into a similar condition of precarity. The perception of limited opportunities in the Italian labour market, albeit with nuances between native workers and workers with a migration background, acted among platform workers to re-create a broad "imagined community" of the precarious workers that encompasses Italian students, recent master graduates without a (decent) job, workers with a migration background, as well as more mature Italian workers who resorted to platform work from a trajectory of work instability. The expression of the "being in the same boat" offers a representation of how the national labour market can influence the drawing of ample and inclusive boundaries and solidarity among platform workers. Conversely, where labour markets are "fit" and precarious working conditions are limited to

specific pockets of workers, such as in Belgium, workers tend to draw narrower boundaries that fail to diffuse a sense of belonging to a larger community of workers.

Therefore, this research contributes to the literature on platform solidarities by bringing labour market back in to our understandings of formation of boundaries and bonds, which are the bases of solidarity at work, although platform solidarities have been considered to be limited due to the highly fragmented and individualized nature of platform work, yet also essential due to the low-payments and precarity. In doing so, our findings showcase that solidarity formation and the notions around categorizations of "us" versus "them" are informed by one's positionality, that is identity influences and potential biases in relation to class, gender, migration status, ethnicity, etc. Through paying attention to patterns of identification, association, and boundary, this research takes into account intersectionality and processes of exclusion in our analysis of solidarity at work.

Concluding Remarks and Broader Implications

As solidarity at work is often appraised by labour sociologists and industrial relations scholars as a prerequisite for labour collectivism and collective action (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996), the forms of solidarity built in different national contexts can have important implications for the organizing of resistance actions at different latitudes. This opens up questions around the potential for transnationalization of solidarity and collective action, particularly when acts of resistance on the national level are based on different notions around solidarity. The question of transnationalization of solidarity movements is even more relevant as scholarly understandings of labour solidarity has been increasingly transnationalized and carried beyond the borders of the nation state, despite the still prevalent methodological nationalism. Attempts of expanding the geographic reach of solidarity movements in the platform world plays a new role in discussions around the future of work, while generating new forms of coalition building and contributing to the emergence of new global struggles against platform capitalism (Woodcock 2021), considering that insecurity in access to labour, precarious self-employment, and tight labour management through algorithms are shared experiences among workers performing labour through the mediation of digital platforms that operate transnationally. In this attempt, scholars have looked into the extent to which new solidarities that emerge through being subjected to operations of platform capitalism can contribute to effective fight back against neoliberal transnational policies and practices and contribute to the development of cooperativist alternatives to mainstream platforms (Schor 2020; Schor and Attwood-Charles 2017).

Through our findings, we contribute to the scholarly debate on the transnationalization of labour solidarity by displaying the embeddedness of workers' solidarity in the national context and hence showcasing potential hindrances towards the feasibility and sustainability to transnational collective action movements. Underlining the influence that national labour market structures have in shaping solidarity patterns, as we do in this study, points to reestablishing the uniqueness of each country's socio-economic arrangements, and potentially predicting an irreducible variation that can but impede the imagination and formation of a solid transnational labour movement. Despite increasingly prevalent attempts of reconnecting different forms of platform workers solidarities (Cant and Mogno 2020), we posit that national particularism could represent a substantial hindrance to the pathway towards accomplishing solidarity formation inclusive of multiple (national) labour subjectivities. In doing so, this research underlines the importance of incorporation of multiple subjectivities into solidarity formation and points to potential pathways towards accomplishing inclusive solidarities.

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RESEARCH

Building Platforms Differently: Collective Action and Legitimation Dynamics in the Field of Platform Cooperativism

Jonas Pentzien[1]

Abstract

How do alternative conceptions of exchange emerge and proliferate within platform capitalism? Drawing on research at the intersection of organizational theory and social movement studies and a data set of 18 interviews, this paper examines the strategies that founders of cooperatively-structured platforms employ to gain legitimacy for their novel organizational form. Three key findings are presented: First, to facilitate network extension, activists strategically encroach upon adjacent fields. Second, to ensure economic survival, activists either create sustainable 'subcultures' within existing fields or attempt to mobilize entirely new consumer audiences. Third, to compensate for a lack of resources, activists strategically cultivate 'community.'

Keywords: Platform Cooperativism, Digital Capitalism, Social Movements Studies, Organizational Legitimacy, Market Change

1   Institute for Ecological Economy Research (IÖW), Free University of Berlin, Potsdamer Straße 105, 10785 Berlin, jonas.pentzien@ioew.de.

1.   Introduction

The cooperative idea has been increasingly advanced in recent years by entrepreneurs, activists, scholars, and policymakers as a possible "silver bullet" to counter the centralization of data, capital, and power in the global platform economy (Schneider and Scholz 2017). By bringing shared ownership and collective governance to the platform model, proponents of the *platform cooperativism* movement, which comprises more than 500 entities in over 40 countries (Platform Cooperativism Consortium 2023), hope to empower workers and transform how value is produced and distributed in an increasingly platform-driven economy (Pentzien 2021). What if taxi drivers in New York City did not have to submit to Lyft's fees and regulations, but instead were themselves owners of its app? What if it were not Airbnb that helped people to organize overnight stays in Berlin, but rather the city's inhabitants? By positioning platform cooperativism as a feasible and desirable alternative to "platform capitalism" (Srnicek 2017), proponents have shaped both scholarly and political debates on what alternative platform organizations – those that operate at the intersection of markets and civil society and which aim to produce not just economic but social value – could look like.

Initial investigations into the feasibility of platform cooperativism, however, have characterized the platform economy as a particularly challenging environment for implementing such "alternative conceptions of exchange and coordination" (King and Pearce 2010:259). From the significant costs associated with creating a scalable, frictionless platform infrastructure to the high levels of concentration in platform markets that lead to substantial entry barriers, platform cooperatives must overcome significant economic challenges while at the same time preserving the distinct cooperative characteristics that differentiate them from their "proprietary" (Staab 2019) counterparts (Bunders et al. 2022). The mobilization and maintenance of legitimacy becomes crucial in this context. As argued extensively by scholars in the field of organizational studies, new organizations necessitate legitimacy, which encompasses aspects such as social acceptability and credibility (Scott 2008; Zimmerman and Zeitz 2002), to "attract and maintain financial resources, and establish recognition and support from key actors and organizations" (Spicer et al. 2019:202). Without legitimacy, the platform cooperativism movement is thus unlikely to accomplish its stated objective of transforming the production and distribution of value in the platform economy.

But how specifically do proponents of the platform cooperativism movement seek legitimacy under the less than accommodating conditions of platform capitalism? To address this question, the paper takes an actor-centered approach, foregrounding the experiences and practices of the so-called "entrepreneurial activists" (Sand-

oval 2019) who attempt to implement a new stable understanding of how platform markets can be built (differently) by way of mobilizing the new organizational form of the platform co-op. Accordingly, the paper employs a "strategic legitimation" lens (Reast et al. 2013), which asserts that legitimacy is not passively granted to organizations for conforming to established norms, beliefs, and rules, but rather strategically pursued by entrepreneurs, e.g., by way of "manipulat[ing] and deploy[ing] evocative symbols in order to garner societal support" (Suchman 1995:572). In light of these considerations, the paper investigates the following research question: *What strategies do entrepreneurial activists employ to gain legitimacy for the new organizational form of the platform co-op?*

To provide answers, the burgeoning movement is approached from two distinct vantage points. Firstly, through an entrepreneurial lens, as an attempt of individual founders and members to create alternative platform organizations that are capable of politicizing and potentially even transforming the proprietary platform markets of the digital economy. Secondly, through the lens of collective action, as an emerging (transnational) field that creates (ideological and material) linkages between user groups and workers from heterogeneous sectors, industries and national contexts and, through that, opens up new spaces for solidarity. Simply put, this paper conceptualizes 'platform cooperativism' as referring to both an organizational form *and* a larger field/movement that these individual organizations are embedded in. This dual nature of '*platform cooperativism*,' in turn, necessitates an examination of legitimation dynamics not only in relation to individual co-ops, but also at the field/movement level.

To account for this, the paper brings the burgeoning literature on actor-driven contentiousness in markets to the context of the platform economy (Bitektine and Nason 2019; Fligstein 2002). Scholarship within this field has distinguished itself by applying the analytical toolkit of social movement studies to the institutional domain of the market (Rao et al. 2000; Soule 2012), positing that far-reaching changes in and around markets are often preceded by movement-like dynamics at the margins, which subsequently converge into new organizing paradigms (King and Pearce 2010). The underlying premise: for new spaces of (transnational) collective action and solidarity to materialize and gain legitimacy, entrepreneurship-driven movements at the margins must coalesce and solidify their nascent social spaces into stable fields – something that can be achieved, for example, through the cultivation of a shared identity and the joint mobilization of resources (Fligstein and McAdam 2011). By investigating platform cooperativism through this lens, the present study offers two contributions to the existing literature. Empirically, it enhances our understanding of how precisely movement-like configurations in the digital economy organize their

social space in order to mobilize legitimacy for a new organizational form. Conceptually, it provides fresh insights into legitimation dynamics that emerge not at the organizational, but the field level.

In terms of the research design, the author conducted an exploratory study of the legitimacy-seeking strategies employed by platform co-ops, whereby *legitimacy* was operationalized – drawing specifically on literature at the intersection of organizational studies, field theory and social movement studies – as relating to the identity frames that movement participants promote, the value propositions they develop, and the resources and networks they mobilize to transform existing platform-driven production and consumption patterns. The study draws on empirical data gathered from semi-standardized interviews conducted with founders and members of 18 platform co-ops in the heterogeneous market economies of the U.S., Germany, and France.

The argument of the paper is structured as follows: firstly, a critical analysis is undertaken of the existing scholarship on platform cooperativism, particularly its treatment of the strategic dimensions of market change. Secondly, a theoretical framework is proposed to fill this gap. The main findings are then, thirdly, presented and discussed, whereby three principal strategies come into view: (a) to facilitate network extension, entrepreneurial activists primarily "encroach" (Spicer et al. 2019) upon adjacent fields; (b) to secure their economic viability, activists either create sustainable *subcultures* or attempt to mobilize entirely new consumer audiences, but generally avoid overtly challenging platform incumbents; and (c) to compensate for a lack of resources, activists focus on strategically cultivating *community*. Through a critical evaluation of these strategies and their associated repertoires of contention, this paper provides novel empirical insights into the manifestation of *counter-power* in the domain of the platform economy, contributing to the broader discourse on collective action within and across digital markets.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

The Rise of Platform Cooperativism

Alternative conceptions of exchange in the platform economy have been the focus of growing academic interest in recent years, with more and more scholars juxtaposing *platform capitalism* with notions such as "platform cooperativism" (Scholz 2016), "platform communalism" (Piétron 2021) or "platform socialism" (Muldoon 2022). By contrasting the notion of the *platform* – normally used to describe "technical and institutional systems" that standardize, create hierarchy, and exert control (Bratton 2016) – with terms that foreground social relations and a desire for (economic) justice,

scholars working in this field argue that the platform model not only produces domination and exploitation, but can also be mobilized for emancipatory purposes. From an empirical point of view, focus is therefore primarily put on actors that, using Polanyi's terminology, purport to *re-embed* what *platform capitalism* had previously *dis-embedded* – that is, on movement-like constellations that work towards bringing the economy closer both to society and to nature (Vercher-Chaptal et al. 2021).

The notion of *platform cooperativism*, however, is not only put forth by entrepreneurs (who aim to *build* alternative platform organizations) and academics (who attempt to *conceptualize* pockets of resistance in a field that is often portrayed exclusively through the lens of domination and power), but also by political decisionmakers who increasingly refer to the need for democratic platform models, using the concept of *platform cooperativism* as a reference point (see for example Corbyn 2016; SPD 2018). Against this backdrop, *platform cooperativism* must be viewed as a triptych: as an organizational form, an analytical framework, *and* as a political project. Simply put, it emerges not as a mere market intervention, but rather as a movement-like constellation of heterogeneous actors who employ a wide range of strategies with the (shared) aim of positioning the platform model as a tool for bringing about social change (Pentzien 2020).

Current research on alternative organizational forms in the platform economy, however, rarely scrutinizes *platform cooperativism* in this tripartite way. Rather, present-day scholarship predominantly examines the conditions under which cooperatively run platforms could emerge as *feasible* alternatives to their proprietary counterparts, whereby feasibility is generally conceptualized as referring to a platform's ability to survive economically (Bunders et al. 2022; Pentzien 2021; Thäter and Gegenhuber 2020). While these approaches are valuable in delineating the various (political and economic) challenges faced by the platform co-op model, they fall short of providing a deeper understanding of how precisely these challenges are negotiated on the ground. Simply put, what is evaluated is the general transferability of cooperative features to the platform economy, rather than the specific strategies that activists adopt to frame this new organizational form and differentiate their businesses from competing models. The result: platform cooperativism tends to be approached as a fixed *concept* (characterized by abstracted organizational features such as *shared ownership* or *collective decision-making*), rather than as an emerging assemblage of entrepreneurs, activists, and scholars who embrace divergent, and perhaps even conflicting, viewpoints on how to build organizational *counter-power* within platform capitalism. What gets lost thereby is both a sensitivity for inner-movement differences and oppositions, as well as a deeper understanding of the "informal, emergent ways" that generally characterize the appearing and possible legitimation of novel organizational forms (King and Pearce 2010:260).

Legitimation Dynamics & Movement-Driven Change in Platform Markets

To fill this gap, it is imperative to open the 'black box' of platform cooperativism and examine how precisely movement participants seek legitimacy for their novel organizational form. Doing so requires a shift in perspective: rather than asking whether platform co-ops possess legitimacy or not, focus needs to be put on how proponents of the movement attempt to gain it. Such a shift – from an outcome-oriented interest in *legitimacy* towards a process-oriented interest in *legitimation* – is of particular importance when it comes to understanding new ventures and alternative organizations, as these entities often lack resources and societal recognition and therefore find themselves forced to focus more strongly on gaining rather than managing legitimacy (Zimmerman and Zeitz 2002).

To facilitate this shift, the paper employs a *strategic legitimation* lens, which, following Suchman, proceeds from the assumption that "managerial initiatives can make a substantial difference in the extent to which organizational activities are perceived as desirable, proper, and appropriate within any given cultural context" (1995:585). Two general pathways of strategic change can be differentiated, as managers can either attempt to change their own organizations (e.g. by adapting its business model or its target audience) or the environment in which their organizations are embedded in (e.g. through lobbying or the creation of new consumer demands) (Zimmerman and Zeitz 2002). Moreover, scholars adopting such a lens argue that legitimacy-seeking strategies differ depending on the type of legitimacy an organization seeks, be it pragmatic, moral, or cognitive, and on whether the organization in question aims to acquire, maintain or repair its legitimacy (Reast et al. 2013). For example, while the acquisition of moral legitimacy is often achieved by explicitly conforming to certain ideals prevalent in society, pragmatic legitimacy, in turn, is achieved by selecting favorable markets or conforming to particular consumer demands (Suchman 1995).

While the strategic legitimation lens is helpful in providing a robust procedural understanding of how actors and organizations proceed to acquire, maintain and repair legitimacy (Strecker 2016), the primary interest of scholars working with it is in the strategies of individual organizations or a small number of actors. With few exceptions (see for example Spicer et al. 2019, who point towards legitimacy as a central determinant in the process of field emergence, or Lounsbury and Crumley 2007), legitimacy is rarely conceptualized as an outcome of collective action, i.e., as resulting from processes in which heterogeneous actors (with varying aims and strategies) band together as a larger group to bring a shared transformative vision to fruition. As a result, there is a lack of conceptual and empirical understanding of how precisely movement-like constellations (such as platform cooperativism) proceed to mobilize legitimacy for a new organizational form.

To address this gap, this paper brings the literature on organizational legitimacy in conversation with scholarship at the intersection of field theory and social movement studies, which envisions market change as resulting from movement-driven dynamics of contentiousness located at the meso-level. Scholarship in this field has emphasized, for example, the effects that movements can have on market formation (Schneiberg, King, and Smith 2008; Williams 2001) or the ways in which (social) movements produce entirely new organizational templates (Bakker et al. 2013; Rao et al. 2000). The concepts of "strategic action fields" (Fligstein and McAdam 2011) and "social movements in markets" (King and Pearce 2010) – both associated with this scholarship – are of particular importance to this paper. While the former offers a meso-level framework for locating change-oriented strategic action not at the organizational but at the *field* level, the latter infuses this meso-level framework with insights from social movement studies in order to explain the importance of movement-like constellations to dynamics of change in and around markets. By integrating these two perspectives with insights from the strategic legitimation literature, the paper establishes a foundation for operationalizing 'legitimation dynamics' at the field level and presents an analytical framework to identify the strategies employed by entrepreneurial activists to gain legitimacy for the new organizational form of the platform co-op. In the following, the specific contributions of both field theory and social movement studies are outlined further.

Field theory, as conceptualized by Fligstein and McAdam (2011), rests upon the primary assumption that collective action (in markets and beyond) unfolds in, and partially creates, so-called "strategic action fields", which the authors define as a:

> *meso-level social order where actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules. (2011:3)*

Although strategic action fields are characterized (and stabilized) by field-specific identities, norms, and rules, their boundaries are considered fluid. Fligstein and McAdam illustrate this by comparing strategic action fields to Russian dolls, suggesting that they can encompass other ancillary fields or overlap with adjacent fields, similar to a Venn diagram. In this context, *strategic action* is defined in a relational fashion as "the attempt by social actors to create and maintain stable worlds by securing the cooperation of others" within and beyond their own fields (ibid. 2011:7). Change within and across fields is viewed as resulting from "episodes of contention," during which challengers "articulate an alternative vision of the field" and mobilize resources to bring this vision to fruition (ibid. 2011:6). To successfully implement a competing vision, chal-

lengers need to produce a new stable understanding of how markets can be structured (differently). This, in turn, necessitates mediation of and adaptation to the broader field environment, including political regulations. The conceptualization of change at the meso-level proposed by Fligstein and McAdam thus shares similarities with the notion of legitimacy presented by Suchman, as both acknowledge that factors beyond market forces, such as the integration and conformity to societal ideals, play a role in shaping stability and mediating uncertainty in economic interactions.

Drawing on these insights, this paper conceptualizes *platform cooperativism* as an emerging strategic action field within the field of the platform economy. Entrepreneurial activists therefore play a double-game: on the one hand, they engage in the construction of identities, norms, and rules in the (sub-)field of platform cooperativism, with the aim of implementing a new stable understanding for how platform markets should operate (differently). On the other hand, they vie for resources for their platform co-op model within the confines of the larger Russian doll of the platform economy, in which the field of platform cooperativism is nested. The underlying premise: for new spaces of (transnational) collective action and solidarity to materialize and acquire legitimacy, entrepreneurial activists must strategically coalesce and solidify their nascent social space into a stable field.

While Fligstein and McAdam's framework provides a robust understanding of the strategic qualities of meso-level dynamics of (market) change, their attempt to formulate a *general* theory of social spaces naturally requires them to operate with a broad understanding of what constitutes a movement. More concretely, Fligstein and McAdam's model is centered around the notion of *challengers* and *incumbents* who face off in temporary episodes of contention. Due to their aspiration towards a general theory, their framework of contentiousness naturally applies not only to change dynamics in markets initiated by social movements in the narrow sense (e.g., the Nestlé boycott of the 1980s), but also to those initiated by, for example, quasi-monopolists (e.g., Google's attempt to challenge Apple's dominant position in the portable consumer electronic devices market). Simply put, Fligstein and McAdam's notion of movement-driven market change is based on a metaphorical rather than literal interpretation of the concept of *movements.* And while such an approach is well suited for identifying commonalities and differences across rather different types of contention, it makes it more difficult at the same time to discern the specific dynamics of legitimation put forth by movements at the margins.

To address this gap concerning movement-driven change, King and Pearce propose to conceive of collective action at the meso-level in more activist terms, i.e., as the result of contentiousness that is explicitly initiated at the margins not only by single

entrepreneurs, but by movement-like constellations. Specifically, the authors point towards organized consumer boycotts (such as the aforementioned Nestlé boycott) or the scandalization of exploitative market practices (like the uproar over labor conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories) to illustrate that social movements increasingly orient their grievances not only with respect to the state, but also towards other institutional domains such as "the market", e.g. by way of "creat[ing] alternative models and templates for organizing" (2010:260).

Perceiving market change in this fashion benefits the paper in two key respects. Firstly, it provides a comparatively richer understanding of *feasibility*, one that is not exclusively centered around economic criteria of success. As King and Pearce argue, activism, even when unsuccessful in creating actual change in markets, can stimulate the proliferation of "new institutional logics, categories, or organizing templates" (ibid. 2010:250). Consequently, their framework prompts us to focus not only on 'feasible' episodes of contention but also on the potentially transformative traces of episodes that may appear 'unfeasible' at first glance. Secondly, by incorporating the conceptual toolkit of social movement studies (see for example Della Porta et al. 2015) into the literature on market change, King and Pearce offer a suitable terminological basis for operationalizing legitimacy-seeking strategies in the field of platform cooperativism. By integrating their insights with the literature on strategic legitimation and field theory as outlined beforehand, this paper argues that legitimacy-seeking strategies in the field of platform cooperativism can best be observed by focusing on the (1) identity frames that activists promote within a given field, the specific (2) value propositions they develop, as well as the (3) resources and (4) networks they mobilize to transform existing production and consumption patterns.[2] In the following, the paper introduces more in-depth the specific insights that can be gained from

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2   Two conceptual caveats are in order at this point. First, the heuristic developed here is a framework rather than a theory, as it does not aim to make predictions. The paper does not suggest that a new organizational form instantly gains legitimacy as soon as its proponents succeed to develop a shared identity, differentiate their value proposition from that of their proprietary counterparts, mobilize resources and network with established actors. In fact, managerial agency is always embedded in an institutional setting that shapes not only organizations' ability to influence their surroundings but also how society evaluates managerial agency (Scott 2008). Second, legitimacy-seeking strategies may not neatly fit into these four categories. Strategies are likely to address multiple dimensions simultaneously (e.g., creating alliances with actors outside of the field of platform cooperativism might help mobilize resources *and* create safeguard mechanisms against pushback). To account for these caveats, this paper's discussion will proceed in an integrated fashion. Rather than focusing on whether certain minimum conditions for legitimacy are achieved within these key dimensions of movement formation and evolution, the paper will explore what types of strategies become visible when analyzing legitimation dynamics through the lens of these dimensions.

analyzing legitimation dynamics at the field level through these key dimensions of movement formation and evolution:

1. **Identities**: To sustain dynamics of collective action over time, activists need to create shared identities, which is achieved through framing processes, i.e. by construing schemata of interpretation that provide meaning (Goffman 1977). The articulation of shared identities is central to the mobilization of legitimacy, as audiences not only evaluate whether a movement creates material benefits, but also whether its actions are normatively judged to be "the right thing to do" at a given moment in time (Suchman 1995). Accordingly, the paper investigates whether (and how) entrepreneurial activists in the platform cooperativism movement develop identities capable of positioning their novel organizational form as (comparatively more) desirable (King and Pearce 2010:258).

2. **Value Propositions**: To imbue new organizational forms with legitimacy, entrepreneurial activists must also combine their identity frames with "radically new practices that undermine the positions of the old guard" (ibid. 2010:260). Following Suchman, the mobilization of 'pragmatic legitimacy' in particular rests on the ability of an organization (or, in the case of this paper, a movement) to devise its internal governance/policies in a way so that the "expected value to a particular set of constituents" is easily understood (1995). Accordingly, the paper investigates how the entrepreneurial activists situate their respective organizations within the platform economy, and what value propositions they put forth to incentivize their various stakeholder groups.

3. **Resources**: Following a resource-based view of companies (Barney 1996), organizations devise their strategies in terms of the resources at their disposal, whether they are human (e.g. skills), material (e.g. technological or financial), or immaterial (e.g. political or reputational) (Grant and Nippa 2009). The ability of a movement to present itself as 'worthy' and effectively articulate its unique value proposition therefore depends on its capacity to mobilize and potentially distribute resources among movement participants. Consequently, this paper examines how entrepreneurial activists in the field of platform cooperativism mobilize resources to advance their alternative vision of the field and the role of legitimacy in this process.

4. **Networks**: To share resources and safeguard themselves from pushback on part of incumbents in their field, entrepreneurial activists must band together and strategically expand their networks (King/Pearce 2010:258). Moreover, movements also attempt to create ties with the larger field environment in order to mitigate what Stinchcombe coins the "liability of newness" (1965, quoted after Zimmerman and Zeitz 2002). The underlying assumption is that by being *networked* with already established organizations, some of the legitimacy of these organizations is conferred to the new organizational form and its asso-

ciated movement (ibid.). Accordingly, the paper investigates whether and how entrepreneurial activists engage in movement-building dynamics and to what extent these dynamics contribute to a solidification of this nascent social space into a somewhat stable field.

3.   Research Design & Methodology

To ensure the success of this research, it was deemed essential to incorporate first-hand insights into the beliefs, practices, and strategies of entrepreneurial activists. Given the absence of previous empirical investigations into legitimacy-seeking organizational strategies in the field of platform cooperativism, an exploratory, mixed-methods research design was employed with the objective of generating a *novel qualitative dataset* on strategy formation. Data collection involved a triangulation of semi-structured interviews (with founders and members of platform co-ops) with desk research comprising websites and mailing list contributions. This approach facilitated, firstly, a comprehensive mapping of the field, as well as, secondly, the incorporation of insights that may not be accessible from a purely external, desk research-based viewpoint.

To control for institutional framework conditions, which strongly impact how economic actors position themselves in their respective markets (Thelen 2018), the investigation was limited to three national contexts. Specifically, the study focused on countries with well-developed platform co-op ecosystems, as these ecosystems are likely to also play a critical role in shaping the field globally. This, in turn, allows for inferences to be drawn about legitimation dynamics in the broader field. The operationalization of *developed ecosystem* was based on three criteria: at least five active platform co-ops incorporated in the country, the presence of a platform co-op-specific network hub, and participation of entrepreneurial activists in relevant field-specific events on a global level. Information on these three criteria was gathered using the aforementioned Directory (for identifying the number of active platform co-ops and network hubs per country) and the platform.coop-website (for identifying whether these actors had contributed to the yearly Platform Cooperativism Consortium Conference, the movement's primary meeting space). Using these criteria, the U.S., Germany, and France were chosen as suitable cases for the investigation.

Next, platforms within these three countries were sampled based on two criteria: self-identification as platform co-ops (using their website or interviews as indicators) and recognition as platform co-ops by external entities (drawing once more on the Directory). Focusing on both self-description *and* invocation allowed for the

capture of organizations that might play an important role in structuring legitimation dynamics in the field but do not perceive themselves as such, a common occurrence in the early stages of field emergence. Using this process, 18 platforms were deemed relevant and subsequently contacted for an interview. All 18 platforms agreed to be interviewed. An overview of these platform co-ops is presented in Table 1 (names of both the platforms and representatives are fictional to ensure anonymity).

Table 1: Field participants in the U.S., Germany, and France

Platform	Type	Sector	Legal Form	Founded	Status	Financing	Competitors	Name	Role
U.S.									
SuperClean	Cooperative Marketplace	House Cleaning	LLC New York	2016	Active	Fees	Handy Helpling	**Jimena**	Founder
Health4All	Cooperative Marketplace	Health Patient Insights	LCA Colorado PBC Colorado	2016	Active	Fees	Craigslist PatientsLikeMe WeGoHealth	**Sally**	Founder
Workers United	Cooperative Holding	Various	LCA Colorado	2019	Active	Fees	Staffing Agencies	**James**	Founder
MusiCo-op	Cooperative Marketplace	Direct Payment Services	LCA Colorado PBC Colorado	2019	Active	Fees	Patreon Only Fans	**Robert**	Founder
Ride:Together	Cooperative Marketplace	Mobility Transport	LLC New York	2020	Active	Fees	Uber Lyft	**Mike**	Founder
OurData Cooperative	Data Cooperative	Data Governance	LCA Colorado	2019	Active	Fees	Databroker	**Bryan**	Founder
Germany									
Better World Co-op	Cooperative Marketplace	eCommerce	eG	2012	Dormant	Fees	Amazon eBay Avocadostore	**Hannes**	Founder
Transform!	Cooperative Intranet Solution	Intranet	eG	2016	Active	Platform as a Service; Freemium	Cloud Service Providers	**Peter**	Founder
care:coop	Cooperative Marketplace (Prototype)	Care	eG (planned)	2018	Discontinued	Discontinued	Nurseries	**Susanne**	Founder
CoopMutual	Freelancer Cooperative	Mutual	eG	2016	Active	Fees	No competitors	**Mariana**	Founder
CoopHost	Hosting Cooperative	Hosting IT & Web Services	eG	2000	Active	Membership; Services	STRATO 1&1 AWS	**Frank**	Amba-ssador
DeliverFair	Cooperative Marketplace	Food Delivery	e.V. (planned)	2020	Discontinued (June 2022)	Fees	Volt Lieferando Uber Eats	**Roberto**	Member
France									
CoopTerra	Cooperative Marketplace	Food Industry	SCIC	2015	Active	Fees	Onsite Supermarkets	**Nathalie**	Member
CoopDeliver	Secondary Cooperative	Food Tech	Association SCIC (Planned)	2016	Active	Fees	Deliveroo UberEats Volt	**Valentin**	Founder
AMaison!	Worker Cooperative	Last-Mile Delivery	SCOP	2017	Active	Services	Stuart Deliveroo Epair	**Corentin**	Founder
Hospitalité Pour Tous	Cooperative Marketplace	Hospitality Tourism	SCIC	2016	Active	Subscription	Airbnb Fairbnb booking.com	**Lucas**	Founder
CoopCommerce	Cooperative Marketplace (Formerly)	Finance	SCIC (until 2020)	2015	Active	Fees	Sardex	**Thomas**	Founder
OnTheMove Co-op	Cooperative Marketplace	Transport Mobility	SCIC	2018	Active	Platform as a Service; Fees	BlaBlaCar	**Mathilde**	Employee & Member

Guidelines for the semi-standardized interviews were developed in a deductive fashion, meaning that the four dimensions comprising *legitimation dynamics* (identities, value propositions, resources, and networks) were operationalized further with reference to social movement studies literature (see previous section). The 18 interviews were conducted in two phases: the first phase involved nine face-to-face interviews conducted in the U.S. and Germany between April and October 2019, while the second phase involved nine online interviews conducted in Germany and France between February 2021 and May 2022, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews lasted between 70 to 140 minutes.
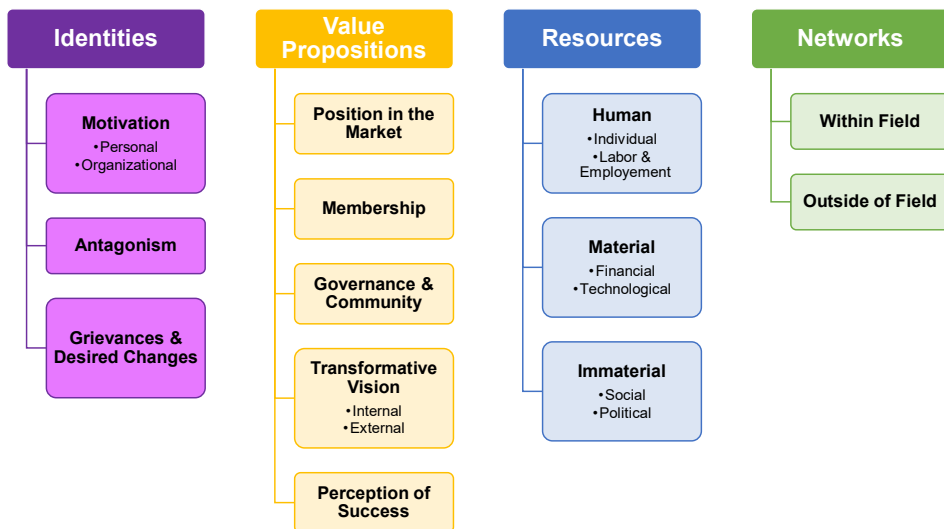

Figure 1: **Coding scheme for identifying legitimacy-seeking organizational strategies**

Following the data gathering process, a coding scheme was developed using *qualitative content analysis*, following the method proposed by Mayring (2015). To generate relevant categories for analysis, two interview transcripts were initially analyzed inductively, which involved identifying central themes and perspectives in the data. These themes and perspectives were then combined with the four deductively derived theoretical categories previously used to develop the interview guidelines. This finalized coding system consisted of four first-order codes and 18 second-order and third-order codes (see Figure 1), and was used to analyze the remaining interview transcripts. To improve coding reliability, each transcript was coded separately by a minimum of two researchers using MAXQDA, a software program designed for computer-assisted text analysis. Results were subsequently analyzed for inter-coded

agreement. Where necessary, a third round of coding was conducted by the principal investigator. In the final stage of analysis, the resulting material was interpreted through the lens of the four dimensions comprising legitimation dynamics, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed by platform co-ops.

4.   Findings

4.1   Identities

When it comes to the ability of the emerging platform cooperativism movement to develop a shared identity, this paper finds that the entrepreneurial activists in the sample all point to a lack of accountability, inclusivity, social equality, diversity, and self-determination within the platform economy as reasons why they felt alternative forms of exchange and coordination were needed in the first place. Peter, co-founder of the German cooperative intranet solution *Transform!*, for example, criticizes the lack of agency that users of major platform corporations such as Facebook or Google have with regard to their content and data, which, in his point of view, would tend to alienate users. Valentin, co-founder of *CoopDeliver*, in turn, criticizes the extractive nature of the platform economy, claiming that many start-ups would operate entirely without a business model and exist "just to make money out of investors." The centralization of power in the hands of a few platform incumbents and the opaque nature of decision-making processes within proprietary platform ecosystems thus constitute two widely shared grievances in the field. Against this background, the cooperative model is positioned as a tool with which to bake "soul and empathy into a platform" (Robert) and to provide workers and users with the opportunity to gain "a seat at the table" (Susanne).

Despite these similarities, however, the various cross-sectoral grievances do not coalesce into a coherent collective action frame. On the contrary, in staying with the metaphor of wanting to gain "a seat at the table", the activists picture themselves as sitting at different tables, with antagonisms being articulated on three fronts: the *systemic* level (7 platforms), the *model*-oriented level (8 platforms), and the *sectoral* level (5 platforms). For the platform co-ops that construct their antagonism on a *systemic* level, grievances largely relate to the overall functioning of the economy, e.g. the capitalist growth paradigm or the investor-driven start-up business culture. Against this backdrop, the platform co-op is framed as an organizational form that might be able to resist or even push back against dynamics of capitalist entrenchment:

We need to change the economic system anyway, and we really need new business models. And so I thought, okay, if we manage to found a company that finances the anti-corruption network and at the same time demonstrates that there are also company models that avoid corruption on their own, then that could be such a contribution. (Hannes).

With frustrations over 'platform capitalism' increasing throughout the 2010s, platform co-ops also took an increasingly antagonistic stance towards the platform model. Eight activists construe their antagonism in these terms, raising the issue of the conduct of 'big tech' and its purported impact on society. Consequently, grievances relate to exploitative labor relations, the concentration of power in the hands of a few platform corporations, the incentivization of unsustainable consumption practices as well as the rise of data-driven/algorithmic management. Corentin, co-founder of the bike delivery co-op *AMaison*, for example, remarks that solely profit-based platforms in the food delivery sector are "not only competitors, but also enemies – (…) [because they're] exploiting people." Nathalie, member of the French food distribution marketplace *CoopTerra*, similarly criticizes the activities of *big tech,* arguing that "these ones are really monsters, and they want to build empires over the economy and over the reality of the people."

The third scale at which activists mobilize their antagonisms is *sectoral*. Accordingly, the platform co-ops that operate in this fashion primarily position themselves against the traditional service providers that shape transactions and interactions in their respective sectors and promote the platform co-op as a tool able to adapt the norms and rules established by more traditional players. This perspective is well illustrated by Lucas, co-founder of *Hospitalité Pour Tous*, a French marketplace for hospitality services, who argues that the main struggle for their organization is not necessarily to contest Airbnb or booking.com but to challenge rules and norms in the tourism sector that long precede the advent of these digital platforms:

The problem [we face] is to change the touristic approach, to stop discriminating between travelers (…) [That's why our platform] is a platform cooperative only for the local community. It's not possible to go alone on the platform and to put your apartment or your activity [like on Airbnb] (…) We (…) tried to forget Airbnb, to forget Booking and to say, if we want to offer hospitality on our platform, what can we do with the digital?

In sum, the findings highlight a wide range of strategies employed by activists to attain legitimacy through the process of identity formation. While the mobilization of conflicts and antagonisms is central to all the observed cases, there are significant

variations in the types of problems the platform co-op model is expected to solve, with some activists focusing primarily on sectoral and others on systemic problems.

4.2   Value Propositions

To create field-specific value propositions capable of mobilizing legitimacy for the model of the platform co-op, entrepreneurial activists employ two strategies: on the one hand, they frame this new organizational form as better positioned to serve the specific needs of existing consumer audiences. On the other, they position the plat-form co-op model as a kind of *economic trailblazer* capable of creating entirely new consumer audiences. Concerning the former, the paper finds that, in order to incen-tivize consumers to switch from established service providers to a platform co-op, platform co-ops either associate their marketplace with a particular set of values (for example decent work or transparency) or try to create value for a specific user group (such as tech experts or sustainability-oriented consumers). Jimena, an employee of *SuperClean*, for example, links their platform's USP to its focus on *ethical* consump-tion, with *decent work* being a guiding principle. The German webhosting co-op *CoopHost*, in turn, orients its business almost exclusively towards IT freelancers with an affinity towards open-source solutions and who, in the words of Frank, want to be more than "just number 5,637 with some anonymous web host." Similarly, Corentin from *AMaison* envisions the platform co-op model as a tool with which to foster *long-term* partnerships on and through platforms and potentially even replace market-based with more planned relationships, thereby appealing to customers who reject the anonymity that usually characterizes platform-based transactions:

> I think our clients really like the fact that, when there's some[one of] the bikers that comes into their shop, into their company, like they know they're talking to the boss, almost one of the boss of the company. So if they want to change anything on the logis-tics, they can talk directly to the guy who's coming in.

Moreover, Corentin believes that facilitating more personal client–platform relation-ships can even have a positive effect on the quality and price of the service provided, as workers identify more strongly with their job:

> Everybody is saying like, 'Yeah, so but you're going to be way more expensive than the gig- economy platforms.' But we're thinking more about (…) how to optimize every delivery, like if you have something in your backpack, you can put another thing [in] if it's on your way. No platform will do it. And we're trying to do this. And in this way, we can be not so much expensive and sometimes cheaper than the [capitalist] platforms.

The second strategy, in turn, is to position one's platform co-op as an economic 'trailblazer' capable of creating entirely new consumer audiences. The New York City-based direct-payment platform *MusiCo-op* (which allows musicians to directly engage with their supporters through regular monthly payments), for instance, purports to solve a long-standing sector-specific problem: that musicians are uncomfortable asking their audience for money without providing something in return:

> *In music there's kind of a cultural stigma around asking or being seen as begging or like admitting defeat in some way. People are sensitive when they're talking about money, so our question was: how can we redesign this utility as a payment processor? (...) So I think that the cooperative angle of what we're doing is such a strong defensible position, it's like we've followed something that the giants can't do, no matter how hard they try. (Robert).*

Other activists similarly connect the value proposition of their marketplace to its ability to offer services that proprietary platforms purportedly cannot. New York City-based *Health4All* for instance, matches pharmaceutical companies with patients, aiming to provide patients with "a seat at the table" in the development of pharmaceutical products. Following Sally, the platform's co-founder, the cooperative model is uniquely positioned to foster trust and meaningful relationships between platform and service providers, a crucial element in encouraging patients to open up and share their experiences with pharma companies, something they are usually hesitant about. As patients must believe that the entity brokering these interactions has their best interests at heart, this bond of trust is essential for the successful marketization of patient insights. The cooperative model – and the trust it engenders – thus form the foundation for the platform co-op to meet demand by providing pharma companies with the 'right' patients and to expand the overall pool of co-op members:

> *What makes us really unique, and that's what our clients tell us, is that we just send them really quality participants. And we do so faster, too (...). With us, we can do it quickly, and that's actually the advantage of our cooperative model because we mobilize our members to be able to go and help us find us individuals, and so that's kind of an advantage of the co-op.*

In sum, the mobilization of the cooperative form in the platform economy not only reflects a normative desire for making the platform economy more democratic and equitable. On the contrary, the form is also mobilized to implement market structures where proprietary platforms are perceived as being unable to do so. Legitimation dynamics, in turn, not only draw on notions of alterity, but also invoke the platform model itself as a desirable institution.

4.3   Resources

The findings show that entrepreneurial activists largely struggle to mobilize (material) resources, which, in turn, shapes the strategies they can employ to solidify their social space into a stable field. Specifically, of the 18 co-ops in the sample, only five claim to have a profitable business model in place, with the remaining 13 platform co-ops finding themselves forced to acquire other sources of funding to keep their businesses afloat. To do so, platform co-ops either orient themselves towards the *third sector* (e.g. philanthropic organizations or foundations), the state (e.g. by applying for grants or stipends), or their community members (by asking for loans or raising the transaction fee, for instance). Traditional private equity funding sources (such as seed funding, angel investments, or venture capital) play a negligible role in the field, which James, co-founder of the Baltimore-based holding cooperative *Workers United*, attributes to the fact that "[cooperativism] doesn't service the needs of what capitalism wants to do right now."

The success of platform co-ops in mobilizing their community for platform development largely depends on their ability to adopt an antagonistic stance, however. For instance, the Berlin-based sustainability marketplace *Better World* and the New York City-based ridehailing co-op *Ride Together* both position themselves in direct opposition to established proprietary platforms such as Amazon and Lyft, respectively, which has helped them not only to cultivate a robust support base and social energy but also to acquire capital. Specifically, the former raised approximately €400,000 through crowdfunding campaigns between 2013 and 2015, while the latter raised around $1.4 million in 2021 through revenue share notes:

> *The reason we have $1 million to build this company is because social movement supporters stepped up (…). The same people who are electing socialists to public office are using our app (…) [and] we're very lucky that people believe in this model. We figured we'd leverage what we have, which is a strong base of support and social energy to get what we don't have, which was capital. And that worked. (Mike, Ride Together).*

However, depending solely on community-driven funding is often insufficient to sustain platform development, especially in capital-intensive sectors like ridehailing. Moreover, not all platform co-ops are successful in building a strong support base. As a result, most of the platform co-ops in the sample either cross-subsidize their marketplace activities with other non-platform-based business models (i.e., they distance themselves from the 'platform' aspect of their identity) or they dilute their cooperative structure, transitioning towards more conventional startup structures (i.e., they move away from the 'cooperativism' aspect of their identity):

We're shifting our emphasis from the consumer rideshare market to a couple other segments which are much easier for us to fulfill right now, where trips are scheduled in advance. We have a prebooking tool where supporters can book their trip to the airport with us. (…) We provide transportation for the Board of Elections in New York City, getting poll workers to their jobs and getting technicians out to the polls so that the voting machines continue to work. (Mike).

We go with the best option for the company for the growth of the system. So we change it. And this is official from, like, one month ago that they allow us after a year and a half to change the statute to become a normal company, I would say (…) [we're now] totally in the good part of the start-up life. So we have a lot of clients, a lot of things to do (…) We just stay focused on what was working. (Thomas, CoopCommerce).

Moreover, the lack of funding opportunities in the field also affects the ability of platform co-ops to develop competitive platform infrastructures, which activists try to compensate by foregrounding notions of *community* as part of *soft internet* or *low tech* approaches. In fact, 12 out of the 18 platform co-ops explicitly aim at fostering strong ties among their members – both online *and* offline. *Hospitalité Pour Tous*, for example, rejects the use of technology almost entirely, with Lucas arguing that "we only use e-mail to discuss between us. We don't have a forum. We don't have a Facebook group. They [the members] don't want to. They refuse. They prefer to have an aperitif to discuss." Similarly, James points out that "we couldn't do the platform and still have it work", while Mariana from *CoopMutual* argues that "we're a reverse platform co-op, which means we go from crowd to platform and not from platform to services." This dependency on *community*, however, is not necessarily presented as a flaw but rather as a key feature. In fact, this shift towards *community* is seen as opening up forms of interaction that would be impossible to produce within the proprietary platform ecosystem. Mariana and Roberto put this succinctly:

In the community, [we] also try to talk to people about it quite often. What does it mean to be bullied by a contractor? I mean, who talks about it, where can you go. Sexual harassment at work, yeah, so exclusion from the contracts, those are really things that we have to deal with and where we sometimes also just say, 'Okay, now we have the stage to talk about it.' (Mariana).

You need the tech. Like, if you don't have it, you don't even start. But then, like, what marks the difference between us and the other is the community building, is the human aspect (…) It's what the big ones – like, they can try, but they can, like – yeah, they can do the cool advertisement (…), but there's no Volt riders' community. (Roberto).

Taken together, the guiding principle of wanting to incorporate *soul and empathy* into the platform model should be interpreted not just as a normative standpoint but as a necessity-driven response to the lack of resources that characterizes the strategic action field of platform cooperativism. Thus, one of the central ways in which activists attempt to gain legitimacy is by reconceptualizing their resource-based flaws as fundamental features central to their identity frames.

4.4 Networks

Regarding network building, the study reveals that the primary advantage entrepreneurial activists associate with the 'platform cooperativism' movement is the shared and (supposedly) useful terminology it provides. Specifically, the activists believe that the *platform cooperativism* framing enables them to communicate their organization's identity more effectively to the outside world, with Lucas arguing, for example, that "when I present [our organization] and I say it's a cooperative of residents (…) [they] don't know what [that is]. But if I say 'platform co-op', people understand that it's a platform, [a] collective platform. It's not to make profit (…) so it works". Nathalie, from *CoopTerra*, similarly argues that the term would allow them to more easily explain their organization's model to others:

> I find [this term] really relevant because it can help us to (…) introduce ourselves in our characteristics and how we're different to the others. We're a platform, okay, but we're not Amazon. We're a platform like Amazon, but we're different than Amazon, and we're a cooperative. We're not a capitalist [business].

Moreover, by associating their organizations with an overarching *social movement*, the activists believe to appear stronger than they might be in reality. Valentin boils this down succinctly, arguing that, as a small organization with lofty aims, "you have to pretend you have big muscles, even if they're fake." Jimena similarly points towards the strategic benefit of associating oneself with a movement, whether real or imaginary, arguing that the mere expressing of allegiance to a movement can help an individual co-op become societally relevant:

> [With] platform co-ops, there's no baggage, it's like, 'Ooh, a platform co-op. This sounds cool.' And it's funny because that has attracted media (…) It has helped us place our work in the 'future of work' conversation and how all of that is transforming people and their relationship to labor. So it's, like, the cool child right now.

Yet, despite these benefits, there are also reasons why activists refrain from engaging in network building dynamics. In fact, the findings reveal a tension around the "meta-organizations" (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008) that have emerged in recent years,

i.e., organizations such as the *Platform Cooperativism Consortium* in the U.S. or *Platform Cooperatives Germany*, which aim to build links between platform co-ops across sectors by, for example, organizing conferences, community calls, or conducting action research. Sally, for instance, voices uncertainty about the actual benefits these meta-organizations bring to the table, arguing that "I feel like I'm part of a group, but I don't know necessarily what that brings (...) I haven't seen any sort of structural help." Similarly, Valentin questions the ability of these organizations to actually build links, given the differing economic sectors that platform co-ops operate in:

> *I don't know if they will produce anything at all (...) it's quite hard to find ways to collaborate (...). They invited me so we were like, 'Yeah, super cool. What do we do together?' [But] our services are completely different. What are we going to do? Like we [recommend] to someone who listens to music to order a burger in Madrid? I don't know.*

Moreover, several of the entrepreneurial activists maintain that the "meta-organizations" place undue emphasis on the transformative potential of platform cooperativism, resulting in a distorted portrayal of the challenges involved in creating and sustaining these entities. Roberto, for instance, contends that worker self-exploitation is an essential aspect of platform cooperativism, which is frequently overlooked in discussions of worker empowerment:

> *Self-exploitation is a part of the game (...) I think it was some platform co-op event, and [my platform] was brought as the example of how we will destroy gig economy and stuff like that. And then you move the curtain and, at [that] moment, [there] was like one guy completely burning out behind this software [who] couldn't go (...) on holiday because the software was down.*

As a result, many platform co-ops refrain from actively contributing to network building. In fact, half of the 18 platforms in the sample argue that the more institutionalized elements within the field (such as regular movement meetings on the national level) have little or no relevance for their organizations, with some activists going as far as portraying the ecosystem as more of a nuisance than a help. Jimena, for example, argues that she only participates in meetings because "it feels like we're placed in a movement... something that's being created and so we, sort of, have to go to check it out."

To compensate for the lack of network building dynamics at the field level, entrepreneurial activists either turn towards their platform-specific communities (a strategy primarily pursued by the various secondary cooperatives in the sample which aim at scaling their own sector-specific federations rather than the overarching movement)

or they seek opportunities for collaboration outside the field of platform cooperativism. Specifically, activists tend to characterize the *platform cooperativism* movement as overlapping with other strategic action fields like the traditional cooperative ecosystem or the social and solidarity economy. In Germany, for instance, entrepreneurial activists have linked up with actors of the adjacent field of social entrepreneurship with the aim of redirecting the country's cooperative statutes in their favor (SEND e.V. 2020). In France, entrepreneurial activists have sought partnerships with allies in the cooperative sector, collectively framing the co-op as a central tool for the socio-ecological transition (Les Licoornes 2023). And in the U.S., entrepreneurial activists have cooperated with politicians at the state level to put in place more beneficial legal conditions for multi-stakeholder cooperatives (Wiener and Phillips 2018).

As a result, ties to the overarching platform cooperativism movement are relatively weak, with activists often unwilling to commit to dynamics at the field level for fear of being pigeonholed. In fact, when confronted with the question of which basket they would put their eggs in if forced to pool their organizational resources, Jimena argues that due to its scope and institutional power, her organization would always gravitate more towards the worker cooperativism movement rather than to the emerging field of platform cooperativism:

> I think that there isn't a clear definition of what a platform co-op is. I feel like people I've talked to are more like, 'Well, I'm a co-op, I'm a worker cooperative first and foremost, I might have a website. Does that make me a platform co-op?' And, I mean, from these characteristics, yeah, sure. [We] meet all those characteristics. But I think we're obviously more connected to the worker cooperative movement (…) because there's a better, a bigger ecosystem of support for worker cooperatives in NYC, that it's an easier connection to that.

Taken together, activists attempt to mobilize legitimacy either by emphasizing inner-field coherence and stability (the aforementioned *big muscle-strategy*) or by portraying their new organizational form as a solution to problems external to the field itself, therewith piggybacking other transformation dynamics.

5. Discussion

What strategies do entrepreneurial activists employ to legitimate the new organizational form of the platform co-op? This was the main question raised at the outset of this paper. Based on an integrated discussion of the identity frames that activists create, the value propositions they develop, as well as the resources and networks they mobilize, this section now proceeds to synthesize and critically evaluate three organizational strategies that predominantly structure economic activity at the field level.

Field participants facilitate network extension through *encroachment* of adjacent fields

Entrepreneurial activists largely struggle to develop collective action frames at the field level, as the findings have demonstrated. This is primarily due to the difficulty of wanting to mobilize legitimacy for an organizational form that is meant to transcend sectoral boundaries, while needing to demonstrate the benefits of this very form by applying it within particular sectors (see Young 2021 for a discussion of this form vs. content-tension in the context of the U.S. food sector). The result: the field of platform cooperativism is not structured around one unifying identity frame that determines rules and drives collective action at the field level, but rather around a set of heterogeneous (and at times even conflicting) frames that mostly operate at the sub-field level (that is, in the particular economic areas or sectors in which the form is mobilized).

While identity frames in the field are therefore too heterogeneous and fluid to coalesce into a set of shared rules, this fluidity nevertheless also enables field participants to strategically draw other organizations and groups (with related aims) into the field. Simply put, by linking the platform co-op model to different sectoral debates, such as ones around the energy transition or shared mobility, the activists enlarge the audience that is receptive to this novel organizational form. Taken together, the *platform cooperativism* movement thus mediates the difficulty of needing to legitimize a cross-sectoral organizational form through sectoral application by "encroaching" upon adjacent fields (Spicer et al. 2019), rather than trying to institutionalize the strategic action field of platform cooperativism or openly opposing *platform capitalism* (see Figure 2 for a schematic visualization).
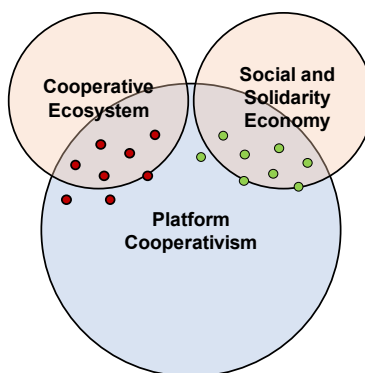

Figure 2:   Schematic visualization of field encroachment dynamics

While helpful in positioning the platform co-op model in heterogeneous societal debates, the absence of shared rules and collective action frames can nevertheless also create problems. On one side, it makes it more difficult to regulate and/or enforce standards across the field, which, in turn, can have a detrimental effect on a movement's ability to claim legitimacy. Simply put, fluidity increases the possibility of "identity theft" (Rao et al. 2000), as it allows non-movement participants to appropriate movement-associated values or movement participants to discard (elements of) the new organizational form. The fact that most platform co-ops in the sample already either cross-subsidize their marketplace activities with other non-platform-based business models or begin to dilute their cooperative structure offers fertile grounds for this risk to manifest itself in the future.

On the other side, the absence of a stable collective action frame also complicates institutionalization dynamics at the field level. Taking Tilly's perspective on movement phases (2017), the findings here suggest that the platform cooperativism movement struggles to transition from the *coalescence stage* (as part of which an initial group of people manages to create public awareness for a certain issue) into the *bureaucratization stage* (whereby a movement develops the capacity to produce stable institutions that can support the movement long-term). That a large majority of activists either perceive such institutionalization dynamics on the field level put forth by the various *meta-organizations* as, at best, a nuisance or, at worst, as an appropriation of their activities for the aims of other stakeholders is indicative of this. As such, the inability of the movement to coalesce around shared rules facilitates network extension on the one hand, but also substantially limits its ability to mobilize legitimacy at the field level on the other.

Field participants either create *subcultures* or mobilize entirely new consumer audiences

Entrepreneurial activists in the field of platform cooperativism pursue two distinct strategies to mobilize a competitive advantage, as the findings in the previous section have demonstrated. While the first focuses on the creation of sustainable 'subcultures' within existing fields, the latter consists of trying to "platformize" (Helmond 2015) sectors where proprietary platforms struggle to do so. With regard to the former, the concrete 'subcultural' values that are promoted generally tend to reflect the particular model that the co-op at hand has incorporated as. For example, platform co-ops set up as worker cooperatives tend to appeal to clients that value planned relationships over market-based relationships, while platform co-ops structured as multi-stakeholder cooperatives primarily tend to appeal to consumers that would otherwise (in the absence of cooperative solutions) not have made use of the platform model at all. To this end, focus is put on notions of sustainable (or value-driven)

consumption, for example by guaranteeing consumers a higher standard of privacy or data protection. Added value is therefore primarily created for consumers, who (literally) pay a higher price for the ability to differentiate themselves from others by using a 'fairer' platform model. This strategy of subculture creation mirrors previous findings on social movement dynamics in hierarchical fields (that is, fields in which critical resources are centralized in the hands of just a few organizations) by Rao et al. (2000), who have shown that the craft-brewing movement focused on carving out 'sustainability' niches that complement rather than contest incumbent practices.
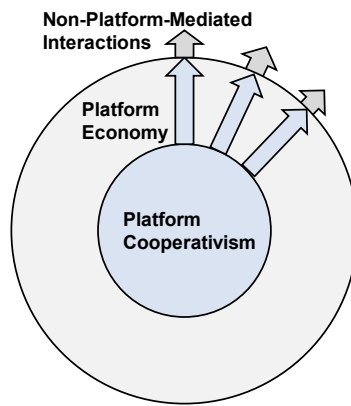

Figure 3: **Schematic visualization of expansion dynamics beyond the field of the platform economy**

Besides the creation of sustainable subcultures in already 'platformized' sectors, activists also mobilize the platform co-op model to put in place market structures in sectors where 'proprietary' platforms are perceived as being unable to. Accordingly, to create new consumer audiences, activists orient their economic activities towards sectors where there is more skepticism of 'big tech' or of marketplace structures in general. The attempts at establishing a marketplace in the sector for patient insights or a direct payment platform in the DIY music scene both illustrate that entrepreneurial activists not only mobilize the cooperative form to contest the proprietary platform model (by creating alternative structures that allow consumers and workers to take control of the means of allocation), but also to *complement* it (by bringing platform-based marketplaces to interactions that traditional corporations had previously been unable to commodify) (see Figure 3 for a schematic visualization). Rather than emerging as a clear-cut antagonist towards 'platform capitalism', which 're-embeds' what 'platform capitalism' had previously 'dis-embedded' (Grabher and König 2020), the frame of 'platform cooperativism' can therefore be equally mobilized to marketize interactions that had previously resisted commodification and monetiza-

tion. Consequently, legitimacy for the new organizational form of the platform co-op is mobilized by way of demonstrating the model's ability to expand the platform economy beyond where 'platform capitalism' has hitherto been able to go.

Field participants mobilize *community* to compensate for resource-based shortcomings

To compensate for the lack of material resources in the field, entrepreneurial activists in the field of platform cooperativism primarily try to harness 'community,' as the findings have demonstrated. While the strategic focus on 'community' therefore initially emerges out of *necessity*, virtually all platform co-ops in the sample subsequently try to reinterpret their dependency on 'community' as a *virtue*. Examples are manifold: where one group of activists perceives this turn towards 'community' as creating genuinely new spaces for interaction – e.g. by aligning incentives of groups that otherwise would never have conducted business together or by creating possibilities for communicating about issues that *proprietary* platforms would most likely try to quell –, a second group frames the creation of a platform-specific community as initiating (transnational) processes of collective learning. Case in point: the worker co-ops in the sample in particular position themselves not as organizations that provide better jobs than their proprietary counterparts (in terms of salary, for example), but rather *different* ones – jobs characterized by the ability of workers to somehow collectively 'grow into knowledge' and, by this path, to create a more *human* marketplace. As such, the activists in the sample mobilize legitimacy for the platform co-op model by arguing, firstly, that the notions of *community* and *platform* are not mutually exclusive, and, secondly, that a *community* orientation can serve as a basis for envisaging field-specific value propositions.

Moreover, the strategic importance that field participants grant to *community* also shapes network building dynamics, both nationally and transnationally. In fact, it is the very reliance of platform co-ops on building and nurturing *community* that also drives the activists to proactively seek out external relations. The current growth of secondary cooperatives – which build *community* by creating sector-specific federations of platform co-ops – is indicative of this (Mannan 2020). By providing a more formalized arena for sector-specific exchange among platform communities in different countries, these secondary cooperatives increasingly take on the role of social movement organizations (SMOs) (Armstrong and Bartley 2007) (see Figure 4 for a schematic visualization). Specifically, they develop the technological infrastructure that enables pre-existing communities (of workers, users, or members) to provide platform-mediated services in specific locations. They provide *onboarding* services, like guidance on how to structure primary cooperatives on the ground (with regard to the legal form and the relevant bylaws). Moreover, they set and enforce

minimum requirements for network participation – and thereby compensate for the above-mentioned problem of *identity theft* that often accompanies the creation of *subcultures* in existing fields.
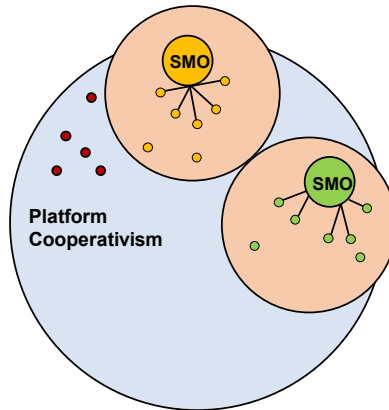

Figure 4: **Schematic visualization of SMO-emergence in sub-fields**

In organizing economic activity accordingly, these organizations not only provide tangible, material benefits, but also become focal points for activists seeking to establish platform co-ops in places where none exist. Sector-specific proto-SMOs thus advance a field-specific notion of growth that transcends borders, one focused more on the horizontal rather than the vertical diffusion of alternative ways of organizing. Simply put, instead of scaling individual platforms upward, these proto-SMOs create the opportunity for *platform cooperativism* to scale wide – and therewith institutionalize the cooperative platform federation as a new space for collective action and transnational labor solidarity. As such, these organizations increasingly act as the type of "brokering, network-building organizations" that Schiller-Merkens sees as essential to the scaling alternatives to capitalism (2020:17).

6.   Conclusion

The emergence of platform capitalism is commonly perceived as having limited the wiggle room for alternative organizations in the digital economy, as network and scale effects create *winner takes all* markets that entail a concentration of capital, data, and power in the hands of just a few platform firms. In recent years, however, various entrepreneurship-driven movements have emerged that contest the proprietary platform model and promote alternative notions of exchange. But how can such alternative conceptions gain legitimacy? To provide answers, this paper applied

insights from organizational theory and social movement studies to the burgeoning *platform cooperativism* movement, evaluating the collective action frames that drive movement activities, the value propositions that field participants develop, and the resources and networks they mobilize to transform platform-driven production and consumption patterns.

Three major empirical findings were developed in the process: first, to facilitate network extension, activists encroach upon adjacent fields rather than plowing a *fresh field* of economic activity. Specifically, the *platform cooperativism* frame is strategically mobilized as a possible solution to problems within adjacent fields, such as the social and solidarity economy, in order to enlarge the audience that is receptive to the new organizational form. Second, to ensure (economic) survival, activists either push for the creation of *subcultures* or try to mobilize entirely new consumer audiences, but largely refrain from openly challenging platform incumbents. As a result, *platform cooperativism* both contests *and* complements the proprietary model, as it expands the platform economy beyond where *platform capitalism* has hitherto been able to go. Third, to compensate for a lack of resources, activists strategically nurture and mobilize *community*, which has led to the emergence of social movement organization-like federations that promote sector-specific formalization dynamics.

On a conceptual level, these findings exemplify the significance of scale in the dynamics of movement-driven market change, as legitimation dynamics oscillate constantly between the field level and the sectoral level. Often, these activists choose to bypass the field level entirely, directing their focus instead towards their specific sectoral ecosystem or towards piggybacking transformation dynamics in adjacent fields. The successful institutionalization of novel organizing templates at the sectoral level, facilitated by proto-SMOs that increasingly complement the endeavors of the *meta-organizations* at the field level, serves as a testament to this. In light of these observations, it becomes necessary to redefine our comprehension of feasibility. Rather than solely emphasizing the economic survival of new organizations, feasibility should also encompass a movement's *creative* capacity — its ability to respond to challenges and limitations encountered during the quest for legitimacy. Essentially, the tension between form and content, intrinsic to the legitimization of all novel organizational forms, should not be seen solely as an inhibiting factor but also as a catalyst for inner-movement innovation. Future research endeavors could delve deeper into investigating this relationship between legitimation dynamics, scale, and creativity. For instance, an examination of the threshold conditions influencing entrepreneurial activists' decisions to shift between the field and the sectoral level would provide valuable insights.

It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that *creativity* is not a substitute for *survival*. A movement oriented towards effecting market change must ultimately solidify its nascent social space into a stable field by way of establishing clear rules and delineating field boundaries, as convincingly argued by Fligstein and McAdam. Yet, this paper shows that creativity, often manifested through informal and emergent practices, offers a distinct avenue towards achieving this objective, one that remains comparatively under explored within both the literature on organizational legitimacy and platform cooperativism. For the case of platform cooperativism, it remains to be seen whether the movement can ultimately produce such a stable understanding. The findings indicate that success will rely heavily on two things: the ability of the various proto-SMOs and *meta-organizations* to work in tandem and transpose sector-specific solutions to the broader field level and the movement's ability to lessen its dependence on solidarity principles. If successful in addressing these challenges, the organizing template of the platform co-op has the potential to open new spaces in the platform economy for entrepreneurship-driven dynamics of collective action and transnational labor solidarity.

Two shortcomings characterize the approach taken as part of this paper. On the one hand, context has largely been disregarded, which makes it difficult to address whether entrepreneurial activists strategically devise their practices in relation to political opportunity structures. On the other hand, focus has been put exclusively on the experiences of *entrepreneurial* activists, which perhaps obscures the role that other movement participants (such as ecosystem activists or politicians) play in mobilizing legitimacy. Further research is therefore needed that assesses organizational strategies as socio-politically embedded. Despite these limitations, however, this paper's actor-centered approach has fleshed out a relatively unexamined path in the analysis of change in and around platform markets – one less focused on purely economic notions of feasibility and more on the informal, emergent ways in which activists promote alternative conceptions of exchange. While it remains to be seen whether the movement will produce a stable understanding of how platform markets can be structured (differently), and thereby transition to a more institutionalized stage, this paper has created a conceptual and empirical basis for further investigating and more effectively interpreting the dynamics of movement-driven contentiousness in and between platform markets.

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**RADBOUD
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RESEARCH

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

Hendrik Simon[1]

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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1   Post-Doc, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and ConTrust Research Initiative Frankfurt, simon@prif.org

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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

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

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).

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

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-

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

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.

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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.

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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.

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 head-quarters, 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 (Junge-hülsing 2015; my translation).

Unlike purely trade union networks comprised of functionaries, the central partici-
pants 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 devel-
oping fields of action for trade union policies (4.). While the objective is to collabo-
rate 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 domi-
nance 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

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 over-emphasized: 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

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-

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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.

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)

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-

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

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

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 partici-pated 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 under-line 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 trans-lation)

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"

(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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DEBATE

Interview with Gianpaolo Meloni from the Amazon EWC

Marcus Franke[1]

Gianpaolo Meloni started working for Amazon in 2012 in a facility center in Piacenza, Italy. After getting involved in union work over years within the work of amazon, he became an essential part of the team negotiating to found the European Work Council (EWC) in Amazon starting at the end of 2018. The negotiations came to a successful conclusion in 2022 and the EWC began its work with the first meeting in April 2023 with Gianpaolo Meloni as the elected EWC secretary.

The following interview was conducted in writing:

How important are trade unions and other employee representatives for you?

Gianpaolo Meloni: To answer this question, I have to talk about how we used the union in the first centre in Italy. I was in trouble because I was helping my colleagues and did not follow the managers' directives on pressure, so I was also taken out of my role of responsibility because they did not accept points of view different from theirs. Productivity rules! In 2015, I decided to join with other colleagues (very few) who had the courage to stand up against this multinational. We decide to contact a trade union (the unions had not shown up in front of our gates up to that point, none) and begin a dialogue to get information and find out if they could help us. I didn't know the unions until that moment either. Some of my colleagues just wanted to make a

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1 Research Fellow at Centre for Labour Studies and Political Education (zap), University of Bremen, Celsiusstraße 2, 28359 Bremen, Germany, MFranke1@uni-bremen.de

fuss so they could get a good economic exit, but for me it was a matter of dignity. In the end, in a few months we managed to secretly collect about 50 delegations from our colleagues and I was one of the first workers' representatives in Italy. I tell you this because I am convinced that if there had been more union presence even at the beginning, we probably would not have ended up with such difficult problems as workers. On union confrontation and the fight to protect colleagues, I think there is an urgent need for a change in union and political approach. The prospect of new technologies should only worry me, but it should be on the table of all unions and on political agendas around the world. This is a revolution that will lead to a mass replacement of workers (AI, Androids, drone dispatch, gpt chat, self-driving vehicles, etc.). The union is a useful tool, but I think it needs a revolution in approach and above all it needs to start an international collaboration (in amazon with UNI GLOBAL it has been going on for a few years) to make the struggle effective, involving European and international political structures and laws to protect the defense of jobs. The union is fundamental to me, there is certainly no doubt about that. We need to raise workers' awareness of the situation.

The problem is social, we live in a society that is not aware of the cliff we are approaching and that leads us to fight more against ourselves instead of fighting against the real issues. I think it is crucial now to unite and fight, without thinking about anything other than protecting the health and safety of colleagues and thinking about how labor might develop in 10 to 20 years. A global and prospective view of the issues, without thinking about the cost of the efforts, but only about a common struggle that could potentially lead to a future social war over joblessness.

The negotiations with Amazon founding the European Works Council (EWC) were long and difficult. What empowered you in the end to achieve an agreement even beyond the minimum standards of the European directive (2009/38/EC) on the establishment of an EWC?
Gianpaolo Meloni: In 2018 we started negotiations to be able to have Amazon's European Works Council, in this case it was the French, Spanish and Italian unions that initiated the request for this. The workers' representative group consisted of 16 members, I had the honor of being elected from the beginning to the chairmanship supported by colleagues whom I already, in part, knew from several European meetings. Right from the start the company was very uncooperative and tried to manipulate us in order to have the most favorable agreement possible, to the detriment of the protection of the European right to information and consultation. For quite some time the dialogue was confrontational and, thanks in part to work based on group involvement and democratic decision-making in a context open to all the

opinions of fellow members, the company was unable to influence our goals. In 2020, in February, we were to have a meeting with the company in Luxembourg, where the workers' representatives were ready to break off negotiations so that we could start the EWC without an agreement and thus avail ourselves of the minimum requirements by law (although it would have been a more difficult path to take). Unfortunately, this meeting never took place, due to the pandemic. Since that time, a virtual dialogue has begun. You can imagine the misunderstandings and difficulties in handling a negotiation with such a company on a virtual level. The company decided to change some members of management because they realized that we would not sign any agreement. The new managers were more respectful toward us, we always maintained a confrontational tone, however, the dialogue had improved. Through a new dialogue approach, we were able to present what were our major points of interest, and negotiations began. Every time they proposed an agreement, it was always below the standards set by law on the point of view of information and consultations, and we kept asking for more. We often found that although there were European-level managers and a legal staff at the management table, decisions were not made by them but always deferred to some figure even higher up than them. We come to 2022, to the penultimate meeting (which could have been the last) where we were ready not to sign, once again, the agreement. The management, however, very astutely presented us with an agreement with lots of changes on points of interest that certainly would have been interesting for us because it was going to mediate many points that we could use to start getting more information from the company. At that point we opened a dialogue between us representatives and we weighed the pros and cons. Even our expert, who up to that point had advised us not to sign anything, gave a favorable opinion of the agreement. The critical points were the transnational consultations, which had a threshold. Otherwise, we had managed to include the United Kingdom in the agreement, to get two meetings instead of one, per year. Information covered all lines of business while consultation was tied to the operations side (previously the company only wanted to focus on operations). Between the pros and cons, we decided by vote that we would try to use this tool that allowed us to start the EWC quickly. If we had not signed up, we would certainly still be in litigation for the failure of negotiations and this would have delayed the exchange of information. I think at the end of the day, despite some weaker points, this agreement is definitely the best we could have brought home. In addition, it is fair to point out, that we were always supported by the European unions who helped us at all stages, including the final stage, always in contact with our expert. It is not easy to sum up a negotiation that lasted almost 4 years in a few sentences, however, I could conclude by saying that it was difficult, stressful but in the end also, personally, satisfying.

Your actual work of the Amazon EWC has started quite recently. How would you describe the work so far? *Did the relationships from the negotiations maintain within the new founded EWC or are there unexpected changes? How would you say is the management acting towards the EWC? Is there timely information, do you have time and capacities to work out your consultation?*

Gianpaolo Meloni: I do not consider the role of the EWC member (or chairperson) a job, but a kind of social commitment, and I do it willingly, as do many of my colleagues. The problem is that to really be able to work, to be informed about everything that is happening in Europe and in your country, to read and study the information that is provided to us, and to do the phone and video call meetings with colleagues takes a lot of hours. I am still a warehouse worker at Amazon, as a labor and safety representative I have about 14 hours a month to spend working for my local Union. The European legislation does not help us because it does not impose an adequate number of hours to make this actually a job. We negotiated to have 72 h paid leave from the company annually if you are part of the select committee and 24 h for all EWC members. Obviously, this does not allow us to work effectively and to be always ready and up to date but is better than subsidiary requirements. I say this because if you want to achieve changes you should invest in the resources and people who are committed to this and not burden them with work and think that it is all done on your own time. I was saying, in my spare time what I try to do is to maintain relationships with colleagues from other countries who are willing to dialogue concerning shared issues. We dialogue a lot via chat, I try to do a video call every month at least with the select committee members to update situations and discuss news. The basis of this work is dialogue and exchange of information, I will say it over and over again. What path it will take with Amazon's European management, I am also pessimistic because in the first meeting we were told data that had already been shared with the press previously and they handled the relations, as they always do, from the top down, not answering sensitive questions and criticizing when the workers' representatives' tones were raised, rightly so, because they did not feel respected. We held only one information meeting in February and we are waiting for the next one, which will be in October; it is too early to know whether the company will respect the information agreements. If it does not, we will be ready for whatever it takes to enforce the right to information and consultation. One thing I have learned in these 11 years at Amazon: they always think they are untouchable. I am Italian, and this feeling brings to mind realities that should no longer exist.

What specific challenges do you see within a multinational company like Amazon for workers?

Gianpaolo Meloni: I have been working at Amazon since 2012, and since 2015 I have lived my work in a conflictual way. I believe there is nothing worse in life than being in a place where you are constantly in the eye of the storm. However, this is happening now, and the most challenging aspect for me is seeing how difficult it is to coordinate forces on the worker protection side. Every country, every union thinks it can fight the battle alone, but fails to realize that the only way to face a giant like this is to set aside individual interests and work together. Paradoxically, the challenge posed by a multinational force like this is to face it in a united and resolute manner. Coordinate social, trade union and political actions to establish boundaries and constraints on the freedom of action and abuse of this giant. Protecting health and safety should be the first priority, but safeguarding employment itself and the future of work is an equally important challenge.

How can we overcome national perspectives to achieve transnational solidarity?

Gianpaolo Meloni: The problem linked to the social struggle affects all of us, and we can all act ethically. This type of problem arises from a question that we almost never ask ourselves when we are buying something on this platform: "Why is it so cheap?". Often, we don't ask ourselves the question because we don't want to know the answer, because it would surely be too uncomfortable to listen to. On a social level we are entering an era where self-centeredness and selfishness are the masters. However, the effects of our choices already fall on employment and market dynamics and will fall infinitely worse.

I think we are taking the media approach wrong, and that it takes much more strength to bring out all the dirt that is hidden under the rug. In conclusion, in order to overcome local and national perspectives, there is a need for a union of intents at European and international levels. This is being done by both trade unions and workers' movements. For example, the Uni Global, with which we are confronted, has launched an international alliance between trade unions to collect information and fight amazon. For example, the slogan "make amazon pay" was created by them. From my point of view, the same type of coordination is also needed at the level of the workers. Bringing information to workers, so they don't feel alone and know that there are many of us fighting. And at the same time work for an effective local, national and international media campaign; to bring out all the improprieties and hypocrisies of this company. In the end I could conclude with some keywords which are: collaboration, sacrifice, passion and shared vision.

About the Authors

Ladin Bayurgil is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Sociological Research at KU Leuven. She is part of the ERC-funded ResPecTMe project on precarious work in digital labour platforms across Europe. Ladin's work spans urban and economic sociology, sociology of work and occupations, and particularly asks questions about urban precarious labour. Before her position at the KU Leuven, Ladin received her PhD in Sociology from Boston University in the USA, and her BA in Sociology, and Political Science and International Relations from Bogazici University in Turkey.

Prof. Dr. Irene Dingeldey is a political scientist and director of the Institute Labour and Economy at the University of Bremen, Germany. Her main research interests concern comparative welfare state studies, employment policy and industrial relations. Most recently she edited "Minimum wage regimes in Europe and selected developing countries", together with Damian Grimshaw and Thorsten Schulten.

Marcus Franke is researcher at the University of Bremen, Centre for Labour Studies and Political Education. He graduated in social sciences from the University of Göttingen with an emphasis on the role of civil society in state transformation and the development of labour markets. Most recently, he worked within the research project scrutinizing European Works Councils and their role for transnational solidarity in the working world.

Dr. Philipp Gies received his PhD from the University of Bremen with a dissertation on Transnational Social Dialogues in the European Union in 2017. His research focus lies on European integration and its impact on developments in labor law. Furthermore, he researches social inequality, solidarity and the relationship between work and unemployment. Currently he is the project coordinator of the research project places and motives of acts of solidarity in transnational working relations at the Centre for Labour Studies and Political Education.

Dr. Heiner Heiland is postdoctoral researcher at the University of Göttingen. His research interests include digitalization of labor, workers' agency, platform labor, algorithmic management and corporate public spheres. His work appeared in Human Relations, Theory, Culture & Society, New Technology, Work and Employment and many others and received several best paper awards.

Franziska Laudenbach is researcher at the University of Bremen, Centre for Labour Studies and Political Education. As political scientist, her research focuses on the intersection and governance of education, training and labour market policies in Germany as well as across EU countries. In her current research project, she is scrutinizing collective action and employee representation in transnational employment relations.

Claudia Marà is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Sociological Research at KU Leuven (Belgium), working within the framework of the ERC-funded ResPecTMe project. Her research interests include working conditions and unpaid labour in the digital platform economy, as well as industrial relations and collective action in the changing world of work. Her work appeared in The Economic and Labour Relations Review, the European Journal Of Industrial Relations, Transfer-European Review of Labour and Research and Work in the Global Economy.

Valentin Niebler is a doctoral researcher at the Institute for European Ethnology (IfEE) and the Berlin Institute for Migration Studies (BIM) at Humboldt University of Berlin. He is interested in labor conflicts, collective action and regulation of the digital economy.

Dr. Ilana Nussbaum Bitran is a sociologist and postdoctoral researcher at the Institute Labour and Economy at the University of Bremen, Germany. Her research interests include transnational labor markets, migration and the recognition of foreign academic degrees.

Jonas Pentzien is the head of the research field "Business, Value Chains, and Consumption" at the Institute for Ecological Economy Research (IÖW) in Berlin, Germany. His research is located at the intersection of Critical Political Economy and Economic Sociology, and explores how digital platforms transform the governing relations between the state, market, and civil society. Currently, he is engaged in a project that compares regulatory and entrepreneurial dynamics of contestation within the platform economy across diverse institutional contexts, with a specific focus on the market economies of the U.S., Germany, and France.

Valeria Pulignano is a Professor of Sociology of Work and Industrial Relations at CESO – KU Leuven. PI of the ERC Advanced Grant ResPecTMe and coordinator of the ESA RN17 Work, Employment and Industrial Relations. Research interests are comparative industrial (employment) relations, precarious work, labour markets inequality and voice at work. Recent book: Reconstructing Solidarity, (with) Ine van Hoyweghen and Geert Meyers, Palgrave; Labour Unions, Precarious Work, and the Politics of Institutional Change in Europe, (with) Virginia Doellgast and Nathan Lillie, OUP.

Hendrik Simon is a post-doc at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and at the research initiative "ConTrust", Goethe University Frankfurt. Furthermore, he co-leads the project "Transnationale Vernetzung betrieblicher Interessenvertretungen" funded by Hans Böckler Stiftung. Publications include "Entgrenzte Arbeit, (un-)begrenzte Solidarität? Bedingungen und Strategien gewerkschaftlichen Handelns im flexiblen Kapitalismus" (2nd ed., Westfälisches Dampfboot 2021, co-edited with Carmen Ludwig and Alexander Wagner), and "A Century of Anarchy? War, Normativity, and the Birth of Modern International Order" (Oxford University Press 2024).

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