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Proposal for track 2 – Voice and Representation at Work

Paper title: Globalisation, regionalisation and transnational unionism: the case of Sweden and the Baltic states today

Background: the political economy of globalisation

The enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004 highlights one of the key issues of globalisation: the question of economic harmonisation between countries. According to the factor price equalisation theorem, prices should converge when previously separated markets integrate. (Cf. Rogowski 2006.) In the EU enlargement case with its integration of labour markets, this theory would lead us to expect a price convergence on labour between the richer western European countries, and the less rich post-communist CEE countries. This, of course, is exactly what many observers in the old EU members feared – a downward pressure on wages in their countries, together with a similar pressure on welfare policy standards – and this is why immigration restrictions were put in place in most EU15 countries in 2004. However, we can see that harmonisation downwards – with a familiar phrase from the globalisation debates, “the race to the bottom” – is not the only possibility. A harmonisation upwards – “a race to the top” – is also possible, at least in theory. (Cf. Mosley and Uno 2007.) Working from a political economy perspective, I ask in my paper how social actors in today’s northern Europe form strategies to deal with the issue of “race to the bottom” and “race to the top”.

Research question and method of investigation

My paper investigates how trade unions handle globalisation and the processes of harmonisation downwards and upwards, through a case study of trade union work and cooperation in construction and transport industries in Sweden and the Baltic states today. As Andreas Bieler (2005), Richard Hyman (2005), Jeremy Waddington (2005) and several other researchers have stated, trade unions are one of the major social forces in the struggle about the “Social Europe” project. But there is, I argue, a lack of empirical studies on precisely how trade unions take part in and struggle in this process. We do have studies of the top-level EU politics of the “Social Europe” project, about the negotiations in the Council, the Parliament and the Commission, but we need more studies on the “Social Europe” process in the labour market, at the micro-level. Without such studies, the discussion will be skewed and restricted to analysing what is going on at the elite level. With this in mind, I am

pursuing my study to contribute with an analysis of the micro-dynamics of economic globalisation, regionalisation and the “Social Europe” project.

The research question is:

- How do trade unions in Swedish and Baltic construction and transport industries form strategies to shape the European labour market integration in a way advantageous for themselves?
- How do trade unions in Swedish and Baltic construction and transport industries develop ways of working and cooperate to shape the European labour market integration in a way advantageous for themselves?

Speaking about “forming strategies”, I intend to study concretely how trade union(ist)s in Sweden and the Baltic states analyse their context and possibilities for acting, and how they according to their analysis form strategies. This question is theoretically motivated by a political economy approach, as I assume that the economy and the labour market contains conflicting interests and conflicts, but that the content of these interests must be determined by the actors themselves. As Sheri Berman (1998, p. 30) puts it, “interests are neither given, nor can they be inferred from the (economic) environment; instead, they evolve out of the ideas and beliefs held by actors themselves”.

Speaking about “developing ways of working and cooperating”, I intend to study very concretely how Swedish and Baltic unions develop their organisations and routines to accommodate to the new international context. At the unions’ offices, how much time is devoted to transnational issues? How do the unions develop their employees’ and activists’ competence with regards to transnational issues? I will investigate this kind of concrete questions.

As for method, I will interview Swedish trade unionists working with European and Baltic issues and cooperation, unionists from the International Trade Union Confederation’s (ITUC) Vilnius office, and, if possible, Baltic unionists.

What can the paper contribute to the field and to the congress

I expect that my paper will be able to contribute to the field both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, it will contribute with a case study of how some unions – Swedish and Baltic – re-organise to accommodate to the new globalised and regionalised environment. With findings from the micro-level, it will also contribute to the “Social Europe” debate.

Theoretically, I believe that the paper can contribute with a much-needed micro-level political economy perspective on globalisation. It will move away from the fetishising view of globalisation as an asocial process where “capital” alone changes the world, and instead contribute to an analysis of globalisation as a social process. (Cf. Bieler and Torjesen 2001, p. 117)

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