

Reiner Hoffmann and Marc Meinardus (Eds.)

# TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE



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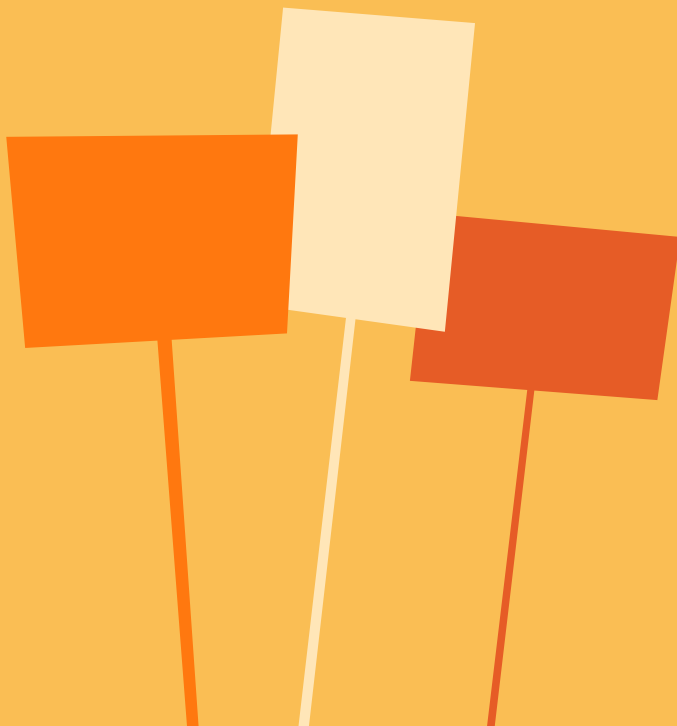
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**Reiner Hoffmann and Marc Meinardus (Eds.)**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

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# FOREWORD



**T**he rise of right-wing populist movements and parties is an almost universal phenomenon in Europe. Right-wing populist tendencies are not without consequences for trade unions. On the contrary, the patterns of social interpretation propagated by right-wing populism are highly problematic for trade unions: There is a danger that the solidarity of workers will erode and fragmentation will be amplified, which, in turn, will negatively impact the solidarity-based policy of interests in companies and beyond. It is to be feared that right-wing populist threats will ultimately lead to the reduction of universalist-oriented workers' rights and social welfare benefits based on collective agreements.

The economic, labour, and social policy discourses and practices of many right-wing populist parties in Europe have similar overall objectives and methods, with individual party peculiarities making each group unique. A key commonality can be found in the identification of the "social question" as an essential reference point in the struggle for political interpretative power and political majorities. The trade unions perceive right-wing populism, albeit to different degrees, as a force that endangers and calls into question the solidarity-based representation of interests through, on the one hand, the strategic weakening of trade union solidarity relations and, on the other, a frontal attack on the trade unions themselves. This is directed, above all, against trade unions' institutional power.

Against this background, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), in accordance with the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), initiated a Europe-wide study at the beginning of 2022 to examine trade union options for dealing with right-wing populist forces. This investigation included the commissioning of a sequence of 12 country studies and a comprehensive comparative analysis of the political processes and trade union experiences in the participating countries.

Despite the often similar, or at least comparable, situations in which the European trade unions find themselves when dealing with right-wing populist forces, the process of inter-union learning has been rather underdeveloped to date. This study is intended as a contribution to the promotion and reflection of the cross-border exchange of information and experience. The aim is to explore whether and how trade unions can learn from each other in the face of similar challenges and sometimes quite different operating contexts. It is aimed at trade union activists and members, decision-makers in the political partner spectrum of the FES, and an interested public.

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# TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

Challenges  
Strategies  
Experiences



Hans-Jürgen Bieling



## INTRODUCTION

Right-wing populist and far-right parties, often referred to as the Radical Populist Right (RPR), have been at the centre of public debate for some time. The term “Radical Populist Right”, emphasises that these parties are primarily characterised by two features: First, a populist component that propagates an anti-elitist, anti-institutional, and anti-intellectual stance with reference to the “true people” and “common sense”, often accompanied by a pronounced moralisation and personalisation of politics (cf. Müller 2016), and second, a right-wing political agenda that includes ethnonationalist or racist orientations, the rejection of immigration and a multicultural society, a negative attitude towards supranational institutions such as the European Union, and the curtailment of democratic participation and the rule of law. The curbing of the rule of law typically includes a disregard for the non-discrimination of social groups, independence of the courts, freedom of speech, independent media reporting, protection of minorities, and so on.

The RPR parties have found support in social protest movements and, accordingly, have seen an increase in membership and considerable gains in parliamentary elections. In retrospect, the rise of right-wing populism in Europe occurred in several waves. The first wave took place in the 1970s and 1980s when so-called “progress parties” were founded in some countries, including Norway and Denmark, which – similar to the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (SVP; Swiss People’s Party), the *Front National* (FN; National Front) in France, and the *Vlaams Belang* (VB; Flemish Interest) in Belgium – positioned themselves in opposition to the welfare state and social spending. The critique of the welfare state was simultaneously based on a nationalist and racist orientation. Later, in the 1990s, other right-wing populist parties – the *Lega Nord* (Lega; Northern League) in Italy, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the *Sverigedemokraterna* (SD; Sweden Democrats), *Perussuomalaiset* (PS; The (True) Finns), and the re-oriented *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ; Freedom Party of Austria) – increasingly turned against the concepts of a multicultural society and the deepening of European integration. These two themes remained prevalent among party projects in the 2000s and 2010s, such as in Geert Wilders’ *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV; Party for Freedom) in the Netherlands, the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS; Law and Justice) party in Poland, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD; Alternative for Germany), and the more recently formed *VOX* party in Spain and *Chegal* in Portugal (these party names translate to “voice” and “enough!” from Latin and Portuguese, respectively).

The crises of the last two decades, including in the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), the European migration regime, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have strengthened EU-sceptical and ethnonationalist dispositions. In parliamentary elections, the average voting weight of right-wing populist parties rose from around 4 per cent in the 1990s to over 8 per cent in the 2000s. Notably, the voter share has risen to between 12 and 15 per cent since the 2010s. In several countries, the approval rating is significantly higher and has even resulted in some RPR parties being in government, albeit in some cases just temporarily: Countries where RPR parties have joined government include Austria (FPÖ), Finland (PS), Slovenia with the *Slovenska demokratska stranka* (SDP; Slovenian Democratic Party), Poland (PiS), Hungary with *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (Fidesz; Hungarian Civic Alliance), and, most recently, Italy with *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI, Brothers of Italy) and Lega. In other countries, the parties of the RPR have been or continue to be indirectly involved in government affairs as a majority provider: The *Dansk Folkeparti* (DF; Danish People's Party) in Denmark, the *Fremskrittspartiet* (FrP; Progress Party) in Norway, and the SD in Sweden.

In the context of the multiple crises that have taken place since the 2000s, the economic and social policy orientation of the RPR has changed. In the 1980s and 1990s, most of the RPR parties still adopted clear neoliberal positions. However, the picture has become more contradictory and complex in the years since. There are considerable differences between right-wing populist parties across Europe (Becker 2018; Biskamp 2022); some parties are neoliberal while others are more oriented towards a welfare state. There are sometimes clear tensions between these positions within the organisations themselves, which points to the fact that the “social question”, usually interpreted in a welfare-chauvinist manner, has become an important reference point in strategic and programmatic discussions (Ennser-Jedenastik 2018; Fenger 2018). The reasons for this reorientation are complex. However, two factors are particularly important. On the one hand, and this affects all political actors, the accumulating sequence of different overlapping crises has shaken confidence in market forces and stimulated *ad hoc* state intervention (Abels / Bieling 2022). On the other hand, the electorate of right-wing populist parties has expanded far into the predominantly male working class, so that their labour and socio-political preferences need to be also increasingly served by a corresponding programmatic offer (Afonso / Rennwald 2018).

In the academic discussion, however, opinions differ about the dynamic forces driving this programmatic reorientation. Those who regard right-wing populism primarily as an expression of racist and nationalist social milieus (Mudde 2010)

see it as little more than a tactical adaptation. For others who see right-wing populism as a reaction to a globalisation-induced threat to their own prosperity (Rodrik 2018; Manow 2018), the labour and social policy reorientation of the RPR is indicative of a fundamental shift in party policy. Between these two frames, there are other analytical perspectives that, in the mediation of culture and political economy, focus on the intersubjective experiences and interpretive struggles of problematic socio-economic situations (Bieling 2017; Gidron / Hall 2017) and try to take into account the peculiarities of the political field (Kriesi 2014; Schäfer / Zürn 2021). The diversity of analytical approaches to the phenomenon of right-wing populism demonstrates that its causes are not easy to identify.

The dispute over viable explanatory approaches is neither over nor scientifically or politically irrelevant. Nevertheless, for some time now, attention has focused increasingly on the socio-political implications of the rise of right-wing populism. Above all, the focus has shifted to the curtailment of the rule of law through political control of the judiciary and media or the impairment of science and freedom of speech (Becker 2018; Krastev 2017); the threat to democracy posed by a climate of intolerance vis-à-vis migrants and other minorities (Olschanski 2015); and the practices of welfare-chauvinist discrimination. Through the implementation of this type of discrimination, social democracy, i.e., the forms of a universalist welfare state and effective trade union representation of interests, is undermined or even eliminated. The trade unions themselves are very much aware of these processes. Firstly, they fear that the general, often universally provided social security benefits and collectively negotiated workers' rights will be restricted (Flecker et al. 2019). Secondly, they are very concerned that the authoritarian dispositive of right-wing populism, i.e., the anti-egalitarian, anti-democratic and anti-union orientations, hinder trade unions' social recognition and legitimacy. Thirdly, they fear that solidarity within the organisation will erode and an effective representation of interests will become difficult if parts of the workforce and trade union members continue to develop an affinity with right-wing populism (Peter / Brecht 2019).

Against this backdrop, the following explanations apply a comparative perspective to pursue two main objectives: First, to examine and discuss whether and in what form the threats of right-wing populist and far-right parties are relevant for the trade unions in selected European countries; and second, to analyse and reflect on the strategies, concepts, and practices employed by unions to address the threats posed by right-wing populism and the associated experiences. This dual stocktaking of problem perceptions and reactions contributes to the cross-border exchange of trade unions, stimulates learning processes, and contributes insights

that can be applicable to everyday trade union practice. The reflective explanations are based on twelve case studies from individual European countries — Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. Each case study deals with these two themes and takes into account the more recent developments in its respective country. In addition, this comparative report also includes further information from the relevant academic discussion.

The paper is structured as follows: After the introduction, the next chapter outlines the analytical framework for the comparative analysis. The analysis is based primarily on a power resources approach, which differentiates between the forms of structural, organisational, institutional, and societal trade union power, whereby the actions of the trade unions, as well as those of the right-wing populist parties, are simultaneously contextualised with reference to the systems of industrial relations and welfare states. This lens makes a more precise determination of the strategic focus of both right-wing populist parties and trade unions possible in the subsequent empirical chapters. The third chapter focuses on the respective programmatic profile and activities of the right-wing populist parties as well as on the implications this has for workers and trade unions. How these implications are perceived by the trade unions is the focus of the fourth chapter, with a view to the different resources of power, especially the forms of institutional power. The fifth chapter, in turn, discusses how the trade unions have reacted to the right-wing populist challenge and their experiences taking strategic and practical action in response. Finally, in the sixth chapter, some conclusions are derived from these findings.

## CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

As already indicated, several sets of factors are responsible for the success of right-wing populist parties (Bieling 2017; Gidron / Hall 2017; Rodrik 2018; Manow 2018; Schäfer / Zürn 2021). Factors include:

1. the socio-economic conditions, i.e., the dynamics of capitalist development, including employment, labour policy and welfare state protection, and their (inter-)subjective perception in different social milieus;
2. the cultural predispositions and the processes of the production of meaning, which often include the dissociation from and devaluation of social groups that do not correspond to the prevailing norms and models; and

3. the particularities of the organisation of the state and the political system that make it easier or more difficult for political actors, e.g. through electoral law, to articulate new lines of social conflict or to use gaps in representation. Within this context, it is possible to assign the RPR parties addressed in this study to different “worlds” of right-wing populism.

## WORLDS OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

The Northern European or Scandinavian world is dominated by RPR parties that, regardless of their origin, are socio-culturally authoritarian in orientation and tend to adopt centrist economic and distribution policy positions (Jungar /Jupskas 2014). This is less true, however, of the Norwegian FrP, a neoliberal tax-cutting and anti-immigration party that took part in a bourgeois coalition government from 2014 to 2021, and the “ultra-liberal” *Nye Borgerlige* (NB; New Right) in Denmark. All the other parties, however, present themselves as moderate in terms of distribution policy. The SD, which has been in formal government since 2022, defends the Swedish *Folkhemmet* (people’s home) with a welfare-chauvinist perspective. The Finns, which was a governing party from 2015 to 2017, has a similar position. The Danish People’s Party (DF), in the course of gaining importance in the 2000s, also developed a positive attitude towards the welfare state but repeatedly supported bourgeois minority governments (2001–2011 and 2015–2019).

The Western European world of right-wing populism is somewhat more contradictory. Nevertheless, here too socio-culturally authoritarian positions are combined with an increasingly centrist economic and distribution policy programme. In Austria, the FPÖ evolved into a strictly neoliberal-right populist force under Jörg Haider from the mid-1980s onwards before toning down its market-liberal economic and social policy orientation somewhat during Karl-Heinz Strache’s presidency, rebranding as a *soziale Heimatpartei* (social homeland party). Since its foundation in 2013, the German AfD has been supported by different currents. While neoliberal concepts were clearly in the foreground at the beginning with its criticism of the EMU, the ethnonationalist forces around Björn Höcke have actively tried to address the “social question” and have recently gained more and more importance. The development of France’s FN, renamed *Rassemblement National* (RN) in June 2018, was and continues to be groundbreaking. After Marine Le Pen took over the party’s top seat in 2011, the FN, now the RN, has increasingly tried to profile itself as a “workers’ party”. In contrast to the developments in Germany, the RN’s racist and anti-Semitic positions have been somewhat mitigated.

Under the conditions of a crisis-ridden economic transformation and a pronounced political fluidity, i.e., weakly institutionalised political systems (Kriesi 2014: 372ff.), the parties of the RPR took over government responsibility in the Eastern European world in many cases, sometimes very sustainably. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz has been in power since 2010, and its neoliberal programme is now flanked by social-protectionist interventionism, while the national-conservative position has hardened further. The successes of Fidesz have spilt over into Poland, where the PiS has been in power since 2015 and has positioned itself even more strongly as a supporter of the welfare state. In other countries in Eastern Europe, authoritarian leaders who combine ethnonationalism with hard-line neoliberal concepts have been successful. In the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš governed with the *Akce nespokojených občanů* (ANO; Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) from 2017 to 2021, and in Slovenia, Janez Janša repeatedly governed with the SDS (2004–2008, 2012–2013, and 2020–2022).

Against the backdrop of the historical experience of fascism, a contemporary Southern European world of right-wing populism did not seem to exist until recently. In Italy, Lega was originally a regional party. In 2018, it expanded to the whole of Italy under the leadership of Matteo Salvini and radicalised itself in terms of migration policy. However, the post-fascist FdI of Georgia Meloni, founded in 2012, profited most from the involvement of Lega in the Draghi cabinet (2021–2022) and has led the right-wing government in coalition with Lega and Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* since 2022. The electoral successes of VOX in Spain, a neoliberal-nationalist group that split from the conservative *Partido Popular* (PP; People's Party) and has been gaining in popularity since 2018, fuelled by the Catalonia conflict, are even more recent. The Portuguese *Chega!*, which was founded in 2019 and came third in the 2022 parliamentary elections with 7.4 per cent of the vote, can be classified similarly. The *Laikós Síndesmos – Chrysí Avgí* (Golden Dawn, GD) in Greece, which gained importance in the wake of the deep economic crisis and participated in parliament from 2012 to 2019, is on the extreme fringe of the parties discussed here with its neo-fascist orientation.

If the parties of the RPR are concerned with increasing their power in the public communication and decision-making spheres, the conditions for trade union action are somewhat different. This should not be misunderstood: Socio-economic, cultural, and political-institutional dynamics are also significant factors for trade unions. The employment situation, the dominant discourse, and political majorities have a significant influence on trade unions' abilities to realise their own goals and strategies. At the same time, trade unions have certain limits when they try to

actively influence the economic and socio-political conditions for action. This is not least due to the fact that they operate in a specifically defined field of action, that of labour policy.

Labour policy encompasses all processes and activities through which the production and labour process is shaped politically, i.e., through collectively binding agreements, including laws, (collective) agreements, and even conventions. In a narrower sense, this applies to the “politics in production”, which encompasses the institutional and legal arrangements and political negotiation processes in companies, as well as the “politics of production”, which are the labour policy implications that become effective across companies through activities in flanking policy fields. The latter includes, above all, labour market and social policy, as well as policies related to technology, industry, infrastructure, and finance. The linking of these two spheres differs between individual European countries due to the unique economic structures and institutional characteristics of the capitalist models, especially the systems of industrial relations and welfare states (Bieling / Buhr 2015; Lehndorf et al. 2017). Trade union competencies and potential for political influence, therefore, vary greatly. In some countries, their scope of action is strongly institutionalised, while in other countries, trade unions have less involvement. Depending on the location, the company level, the cross-company level, regional, or national levels can be of particular importance. Trade unions’ ideological orientation also varies by country, where in some contexts, competition is key and, in others, the model of a single general trade union is dominant. These features correspond to specific relationships between trade unions and the state, government, and political parties, which are often also reflected in the considerable diversity of the operational and socio-political self-understanding of the trade unions.

## TRADE UNION CONDITIONS FOR ACTION

Contextual factors play a significant role in unions’ capacity for action and should be taken into account when looking at developments in individual countries. Moreover, a brief sketch of the trade union arenas of action makes it clear that the goals and priorities of the political parties, including right-wing populist parties, and the trade unions differ structurally. Both are concerned with establishing laws and agreements on labour policy that are advantageous and appropriate from their point of view. However, the right-wing populist parties do this to increase their own power in the systems of political representation, while trade unions are concerned with the direct representation of the interests of employees in compa-



nies and supra-company labour policy. Here, as the experiences of European Union member states show, the right-wing populist parties and trade unions do come in to conflict, and when they do so, they clash over specific objectives.

The motives and considerations of the trade unions are not exclusively determined by their role in the national industrial relations systems or their aim to maintain their own socio-political self-image. As representatives of the interests of employees in labour policy conflicts and negotiation processes, it is important that unions preserve and, when possible, strengthen their power resources. Based on an analytical heuristic (Brinkmann et al. 2008; Schmalz / Dörre 2014: 222ff.), which attempts to determine the conditions and options of strategic choice, trade union power resources can be systematised, as follows.

First, *structural union power*, derived from the position of employees in the economic system, is a fundamental component of trade union power resources. On the one hand, this structural power is a product of *production power*, the ability of workers to disrupt the production and work process and the management's capacity to prevent such disruptions through flexible production networks and relocation, for example. On the other hand, structural power results from *market power*, the replaceability or indispensability of workers due to their particular professional skills and the existing labour market situation. High unemployment and a large labour supply signal weakened structural power for unions, while full employment and a large demand for workers with specific skill profiles correlate with a time of strengthened structural trade union power. The structural power of trade unions has eroded since the 1970s in most countries due to globalisation, transnational value chains, technological change, mass unemployment, precarious employment, and the increased power of capital. More recently, the picture seems to be changing again as many societies face de-globalisation and numerous bottlenecks in the employment system, such as a shortage of skilled workers.

Whether and to what extent trade unions are collective actors capable of asserting the interests of employees is determined not only by their structural power but, above all, by their *organisational power*. This power comes from individual workers uniting in the organisations empowered to represent collective interests. An important indicator of organisational power is the number of members a union has, or more precisely, the union density rate, which is the percentage of the total workforce that are union members. This quantitative factor should not be underestimated, especially since members also make financial contributions, and membership numbers thus contribute to a certain financial power. However, this does



not tell us anything about how the trade unions use this quantitative potential or, more specifically, how they can use it politically. Qualitative aspects contributing to trade union organisational power include, above all, intra-organisational relationships. These qualitative components include the concrete, most efficient use of financial resources for staff, buildings, educational facilities, or strike activities, the involvement and participation of members in union activities, and thus also the everyday solidarity relations. In short, internal organisational cohesion also contributes to organisational power. It can be observed that, from both a quantitative and qualitative point of view, the organisational power of unions has been eroding in many countries since the 1970s; nevertheless, in recent years, this erosion appears to have been halted or at least mitigated.

Trade unions have benefited from the stabilising effect of their *institutional power*. As the term implies, this facet of union power comes from the fact that the agreements reached as the result of past conflicts and negotiations have been legally and institutionally anchored. For example, the results of union-brokered conflict resolution have taken the shape of laws that guarantee employees and the trade unions themselves protection, information, and participation rights (freedom of association, right to strike, co-determination, health, and dismissal protection, for instance) and welfare state security, as well as certain obligations and a rules-based behaviour. Moreover, union negotiations have led to the legally anchored collective bargaining arrangements, which define important conditions of employment, including payment, night and weekend bonuses, working hours and holidays, and training and further education, at the supra-company and, in part, at the company level. In addition, the conventions that provide for specific forms of trade union consultation at different levels, which are sometimes also institutionally established within neo-corporatist settings and are usually oriented towards social partnership, are grounded in legal frameworks. As already indicated, the forms of institutional power for the trade unions are multifaceted. On the one hand, they are relatively durable and can stabilise the collective representation of interests even during periods of political weakness. On the other hand, they also have a behavioural control component that contains and channels class conflict so that trade unions and workers often find it difficult to articulate existing discontent and conflicts of interest in a politically visible way.

Finally, the fourth form of power held by unions is *societal power*. This consists of the trade unions' capacity to cooperate with other organisations in civil society, including social movements, the media, and different kinds of associations or parties, in order to bring their own goals and interests to public attention. In this

sense, the societal power of trade unions has two main aspects. First, there is co-operation, which is understood as the formation of civil-society alliances with actors who pursue similar or at least complementary interests. In alliance with other forces, the limited societal power of the trade unions can sometimes be considerably strengthened when the chorus of pro-union voices swells during strikes and campaigns, for example. Secondly, there is discursive power. By problematising, scandalising, or politicising certain developments and – in coordination with other civil society actors – publicly articulating their views and narratives, trade unions can increase their power of interpretation, sometimes to the level of discursive hegemonic. In the struggle for union-friendly political majorities and legislation, this fourth type of power is far from meaningless. The other forms of power outlined above, particularly organisational and institutional power, can also be strengthened by the societal power of trade unions.

The rise in importance of right-wing populist organisations and discourses is not without consequences for trade union power resources. Thus, structural trade union power is weakened by the fact that the fragmentation and rivalry increasingly found within the workforce are strengthened by right-wing populist discourses of ethnonationalism, for example. This also applies to the organisational power of trade unions since ethnically motivated conflicts or the founding of rival organisations by the RPR make internal organisational solidarity fragile and impair the effective representation of interests by trade unions in companies and supra-company affairs. This is also reflected in the forms of institutional power, i.e., the negotiated welfare state and labour policy agreements. Even if they remain legally and institutionally unchanged, their social content and the practices of their everyday operation may vary. The existing labour and socio-political regulations (the welfare state, collective bargaining policy, co-determination in companies, and so on) are redefined in a racialised and socially exclusionary way, especially when right-wing populist views gain influence in economic, social, and democratic political discourses and push back the societal power of trade unions.

## **RIGHT-WING POPULIST STRATEGIES TOWARDS TRADE UNIONS AND EMPLOYEES**

General tendencies toward right-wing populism can be found in almost all European countries with varying weight and specific emphases. These tendencies unfold through a systemic diffusion as the entire structure of labour organisation and political regulation changes under the influence of right-wing populist dis-

courses and (everyday) conflicts. However, it would be too short-sighted to focus only on the processes of systemic diffusion of right-wing populist perspectives and not also on the ways in which right-wing populist organisations conduct strategic-relational shaping through their political activities. This is especially apparent in the social and labour policy initiatives they launch. In recent years, these have been characterised by a welfare-chauvinist orientation, which, of course, differs from country to country. Depending on the concrete points of reference – the existing social security systems, public services, and labour policy agreements – they can be more socially or neoliberally accentuated.

In essence, welfare-chauvinist programmes are characterised by a nativist or ethnonationalist attitude. This can be seen, for example, in a positive reference to a dominant national culture, which is typically exaggerated and interpreted in an essentialist way. Often, the name of the RPR parties – such as the Sweden Democrats (SD), Alternative for Germany (AfD), and True Finns (now only The Finns) – is an indication of its ethnonationalist orientation. The ethnic component is particularly central and pronounced in the parties of the RPR, which as neo- or post-fascist organisations have broken with the tradition of fascism only half-heartedly, as illustrated by the Golden Dawn in Greece, the very cumbersome RN in France, the FdI in Italy, or the SD in Sweden. For other parties, such as the Progress Parties in Norway and Denmark and The Finns in Finland, ethnic considerations played no or only a subordinate role for a long time; in more recent years, however, these parties too took up such concepts and radicalised themselves toward the right. Meanwhile, ethnonationalist positions have become dominant within the core themes of right-wing populist programmes: The rejection of refugees and migrants, especially from “foreign” cultural spheres; the criticism of the multicultural society, especially if this is characterised by a significant role of Islam; a law-and-order position in order to harshly reject violations of the valid legal order by migrants; a simultaneous rejection of liberal-cosmopolitan arrangements that presumably curtail national sovereignty and strengthen the rights of migrants, but also of women, LGBTQ, and socially disadvantaged groups; and a sceptical or even hostile attitude towards the EU, even if it becomes active in labour and social policy and advocates for minimum social standards, national minimum wage regimes, or the coordination of economic, financial, and labour market policies, for example.

The welfare-chauvinist orientation and neoliberal welfare-state reforms are by no means mutually exclusive. The positions of the AfD in Germany, *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD; Forum for Democracy) in the Netherlands, FrP in Norway, NB in

Denmark, Lega in Italy, SDS in Slovenia, VOX in Spain, and *Chega!* in Portugal all point in this direction. Other parties have positioned themselves more cautiously, including the FPÖ, which now considers itself a “social homeland party”, or the ethnonationalist wing of the AfD, which has discovered for itself a “new social question” that refers to a conflict between insiders and outsiders, between the German and non-German population, while also taking part in protests against factory closures in the eastern German states. Still other RPR parties have long seen themselves as socially oriented organisations, such as PiS in Poland, which increased child benefits and lowered the retirement age before the 2015 parliamentary elections (Becker 2018: 97) and the SD in Sweden, which presents itself as “socially conservative” and argues for the defence of workers’ social rights, not least family, health, and pension insurance. The same applies to the PVV in the Netherlands (Erben / Bieling 2021). Like The Finns in Finland, the RN in France claims to defend the welfare state for the “ordinary people” through opposition to immigration.

Though they all have different starting points, all parties on the RPR have positioned themselves as welfare-chauvinists. They push to privilege the so-called autochthonous population according to ethnonationalist or nativist ideas. The non-universalist, specifically conditionalised elements of the welfare state form an important point of reference. Such elements are present in all welfare states, even in the more universalist Scandinavian models. They can be strengthened and re-arranged by means of ethnic accentuation via “exclusionary solidarities” (Scorce et al. 2022). Accordingly, the parties of the RPR do not advocate a dismantling of the welfare state but rather a restructuring of it. This means that, in most countries, they defend, at least superficially, the national models of the welfare state and labour relations in order to tailor them more closely to the presumed needs of the autochthonous population. The focus here is on distributive welfare state benefits. Typical examples of this are the increase in child benefits and the lowering of the retirement age, as practised by the PiS in Poland (Becker 2018: 97), or the defence of family, health, and pension insurance by the SD in Sweden and the PVV in the Netherlands (Erben / Bieling 2021).

The socio-political developments taking place in the countries considered here correspond to the following pattern: In general, the RPR parties are careful to discuss the level of welfare state benefits in a diffuse, often contradictory manner for electoral reasons, so as not to scare off any voter groups. At the same time, the social policy programmes of the RPR parties have a relatively clear profile. Most RPR parties tend to strengthen the distributional aspects of the welfare state in order to implement a nativist, migrant-excluding practice that instead benefits their own

clientele. In return, the social investment welfare state services that are accessible to all and have egalitarian effects, such as active labour market policies, education, and other social infrastructures, are neglected or cut (Enggist / Pinggera 2022).

The welfare-chauvinist restructuring of the welfare state is not without consequences for trade unions, not least because of the implications for labour policy. However, the impacts are largely indirect. Directly, the RPR parties target the trade unions with their labour policy activities. Thus, the right-wing populist parties strive to push back against the influence of trade unions, as they represent a (potential) bifold counterweight against the political agenda of the RPR parties: On the one hand, they do not fit into the concept of an ethnically determined people's community, with elements of paternalistic social care, because the very structure of the union expresses a class-based, inclusive solidarity for all workers, regardless of origin, gender, religious conviction, and so on; and on the other hand, as intermediary organisations with their own power resources, they oppose all efforts to co-opt workers in an authoritarian manner. In the confrontation between RPR parties and the trade unions, populist considerations come to the fore insofar as trade unions represent intermediary organisations – between the workers and labour politics – which oppose the direct, immediate relationship between the people and the political leadership.

A central point of attack for the RPR parties is, therefore, to target the trade union's institutional power. This is particularly pronounced in the neo-corporatist models in Northern and Western Europe, where trade unions and employers' associations are systematically involved in political negotiation and decision-making processes. An important element of institutionalisation in the Scandinavian countries is the Ghent system, which is a system of state support for unemployment insurance administered by the trade unions that supports high levels of trade union organisation. In Denmark, the DF worked with the bourgeois parties to allow competing cross-industry insurance schemes (Bandau 2018: 102f.), while in Sweden, the SD is now pushing to replace the Ghent system with a compulsory state insurance scheme (Erben / Bieling 2020: 97). Other proposals to undermine institutional trade union power include abolishing tax-subsidised union membership fees and questioning the forms of effective trade union representation in companies, supported by industrial action (ibid.: 89). In Austria, too, the FPÖ is striving to weaken institutional trade union power. As a governing party, it has not only often bypassed the trade unions on labour and social policy issues, in contrast to the usual practice, but has also launched an attack on the Chambers of Labour, which, as the embodiment of an institutionalised social partnership, were to have their funding cut.

In France and in the southern European societies, the situation is similar, although the forms of neo-corporatist institutionalisation are rather weakly anchored. In many cases, they only emerged in the 1990s when new social pacts were introduced to adjust national models of capitalism and social welfare to EMU requirements (Hassel 1998). In Italy, this was done through concerted action, which, since 1993, has included an annual protocol on income policy and planned inflation, a practice that became non-binding after 2009. In other countries, too, the RPR parties have pushed for the erosion of such arrangements. In Spain, VOX has not only challenged state support for collective bargaining and the social dialogue but, as the governing party in the region of Castile and León, it has also suspended it. In France, the RN has repeatedly pushed to override the legal modalities of trade union representation in workplaces, which among other things, require trade unions' independence. This has not been limited to France; other countries have witnessed numerous expressions of programmatic anti-unionism. These can be understood as an outcome of the RPR parties' desire to develop direct relationships with workers in order to strengthen the national community and ward off industrial disputes that weaken the national economy. The pronouncements of VOX in Spain, *Chega!* in Portugal, and Golden Dawn in Greece are all quite similar; they can be interpreted as an "open declaration of war" against the trade unions, with GD's attacks extending beyond the verbal to the physical.

In Eastern European societies, the curtailment of institutional trade union power is less prominent. This is mainly due to the fact that, in contexts where it was possible to establish forms of social dialogue, cooperation with trade unions has often only been symbolic in character. Slovenia is somewhat of an exception; neo-corporatist structures prevailed against the vagaries and crisis dynamics of the transformation period in this country. However, they were undermined by Janša's SDS to the extent that the trade unions were no longer included, and often not even consulted, in labour and social policy decision-making processes.

The activities of the RPR parties not only aim to weaken institutional trade union power, they are equally concerned with curtailing trade union organising power. In almost all countries, they have tried to build right-wing trade union parallel structures. However, they have not been very successful so far. In Sweden, *Lön-tagarna* (The Workers) was not able to recruit more than 200 members after its founding. In Austria, the *Freiheitliche Arbeitnehmer* (FA; Liberal Workers) had a share of about 10 per cent of the vote in the elections to the Chamber of Labour and was thus far from being able to exploit its potential. The "alternative" trade unions founded in Germany – *Arbeitnehmer in der AfD* (AiDA; Workers in the AfD),

*Alternative Vereinigung der Arbeiter* (AVA; Alternative Association of Workers), *Alternative Öffentlicher Dienst* (AöD; Alternative Civil Service), *Alternativer Arbeitnehmerverband Mitteldeutschland* (ALARM; Alternative Worker's Association of Central Germany) – play essentially no role in German companies. Even the right-wing candidate lists for works councils, most of which call themselves *Zentrum* (Centre), had only sporadic success. In other European societies, the situation is similar but contextual. The right-wing trade unions founded in France in the 1990s in the areas of police, public transport, postal services, and the penal system have all been banned because of their lack of political independence, whereas in Italy, the nationalist *Unione Generale del Lavoro* (UGL; General Labour Union), with its 1.8 million members, has a certain political weight. At the same time, however, Italy's other big unions – *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL), *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* (CISL), and *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL) – have been relatively stable, so far.

In Spain, VOX founded a right-wing union, which, as the name *Solidaridad* suggests, is modelled after the anti-communist *Solidarność* in Poland. In Portugal, *Chega!* intends to realise a similar project with *Solidariedade*. As anti-system union, *Solidaridad* propagate a patriotic project directed equally against the “corrupt class unions” and “illegal immigration”. The target groups are considered to be workers in public administration, schools (teachers), health services, and especially the police. Faced with difficulties in gaining a foothold in the workplace, VOX turns to Spain's civil servants' union, *La Central Sindical Independiente y de Funcionarios* (CSIF; Central Independent and Public Employees' Trade Union). The police forces are also the target of the GD's activities in Greece. Despite all their efforts – not to mention the deep social crisis and the sometimes-heated political atmosphere – the GD in Greece has not succeeded in anchoring itself in the trade unions.

These difficulties indicate that there is a wide gap, at least an ideological distance, between the positions of the right-wing populists and those of the trade unions. At the same time, large groups of employees, and even unionised employees, are prepared to vote for RPR parties and candidates in elections. As evidenced by election results, the activities of the right-wing populists attract these social groups. In some countries (i.e., Hungary and Poland), RPR parties have become a hegemonic force. In Italy, they are on their way to becoming one. So, it fits the picture that significant parts of the labour force, especially blue-collar workers, have turned to right-wing populist parties. If the statistical data is reliable – information is not always measured and attributed in the same way – about 60 per cent of blue-collar voters voted for the FPÖ in Austria (2017) and 27.2 per cent for the SD



in Sweden (2022). In Italy, blue-collar voters cast ballots for two RPR parties, with 34.6 per cent voting for the FdI and 13.4 for the Lega (2022). In Germany, the AfD also has an above-average share of the vote among workers. In Finland, The Finns, as a “worker’s party without socialism”, has a lower approval rating among trade union members, but the level is still remarkably high. Employees and trade union members are, therefore, not ideologically immune. Apparently, many trade union members hold similar views on many political issues, such as migration, distributive justice, gender (in)equality, and hostility to science. If, in Norway, the FrP has dropped from its high of 23 per cent of the electorate (2009) to 11.6 per cent (2021), it is not due to trade union members, of whom about 10 per cent form a relatively stable base, but rather to the growing acceptance of the multicultural society in other social milieus.

In France, where Marine Le Pen won more than 40 per cent of the vote in the last run-off election for president, the RN is mainly anchored in the structurally weak regions. Given France’s Roman majority voting system, receiving 17 per cent of the votes in the parliamentary elections (2022) is a very reasonable outcome for the FN/RN. A more detailed breakdown of past elections since 2002 shows that the right-wing populists are also disproportionately supported by members of some trade unions, especially the Catholic reformist *La Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC; French Confederation of Christian Workers) and the *Force Ouvrière* (FO; Worker’s Force). The support of workers for the GD in Greece is much weaker. Here, a relatively large number of young people, mainly low-skilled, unemployed, or precariously employed young men, voted for the GD, with a strong presence in Athens’ harbour district Piraeus standing out.

The right-wing attempts to weaken institutional and organisational trade union power are hard to miss, but the limits of these activities cannot be ignored. The RPR parties often present themselves in the public sphere as powerful in discourse and thereby also, at least partially, impair the societal power of trade unions. At the same time, the right-wing populist criticism of the trade unions remains highly contradictory. On the one hand, the trade unions are criticised for fuelling “class struggle” and affecting the performance of the national economy through a consistent interest representation, including through strikes; on the other hand, the social partnership orientation is repeatedly the focus of criticism. This is particularly the case when the trade unions come to an agreement with the political elites – governments and employers’ associations – in the neo-corporatist arrangements or when their representatives act as co-managers in committees of company co-determination.



Directed against established trade union practice, the RPR parties are mostly oriented, often implicitly, towards forms of nationalist-authoritarian corporatism that adhere to the ideal of a homogenous and simultaneously internationally competitive national community. The understanding of the social interests of the workers is not very substantial. Everyday practices of the RPR parties, however, point in the opposite direction: They usually vote with the bourgeois parties, as seen with the PVV in the Netherlands, for example. They enter into an open or covert government coalition with them, e.g. the SD in Sweden, in order to criticise the minimum wage or to push for the abolition of tax concessions for trade union membership fees. Like the FPÖ, they work in close cooperation with the conservatives (ÖVP) to implement a neoliberal economic and social policy agenda. As seen by the Lega in Italy, they advocate for a socially regressive “flat tax”, or, in the case of the Spanish VOX, they oppose progressive labour and social policy government initiatives, such as short-time working benefits, the minimum wage, the regulation of telework, or a framework agreement on pension reform. They refrain from supporting trade unions when they try to fend off the employers’ attacks about employment conditions, as seen in Finland. Moreover, they sometimes organise strike-breakers in cooperation with the big companies to keep the economy going, as the GD in Greece did. All of this shows that the social base of the RPR parties lies only partly and often only very superficially in the worker milieus. In the end, the interests of companies and the self-employed are usually given greater importance.

## PROBLEM PERCEPTION OF THE TRADE UNIONS

The programmatic statements and activities of the RPR parties, not least the initiatives concerning welfare arrangements and labour relations, and thus also the trade unions, aim at a reconfiguration of social relations of solidarity. This is obvious insofar as the forms of solidarity are not simply given but are continuously reproduced and changed in everyday communication and negotiation processes. Solidarity is to be understood as a specific social relationship in which the actors involved coordinate their own interests to achieve common goals through the mediation of shared values and mutual obligations (Bayertz 1998). How this happens is decisively structured and relatively consolidated by social institutions and arrangements, not least by the welfare state and industrial relations. This means that the (competing) social ideas of solidarity (Altreiter et al. 2019) are inscribed in given institutional arrangements. Conversely, this also means that the change in the mode of operation of the welfare state and labour relations is accompanied by a transformation of solidarity.

The activities of the RPR parties and the networks and movements that support them can be interpreted in this sense. Their welfare-chauvinist orientation opposes the institutionalisation of a comprehensive and inclusive or “universalistic” solidarity and, in return, promotes forms of an “exclusionary” solidarity that excludes or degrades social groups beyond the autochthonous majority community, i.e., discriminates against them and puts them in a worse position. The trade unions mostly view the initiatives that point toward an often conservative-traditionalist justified ethnonationalist defined closure or segmentation with great concern: Firstly, because the privileging of the autochthonous population, and especially the autochthonous male population, runs counter to their own objectives and values of non-discrimination; secondly, because such initiatives promote the erosion of class-based solidarity, i.e., undermine the everyday practices of an effective union representation of interests; and thirdly, because these processes are flanked in all countries by attacks on institutional and organisational trade union power.

The above-mentioned dimensions of concern are seen differently by the individual trade unions. Nevertheless, there is unanimous concern that the institutional and organisational power of the trade unions will be further weakened by right-wing populist activities. Since these two forms of power largely determine the conditions for action in labour policy, such attempts by the RPR parties are opposed by the trade unions — especially since they had already been curtailed in many countries in the previous phase of neo-liberal modernisation. On the one hand, the trade unions try to defend the systems of neo-corporatist participation and negotiation of interests at the national or central government level: This can be seen in the Ghent system in Scandinavian countries, or the role of the Chambers of Labour and the self-administration of social insurance in Austria. In Southern and Eastern European countries, however, it is much more difficult to maintain institutionalised social pacts in view of the low level of trade union organisation found in Italy, Spain, and Slovenia. On the other hand, they try to defend institutional trade union power at the workplace level, often in alliance with other political parties or civil society actors. Attention is mostly focused on limiting or containing right-wing influences in companies. The FA in Austria and the various Zentrum organisations in Germany are relatively isolated, and in France, the right-wing trade unions have often failed to reach the 10 per cent threshold in elections for workers’ representation or have now even been banned by the courts.

Defending institutional and organisational power is essential for trade unions. However, it is not systematically linked to the other two concerns, non-discrimination and class-based solidarity. This is already evident from the fact that there

are very different ideas among workers, trade union members, and trade union officials about what contemporary relations of solidarity should look like and whether and how trade unions should act on them. The heterogeneity reflects the competing socio-political preferences as well as the organisational policy orientation of the trade unions. This is evident within the individual unions, but even more so between them, as their self-image sometimes diverges considerably. The differences between the ideologically oriented trade unions and the general trade union organisations are not insignificant. However, the difference between unions that position and engage themselves socio-politically and those that see their primary task as providing services for their members seems to be more significant.

The trade union confrontation with the RPR parties is part of the broader social struggle for cultural or ideological hegemony. These struggles are mainly fought in the public sphere. The activities of the RPR parties are often supported directly or indirectly by social protest movements. Examples of direct support include *Pegida* in Germany and *Movimento Zero* in Portugal. More indirect interactions between protest and party can be found in the example of the *Querdenken* movement in Germany, the protests against pandemic management in Italy, and the “Yellow vests” in France. Demonstrations and protests do not always proceed without violence. In Greece, numerous migrants and trade unionists were the target of right-wing attacks, and in Italy, after the attack on the CGIL headquarters, other offices and Chambers of Labour were targeted as well.

Such an escalation of public confrontation contributes to the trade unions’ highly politicised perception of the rise and increased significance of the RPR parties. Thus, the CGT and the CFTD in France, the CGIL in Italy, the unions of the GSEE and the ADEDY in Greece, the ÖGB in Austria, and the DGB unions in Germany are not only very sensitised, but they also see the confrontation with the forces of the RPR as a primarily political question. In contrast, trade unions in other countries often react more cautiously. In the Netherlands, there is, at best, moderate to weak politicisation. Similarly, the interactions in Finland, on the part of the *Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö* (SAK; Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, the *Toimihenkilökeskusjärjestö* (STTK; Finnish Confederation of Professionals), and the *Korkeakoulutettujen työmarkkinakeskusjärjestö Akava*; (AKAVA; Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland), and in Denmark, can even be characterised as having political restraint. Although the trade union leadership stands for a policy of anti-discrimination, it does not give much weight to this aspect. Under the growing influence of right-wing discourse, concern about political escalation (and the threat of losing members) often results in avoiding “sensitive issues”.

All this suggests that the political culture of the country and the activities of the RPR have a decisive influence on trade union perceptions. However, it is not enough to let these two aspects carry the full explanatory burden. At least as important seems to be the development of the aforementioned self-image on the basis of which the trade unions operate. After all, quite different political perceptions and reactions can be identified even in countries where public conflicts are more moderated (Erben / Bieling 2019). A typical example of these can be found in Sweden. Here, the perception of the SD by the *Landsorganisationen i Sverige* (LO; Swedish Trade Union Confederation) is clearly politicised, to the point that the LO is very active in the election campaign, while the *Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation* (TCO; Sweden's Confederation of Professional Employees) and the *Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation* (SACO; Sweden's academics' union known as the Confederation of Professional Associations) see themselves as party-politically "neutral" and keep a low profile in the debate with the right-wing populists. A similar picture can be seen in the Netherlands, where the *Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging* (FNV; Federation of Dutch Trade Unions) takes a clear position, while the *Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond* (CNV; Christian Trade Union) and the *Vakcentrale voor Professionals* (VCP; Academic Staff Union) are very hesitant. Similar differences, even if not quite as pronounced, can also be seen in Austria within the ÖGB and in Germany within the DGB.

The rather passive and reserved, in a certain sense "depoliticised", view of the right-wing populist challenge thus stems from several root causes. It results partly from the political culture of the country as well as from the operational self-image of the trade unions. The Danish example is instructive in that it shows how these two aspects can intertwine and mutually reinforce each other. Thus, in Denmark, and to a certain extent also in Austria and Finland, processes of "normalisation" can be observed. Such processes show the adaptation to a welfare-chauvinist reform agenda, but above all right-wing interpretations and narratives that come to be considered a "normal" part of public discourse and are adopted in some respects by the conservative, liberal, and sometimes even social democratic parties. Such shifts are not without consequences for trade unions. They contribute to the fact that the trade unions increasingly see the RPR parties, in this case, the DF – regardless of their ethnonationalist orientation – as an "acceptable" and "suitable" interlocutor. However, such a perspective is neither self-evident nor inevitable but instead is presupposed by a certain depoliticisation of the trade unions. This seems to be the case for trade unions that see themselves primarily as service providers. Not infrequently, depoliticisation has also been promoted by the fact that the established left parties and

the trade unions have decoupled from each other financially, organisationally, and programmatically, and this is only insufficiently compensated for by personal networks.

## TRADE UNION STRATEGIES AND EXPERIENCES

Just as the contexts of right-wing populism and the forms of trade union perception of the problem differ, so do the reactions of the trade unions. These also reflect the specific national conditions for action and the traditional self-understandings of trade union organisations. In addition, there is also the dimension of a “strategic choice”, i.e., the political reflections, consultations, and, ultimately, decisions that have produced specific strategies and practices in dealing with RPR parties. The strategies and practices of the countries discussed can be categorised as follows:

- First of all, it is noticeable that, in some countries, trade unions have hardly any experience with right-wing populism. Although founded in 2013, the Spanish *VOX* has only been a political player since 2018. The electoral successes of *Chega!* in Portugal, founded in 2019, are even more recent. In both countries, the recent fascist past – the transition to democracy occurred only in the mid-1970s – probably still acts as an inhibitive factor. In addition, trade unions committed to labour and socio-political issues in both countries helped limit the establishment of the newly founded right-wing populist trade unions (*Solidaridad* in Spain and *Solidariedade* in Portugal). The position of the trade unions in Greece, where the neo-fascist GD is, in some ways, a special case, was even more consistent. In Greece, through consistent criticism and cooperation with civil society organisations, i.e., with internationalist-oriented (anti-fascist) initiatives, it was possible to strengthen socially inclusive, community-based solidarity relations and to push back the GD.
- In other countries, trade unions also follow a “hard line” in dealing with right-wing populist-affiliated trade union members who expose themselves publicly and, for example, run for RPR parties. In France, about 50 RN activists have left the CGT in recent years, either through formal expulsion or political pressure. The central criteria for justification were always the rejection of the “priority for natives” policy propagated by the RN and the maintenance of the principle of trade union independence. The other unions, the CFDT and FO, basically take a similar position. Despite some differences, the unions are

working together on this issue. This means that they publicly stand up for the goals of a workers' movement in solidarity and against all forms of discrimination. They have again taken a very clear position against the RN, also in the context of presidential or parliamentary elections, although the FO has sometimes been somewhat reticent.

- In the remaining countries, unions likewise take a clear stand against the RPR parties. However, their approach has been somewhat more differentiated in some respects. On the one hand, they accept that a considerable part of their membership is also a member of a party of the RPR; on the other hand, they become active when exponents of right-wing populism aspire to fulfil important tasks, for example, as shop stewards, or even to get a leadership role in the union. In Sweden, for example, the LO's Metalworkers' Union has strictly forbidden this, and in the DGB and ÖGB, too, there is a clear anti-fascist basic consensus that constitutes a "red line", despite the unions' non-partisan stance. If human rights and democracy are endangered and anti-union positions are taken, then these incompatibility resolutions take effect. In this respect, there is a clear defence against racism and discrimination, but also a willingness to engage in dialogue with workers with right-wing populist affinities to ensure a high quality of everyday representation of interests.
- Another reaction is to deny or disregard right-wing populist activities. This reaction is most common in countries where there has been a "normalisation", i.e., adaptation of public discourses and political agendas to the positions of RPR parties, and where trade unions see themselves less as an organised solidaristic community of all employees but primarily as service providers. Therefore, very pragmatically oriented trade unions that think in terms of political "neutrality" tend to be more tolerant of right-wing positions and activities. This tendency is particularly common among Danish unions but can also be found in Finland, where the academic union STTK has entered a dialogue with The Finns. In the Netherlands, it can be seen how different trade union self-conceptions lead to divergent strategies (Erben / Bieling 2020): While the social democratic-oriented FNV takes a clear public position, the Christian CNV keeps a 'neutral' distance, and the academic union VCP avoids confrontation. A similar differentiation can be seen in Sweden, where both the white-collar union TACO and the academic union TCO publicly distance themselves from the SD.

The differentiation of reactions and strategies in dealing with right-wing populist activities made here is relatively rough and not much more than a first approxima-

tion. To better understand and determine the trade union options and restrictions more precisely, the different arenas in which the trade unions operate must also be included in the consideration as well. In the country studies, the focus was, on the one hand, on organisational policy concepts with right-wing trade unions and right-wing populist-affiliated employees and trade union members, and, on the other hand, on the public sphere, i.e., the arena of socio-political disputes. Here, trade unions generally present themselves as organisations that claim to represent the interests of all workers effectively and in solidarity and to counteract the various forms of discrimination. Differences become apparent when it comes to compromising on issues of solidarity and non-discrimination or rejecting such compromises and engaging in socio-political discussions in a publicly visible way. Examples of this second option were clearly visible in trade union involvement in election campaigns, such as in Sweden or France; participation in political campaigns in Spain and Norway, for instance, in defence of universal rights and cultural diversity; and involvement in civil society protests and alliances against the activities of the RPR parties, e.g., against the Janša government in Slovenia, against the GD and the neo-fascist attacks in Greece, or in the attempt to stymie the formation of the RPR in Italy.

In addition to the socio-political and organisational dimensions, the country studies repeatedly, but not consistently, focused on the different areas of labour policy in the narrower and broader sense, i.e., the “politics in production” and “politics of production” mentioned in the beginning. The implementation of trade union strategies is closely linked to the forms of institutional trade union power, which are understandably the subject of fierce struggle. In many cases, the trade unions have taken a defensive stance – not only as a result of the RPR parties but in response to the neoliberal reorganisation taking place since the 1980s. This defensive position makes it difficult for unions to openly address the continuing problems of institutional arrangements: For example, the concessions in the social pacts, the restraint in collective bargaining policy or the limits and ambivalences of workplace co-determination. The Danish trade unions have gone one step further and have defended not only Danish competitive corporatism and the flexicurity concept but also its welfare-chauvinist accentuation and have attacked the EU from a nationalist position. The trade unions in other countries are far removed from this, but even so, they still find it difficult to autonomously adopt positions critical of society and capitalism. Often, criticism is left to right-wing actors. These actors increasingly take up the flexibilisation and precarisation of the world of work, as well as the deregulation and privatisation of social security, and try to capitalise on the situation politically.



Accordingly, the challenge is to defend the forms of institutional trade union power while simultaneously presenting themselves as an autonomous force critical of capitalism and society. It may be instructive to adopt a perspective inspired by Karl Polanyi (1977; Bieling et al. 2021: 158), which sees trade unions as organisations that oppose the unleashing of the market and the social inequality and insecurity it increases, and advocate for forms of social protection and participation. By focussing on this, they can counter the conceptions of the RPR parties, which propagate ethnonationalist forms of protection, by ideas and concrete projects of a universalist solidarity, which are consistently implemented and practised by trade unions in everyday life.

However, this also means that labour and social policy undoubtedly remain the primary field of action of trade union practice and strategy building. In the countries studied, there are numerous indications of how a “contemporary class solidarity” can be developed and strengthened from this basis in order to enable progressive (socio-ecological and universalist) reform concepts. In a narrower sense, this includes educational and reflexive work on important issues such as conflict management, anti-fascism, and anti-racism. Such programmes exist in Austria, Germany, Spain, France, and many other countries. The Italian CGIL is very active, as is the ETUC, of course, in establishing transnational networks, training programmes, and information campaigns to counter right-wing populist activities intellectually and discursively. Confronting the RPR is effective when it is accompanied and underpinned by concrete economic and labour policy struggles, such as demonstrations and strikes against neoliberal initiatives, as in Norway, where social dumping strategies were fought off by binding collective agreements and minimum social standards. In combination with initiatives for the integration and equal rights of migrant workers, trade unions in other countries are also working to reflexively renegotiate the content of a “contemporary class solidarity” that has a transnational character and addresses questions of ecology and intersectionality.

However, it would be too one-sided and positive to consider trade unions a consistently important factor in the socio-political struggles for cultural hegemony. Not only do trade union positions point in different directions, but experiences in individual countries also diverge. The divergence has both a spatial and temporal dimension since the political cycles of right-wing populism and the struggles against it are asynchronous, i.e., do not take place at the same time. The resulting lack of clarity is further reinforced by numerous contingencies, which may include, for example, the role of charismatic figures, the public discussion of scan-



dals, or a consistent counter-mobilisation by social movements with the participation of the trade unions. These contingencies and particularities must be kept in mind.

Nevertheless, there is also a structural feature of political conflicts that gives trade unions a very central role in the confrontation with right-wing populism. The structural feature is that whenever RPR parties become significant and gain influence – a rise to prominence fuelled by numerous everyday problems, crises, and discontents – this takes place primarily in the public sphere, i.e., in the areas of political debate. It is only from here that right-wing activities and discourses spill over into workplace relations, where so far they remain comparatively well contained. There’s no evidence of a “long-term anchoring” of right-wing populist actors in the workplace. In Spain, VOX’s open declaration of war on the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT; General Union of Workers) and the *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO; Workers’ Commissions) was not backed up by a right-wing alternative trade union. In other countries, including Portugal, France, Italy, Slovenia, and the Scandinavian countries, right-wing populist organisations do not have a strong workplace base either. Critically distinct from Antonio Gramsci’s Fordism theory, it cannot be assumed that a “right-wing hegemony”, if European societies are on the way to such a hegemony, “springs from the factory” (1991–1999: 2601ff.).

This should not be interpreted to mean that there is no “breeding ground in the world of work” (Sauer et al. 2018: 184) for right-wing populism; after all, in the course of deregulation and flexibilisation of labour relations, segmentary inequalities in the workplace, above all, atypical, often precarious employment and the associated insecurities, have also been reinforced. Specific ideologies that can be used by right-wing populist actors also unfold in the workplace arenas by linking power relations and the discursive processes of the production of meaning. Where this happens, however, these ideologies have primarily a populist component directed against the co-management of works councils and trade unions rather than an ethnonationalist component, which is hardly surprising given the composition of most workforces. The multicultural character of the practical solidarity relations in workplaces thus represents the first important impediment and limitation of right-wing populist activities. A second limitation results from the forms of “workplace universalism”, which, partly in contrast to the different legal standards in public life, is fed by the equal workplace rights of all employees regardless of origin, religion, gender, or citizenship (Schmidt 2020: 19ff.). These rights are implemented in practice by the trade unions, which negotiate collective agreements and implement the collective rights of representation and co-determination at the workplace.

The forms of workplace universalism and the solidarity relations nurtured by these values vary from country to country and have been partially eroded because of the weakened institutional and organisational power of the trade unions. However, they have by no means disappeared and are still an important anchor and starting point for trade union activities against the right. In the workplace arena, trade unions have certain structural advantages: Firstly, they can confront right-wing populist actors offensively, and it is difficult or impossible for them to use ethnonationalist or welfare-chauvinist arguments, as they discriminate against large sections of the workforce. Secondly, the trade unions not only rely on the multicultural composition of the workforce but also on their legal equality in collective agreements and legal foundations, i.e., they can use legally institutionalised anchors to defend themselves against discriminatory practices and discourses. Thirdly, there are numerous examples and experiences conveyed by trade unionists wherein it was, above all, the union members themselves that fought for these labour rights and made them usable in the interest of all workers.

## CONCLUSIONS

The development of the RPR parties sometimes shows a certain fluidity in the individual countries. Despite all fluctuations, however, the approval ratings for the RPR parties are generally rising or remain high. Since no country has yet succeeded in pushing back the RPR parties in the long term, it is difficult to identify any tried-and-true “best practices” for successful trade union dealings with the RPR parties. Moreover, in view of the very different national conditions for action, caution seems appropriate in trying to generalise the practices in individual countries. Learning processes can, at best, be identified with certain reservations. Accordingly, the conclusions outlined here should rather be interpreted as suggestions for reflection and further development of the respective trade union strategies and practices, not as an agenda that simply must be implemented:

- 1) First, it is noticeable that structural trade union power is hardly ever addressed in the country studies. When it is addressed, it is mostly only implicitly. This is hardly surprising for two reasons: Firstly, the competencies and instruments of monetary, economic, cyclical, and thus also employment policy are mainly in the hands of other actors, i.e., the central banks, the European Commission and the national governments; and secondly, structural trade union power is not at the centre of the arguments with the parties of the RPR. It is, therefore, clear that this is not the sphere in which to delve deeper. Nev-

ertheless, it could be helpful to include the forms of structural power more in the development of trade union strategy. In the context of a Keynesian-oriented economic policy, i.e., active monetary, financial, industrial, and structural policies, the conditions for trade union action should generally improve. Moreover, insofar as such a policy helps to absorb and reduce social inequalities and insecurities and to actively shape the future of European societies, it also functions to dry up the socio-economic “breeding ground” for right-wing populist attitudes.

- 2) As far as institutional and organisational trade union power is concerned, the findings of the country studies are empirically rich and differentiated. In some areas, trade union activities against the RPR have been relatively successful and in others, they have achieved less or the results have been rather ambivalent. The focus is often on the defence of institutional trade union power, such as social pacts and corporatist arrangements, collective bargaining agreements or workplace representation. The institutional and legal provisions in all these arenas have been challenged by the RPR parties. At the same time, they function as important reference points for the trade unions to promote and defend the ideas of universalist-oriented solidarity. At the national or supra-company level, the results are mixed. On the one hand, the trade unions have mostly succeeded in defending important aspects of institutional power; in Austria, for example, they’ve done so by retaining the Chambers of Labour and maintaining a high rate of collective bargaining coverage and self-administration in social insurance. In many other countries, unions have also largely been able to defend the social pacts against the attacks of the RPR parties, sometimes in cooperation with the employers, as in Spain. On the other hand, they have often not succeeded in moderating the national-competitive-corporatist character of these arrangements. On the contrary, under the influence of the RPR parties, welfare-chauvinist discourses have gained prominence and have partly guided the reform of the welfare state regimes.
- 3) In the workplace, as an arena of action, trade unions have had to defend their institutional power. In some countries, such as France, Spain, Portugal, and even Germany, there were numerous attacks by the RPR and attempts to establish alternative right-wing unions. All these efforts have been repelled or contained. Apparently, it is not only the multicultural composition of the workforce that comes into play here but also a workplace universalism based on the equal workplace rights of all workers regardless of origin, religion, or

- gender. Although this universalism has become somewhat fragile, it often still contributes to the fact that the experience of “inclusive workplace solidarity” in the everyday business of trade unions can act as an important anchor against the nationalist and racist exclusion discourses of the RPR parties.
- 4) The basis for the durability of this solidarity is a credible, i.e., consistent and effective, trade union representation of interests that includes all dependent employees. However, this is exactly what is endangered in almost all countries by the fact that a large faction of the employees and even a growing part of the trade union membership is turning away from their previously preferred parties and towards right-wing populist positions. This points to an erosion of the organisational power of trade unions. In addition to declining levels of organisational strength, internal cohesion also seems to be waning. This can be understood as a diminishing solidarity among union members themselves. The loss of members and the poor presence in many workplaces are, in turn, a gateway for right-wing populist positions and activities. In many cases, for example, in Germany, Austria, and France, the trade unions are trying to counter this with educational and training activities in combination with making greater efforts, as seen in Norway, to organise migrant workers and to actively involve them in trade union practice.
  - 5) Their success in these endeavours often corresponds to the societal power of the trade unions and a socio-political “climate” that is shaped by ideas of “inclusive” or “universalist” solidarity. Trade unions are not alone in creating such a climate. But they can – in cooperation with other civil society actors – actively contribute to the creation of such a climate through public events, demonstrations, and campaigns. The conflicts with the RPR provide numerous examples of this in the countries studied in this report.

The above points make it clear that the different forms of trade union power are complementary, not substitutive. A union’s weakened institutional and organisational power cannot simply be compensated for with strengthened societal power. This also applies to the confrontation with the RPR. Here, it is advisable for the trade unions to operate from their original areas of labour policy action. This requires, firstly, that they act consistently and authentically in everyday activities, i.e., collective bargaining and workplace representation, in order to win the trust of all employees – and not only the trust of the so-called autochthonous employees – since the crisis of confidence in the institutional political system has also affected the trade unions to some extent. Secondly, this positioning is easier if the

trade unions do not confine themselves to pure service tasks. An effective policy of labour interests in relation to employers always presupposes a capacity for conflict both within and across companies. This implies that the relationship between labour and socio-political activities must be intensively discussed and, if necessary, redefined. Thirdly, it is important to use a broader concept of interests, not only focused on “social class” in the narrow sense but a concept that understands and reflects class in relation to or intersection with other nodes of tension or conflict such as gender and ethnicity. Only in this broader understanding can a contemporary understanding of an “inclusive” and “transnational” solidarity be discursively developed and made practically usable.

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# **COUNTRY STUDY**

## **AUSTRIA**

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## INTRODUCTION

Right-wing extremist and populist parties have experienced a significant increase in popularity over the past two decades in multiple European countries. In Austria, the far-right populist Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (FPÖ; Freedom Party of Austria) has been making strong gains in regional and national elections since the 1990s. As a result, the party has been involved in coalition governments at the regional and national levels on multiple occasions (2000–2005 and 2017–2019 on the national level; 2015–ongoing in Upper Austria; and 2015–2020 in Burgenland) and even as the sole government in Carinthia under Jörg Haider.

Since the turn of the century, the FPÖ<sup>1</sup> has explicitly targeted workers and, like numerous other right-wing populist parties in Europe (Lefkofridi / Michel 2017), has transformed its rhetoric from an openly neoliberal position on welfare state issues to a welfare-chauvinist (Kitschelt 1995) or national-exclusionist social policy position. In Austria, this has been expressed through slogans such as “*Fair. Sozial. Heimmattreu*” [Fair. Social. Patriotic]. The working class and the so-called “everyday man” are the central targets of this agitation. Instead of showing international solidarity with the working class, the FPÖ propagates the juxtaposition of national solidarity of ‘autochthonous’ Austrians against an imagined threat from outsiders, i. e., immigrants. The party thus shifts questions and conflicts about income distribution from the vertical level between the exploited and the exploiting to the horizontal level between different exploited groups (Flecker et al. 2018).

For Austrian trade unions, this leads first to ideological rivalry vis-à-vis questions of solidarity and social policy. Secondly, the FPÖ’s policy while in government, as well as their opposition rhetoric, has been aimed at weakening the organised representation of workers’ interests. Both the Arbeiterkammer (AK; Austrian Chamber of Labour) and the trade union, in the form of the Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund (ÖGB; Austrian Trade Union Federation) and its sub-unions, as well as self-governance in the various social insurance and welfare state institutions

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<sup>1</sup> In the following, we refer to the FPÖ as a right-wing populist party to, on the one hand, facilitate comparison with other country studies, and on the other, to direct the focus to the party’s structure as a populist agitator. Authors from the Documentation Centre for Austrian Resistance emphasise that the term right-wing populism, when applied to the FPÖ, “can only describe the form of agitation; the ideological core elements [...] are to be examined to be examined using terms from the concept of right-wing extremism. [...] The FPÖ is, at its core, a right-wing extremist party, even though not all its voters share in this ideology or can be described as right-wing extremists” (Bailer 2016: 1).

(Public Employment Service, health insurance, and general accident insurance) have been and continue to be the targets of verbal attacks as well as (partly implemented) plans, to curtail their financial resources and capacity for co-determination by altering the composition of decision-making bodies to shift the weight to the employer. Moreover, the FPÖ pushed for the extensive exclusion of trade unions from legislative processes, undercutting Austria's previously strong tradition of social partnership.

In addition to the FPÖ, the New People's Party under Sebastian Kurz<sup>2</sup> can also be categorised as a right-wing populist party. While in a coalition government with the FPÖ (2017–2019), the party played a key role and was a participating driving force in measures to weaken the political power of workers' interest groups. Moreover, it participated in ideological agitation against refugees, thereby promoting division among working people.

Austria is a very interesting case for studying the effects and challenges right-wing populism poses for trade unions precisely because of the combination of a strong tradition of social partnership and the existence of an already strong and influential right-wing populist party (FPÖ). That said, there have been only a few studies on this topic to date (Erben / Bieling 2020; Mosimann et al. 2019). At present, there have been no large-scale studies examining the attitudes of trade union members, for example (such as in Germany, Fichter et al. 2008). This study addresses this topic by drawing on the results of previous studies and project-specific interviews, including the European Social Survey (ESS), election day surveys (Zondonella / Perlot 2016), the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), and interviews with trade unionists and an expert on right-wing extremism from the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW)<sup>3</sup> conducted for this purpose.

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<sup>2</sup> For the 2017 National Assembly elections, Sebastian Kurz, then only 31 years old, Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) into "Liste Sebastian Kurz – die neue Volkspartei" (LSK-NVP; the Sebastian Kurz List – the new People's Party). With this, he was able to manoeuvre the struggling People's Party back into the top spot nationwide. Due to corruption allegations in 2021, Kurz resigned as chancellor and party leader. The party now operates under the name "Die Volkspartei" (The People's Party).

<sup>3</sup> The DÖW is a scientific and archival institution sustained by the City of Vienna, the Republic of Austria, and the DÖW Society. Founded in 1963 by former resistance fighters and engaged academics, it focuses on resistance, persecution, as well as right-wing extremism after 1945 (doew.at).

## THE AUSTRIAN SYSTEM OF EMPLOYEE INTEREST REPRESENTATION

Austria has a bi-fold industrial relations system. At the sectoral level, seven sub-unions represent worker interests under the umbrella organisation, the ÖGB. Meanwhile, workers' concerns are represented by works councils at the company and enterprise levels. The power to enter into collective bargaining agreements is held at the sub-union level exclusively. However, in reality, the two levels are intensely intermeshed in the labour and political spheres. The seven sub-unions currently have a total of 1.2 million members. The largest trade union by number of members is the Austrian Union of Private Sector Employees, Graphical Workers and Journalists (GPA-djp) (ÖGB 2022). Moreover, there is a third, alternative space for worker representation in Austria. The Labour Chamber (AK) provides advice on labour law as well as (legal) representation in claims against companies as well as in social and legal matters. Non-union members and employees without a works council are both eligible for support from the AK. In contrast to the political party landscape, where political actors to the left and right of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs* (SPÖ; Social Democratic Party of Austria) and the *Österreichische Volkspartei* (ÖVP, now The People's Party) have been able to assert themselves, a strong system of proportional representation is still present in the social partner interest representation organisations. The Chamber of Agricultural Workers (LKO) and the Chamber of Commerce (WKO) have traditionally been dominated by the ÖVP; in the AK and the ÖGB, the Social Democratic Trade Unionists' Group (FSG) has the largest voting power.<sup>4</sup> When looking at Austria as a whole, around 60 per cent of the votes cast in the 2019 AK elections went to the FSG. This was followed by the worker's group of the ÖVP, the Austrian Worker's Federation – Group of Christian Trade Unionists (ÖAAB-FCG) with 18 per cent, and the Free People's Party (FA) with about ten per cent of the vote.

Since 1957, the social partnership has occupied the intersection between the organisation of industrial relations and the political system in Austria. As a network of relationships between employers, workers, and government bodies, the main tasks of the social partnership are to coordinate interests and seek compromise between capital and labour, as well as to be involved in respective interest representation bodies in the political decision-making process (Tálos/Obinger

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<sup>4</sup> Exceptions include agriculturally heavy, industry-poor provinces such as Tyrol and Vorarlberg, where the workers' organisation of the ÖVP dominate (ÖAAB and FCG).

2020: 19). This is done centrally in the collective bargaining process. The collective agreement system has proven to be very effective in Austria. Of the 98 per cent of private sector employees covered by a collective agreement, around 95 per cent are covered by a sectoral collective agreement and three per cent by a company-level collective agreement (Böheim / Steidl 2017: 208). However, in 2008, just 14 per cent of companies had a works council. This means that only slightly more than half of private sector employees were represented at the company level. The declining prevalence of works councils is also evidence of a growing gap in representation at the company level (Hermann / Flecker 2009).

The ÖGB's power resources<sup>5</sup> have weakened over the last 30 years (for an overview, see Astleithner / Flecker 2018). The institutional power of the trade union has proven to be comparatively robust thanks to its anchoring in the social partnership. However, the scope and extent of its influence are contingent on the context of the (party) political power relations in the country and have, in the past, been curtailed by increasingly prevalent attacks from right-wing conservative governments. Historically, the proximity of the AK to the SPÖ and the strong presence of the FSG in the ÖGB have secured the organisational power of the trade union. In the past three decades, however, the ÖGB, like so many other European trade unions, has struggled with a decrease in membership. The decline in structural power due to economic crises, deregulation of labour relations, and rising unemployment have put workers' organisations on the defensive. In terms of discursive power, the union has learned to present itself as an opponent on important social issues, thus sometimes influencing public opinion. However, the trade unionists interviewed for this report also point to the success of the right-wing discursive shifts in the workplace and society.

Examining the key developments of the last 30 years, the lasting threat of Austrian right-wing populism stands out. In 1970, the ÖGB was at its greatest organisational strength, with 62.8 per cent of employed workers registered as members (Pernicka/Stern 2011: 335). In 1981, it reached its peak in absolute numbers with 1.6 million members (ÖGB 2022). The trade union's organisational power coincided

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5 The power resources approach (Dörre / Schmalz 2014) is a methodology for analysing the capacity of collectively organised workers' interest groups to assert themselves. The authors distinguish between four types of resources: first, structural power, which arises from the social position of workers within the conflict between capital and labour; second, organisational power, which can be measured by trade union, works council, and political party's level of organisation; third, institutional power, which enables the integration of workers' groups into the industrial relations landscape at the national level; and fourth, social power, which describes unions' ability to form alliances and create hegemony in society more broadly.

ed with a period of social democratic governance under Bruno Kriesky and a period of economic upswing across Europe. Although full employment prevailed until 1981 and the neo-liberal turn was delayed in Austria (Penz 2007: 60), it did bring significant cuts for the scope for action of the trade unions when it finally arrived. The deregulation of the labour market led to, among other things, an erosion in work standards and a rise in unemployment. Privatisation, accordingly, has led to a decline in worker organising and has decreased the influence of works councils (Flecker/Hermann 2009: 29). The implementation of relatively mild, market-liberal reforms has resulted in a weakening of organisational trade union power due to dwindling membership, the lack of a sustainable recruitment strategy, and the emergence of gaps in the representation of women and precarious workers (Asleithner/Flecker 2018: 189). With the increasing internationalisation of the Austrian economy and orientation toward the European Economic Union, hits to the institutional power of the trade union have become increasingly noticeable. Social partnership mechanisms no longer have the same effect at the European level. On the one hand, Austria does not have a particularly important status in the EU. On the other, the EU decision-making bureaucracy and its associated deadlines make it difficult to harmonise national interests (ibid.: 190). In addition to the hurdles of Europeanisation, the union is also losing its respected status due to a series of internal corruption scandals. The resulting loss of legitimacy for worker representation organisations can be seen in the declining participation in the AK elections.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the FPÖ exploited the frustration caused by internationalisation and the breaches of confidence committed by the trade unions. It successfully portrayed itself as an anti-EU and anti-corruption party and came to power at the turn of the millennium through a right-wing conservative coalition. The subsequent anti-union and anti-worker policies led to a serious weakening of the ÖGB; consequently, the social partnership was excluded from the political process and a legal challenge to compulsory membership undercut the union's institutional power resources (ibid.: 191). After the end of the FPÖ/ÖVP coalition in 2006, partial gains could be made within the framework of an SPÖ/ÖVP coalition. Moreover, the 2008 financial crisis impact mitigation measures were implemented through the social partnership (ibid.: 193). However, rising unemployment, social inequality, and the increasingly decentralised nature of labour relations continue to put structural and organisational pressure on trade unions. The election analyses from these years show that the SPÖ and FPÖ increasingly shared a pool of voters who traditionally had voted for the SPÖ only (*sora.at*). The trade union has not yet found a sustainable way to take these votes

back. This development incited a feeling of helplessness in dealing with the FPÖ and established a socio-political trend that continues to this day (Astleithner / Flecker 2018: 200).

The right-wing conservative government under Sebastian Kurz from 2017 onwards significantly weakened the trade unions once again. This period of government can be characterised by austerity policies, social reforms in which workers inevitably draw the short straw, and further deregulation and flexibilisation of the labour market, such as the extension of the definition of the working day to 12 hours (for an overview, see Bieling / Erben 2020). These setbacks have been accompanied by historic electoral losses for the SPÖ, further weakening the discursive – as part of social power resources – and the institutional power of the trade union (ibid.: 67, 70). Simultaneously, emphasising alternative interpretations of neoliberal policies and successfully mobilising members against the attacks on worker's rights can be seen as evidence of an attempt on behalf of the trade unionists to revitalise their own discursive and organisational strength (ibid.: 100). In juxtaposition to the government's recent policies, the AK has also managed to regain legitimacy, trust, and approval, in particular when it comes to its advisory capacity.

Formed following the dissolution of the ÖVP/FPÖ government in 2019, the new coalition between the ÖVP and the *Grünen* (Green Party) has a distinctly less anti-union tone. Nevertheless, social partners are largely isolated from the political sphere. Meanwhile, workers' rights have been subject to a series of conservative-liberal adjustments in the past three years, which in real political terms means democratic concessions and financial losses for segments of the population.<sup>6</sup> While labour market measures to safeguard employment during the lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic were implemented through social partnership negotiations, trade union concerns that extend beyond industry and company agreements have not been considered in government decision-making. Institutions close to the ÖVP currently exert far more influence in this realm. Although the ÖGB and AK are gaining discursive support with their demand for an increase in unemployment benefits in the wake of rising unemployment during the pandemic, the government continues to limit itself to one-off payments only. The same applies to the cushioning of the current inflation crisis. Here too, the

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6 Examples include the abolition of the manual labourers' regulation under the pretext of supposed gender equality (ORF 2020; Die österreichische Presseagentur 2022) and the discussion of abolishing the *Jugendvertrauensräte* (Youth Councils of Trust).



government is choosing short-term financial subsidies, a presumably cost-saving path.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the ÖGB is reacting with a package of measures to mobilise trade union power both in upcoming collective bargaining negotiations and in public demonstrations.

## RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN AUSTRIA

The relationship between workers' organisations and the government clearly shows that the extreme right in Austria does not operate like a fringe party but as an integral part of the political landscape. This also influences the level of threat they pose to trade unions. Under Jörg Haider, the FPÖ successfully adapted right-wing extremist positions to the modern context within the framework of a populist turn (Bailer-Galanda / Neugebauer 1997: 55). Along with multifaceted critiques of the political elite of the older parties (SPÖ and ÖVP), the FPÖ tackles issues around reform stagnation, as well as "economy of party membership and privileges" (Pelinka 2017: 4). In the 1990s, the bourgeois middle-class FPÖ increasingly portrayed itself as the party of the "little man" with strong proletarian features (Fallend et al. 2018: 35). This is also reflected in the party's new additional name, the "social homeland party" (*Soziale Heimatpartei*). Topics of migration and Austrian integration into the European community were successful campaign themes for the FPÖ before the turn of the century. From the beginning of the 2000s until mid-2005, the FPÖ succeeds in achieving a coalition government with the ÖVP nationwide for the first time. After the re-establishment of the Grand Coalition in 2006, the FPÖ found itself in the opposition for a considerable period. During this time, and under its new party leader Christian Strache, its claim to represent the "people" against the establishment and its demand for "fairness" for Austrians deepened (Hannig 2017: 237). In addition, the contours of the party's 'anti-Islam' rhetoric have become increasingly clear through racist enemy image construction and presentation in the public sphere – especially in connection with the migration flows in the summer of 2015.

In FPÖ political propaganda, the party focuses in particular on the theme of migration; this is also seen as a central component of its electoral success (Aichholzer et al. 2014). In doing so, it specifically links socio-political topics with migration issues and outwardly portrays a nationalist-exclusionary "solidarity" through restrictions on social benefits for migrants, which in reality also affect Austrian

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7 As of September 2022.

citizens (Flecker et al. 2018). Workers are the clear primary target for their present inflammatory discourse. Sometimes, they even refer positively to the socialist workers' movement, such as with the "October Revolution" campaign posters in Vienna in 2015 (Schindler et al. 2019). This pattern corresponds to a general strategy employed by European right-wing populist parties whereby they attack the established workers' representation organisations and present themselves as an alternative form of workers' representation nationwide (Mosimann et al. 2019).

This strategy appears to be successful in terms of electoral politics. Support for the FPÖ rose sharply between 2002 and 2019, especially among blue-collar workers (see table 1). In the 2002 national elections, only around 10 per cent voted for a right-wing populist party; in 2017, the figure was around 60 per cent. In 2019, approval dropped to just under 50 per cent, which is still significantly higher than at the beginning of the millennium. Among white-collar workers during the same timeframe, support did not increase as sharply but still rose significantly between 2002 and 2017. White-collar approval of the party also decreased from 2017 to 2019 in this group and at an even more pronounced rate than among blue-collar workers. Likely an impact of the FPÖ's "Ibiza affair" and its aftermath, this decline in approval can be seen across all groups (including the self-employed and pensioners). Therefore, it is also likely that this decrease in support for far-right parties in Austria is only temporary.

However, the voting behaviour of employees in AK elections differs drastically from National Assembly elections. In the legal representation of employee interests, the SPÖ-affiliated FSG group is still clearly the strongest force, while the FPÖ's FA faction typically garners significantly less support than in the National Assembly elections (Glötzl / Mitterlehner 2019). At the company level, according to assessments made by trade union officials interviewed for this study, only a small number of works councils are declaredly aligned with the Freedom Party.

Studies on the voting behaviour of trade union members and non-members show union members in Austria have less support for right-wing parties than their non-member counterparts (Oesch 2008, Rennwald 2015, Mosimann et al. 2019).<sup>8</sup> This is also evident in the AUTNES data for the National Assembly elections in 2013 and 2017 (see Table 2), as well as the election day polls for the 2016 presidential runoff, where a majority of members voted for the Green Party candidate (55 per cent)

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<sup>8</sup> However, findings from previous studies on this topic are not homogenous. Instead, they vary by country and by the class affiliation of trade union members.

Table 1  
National Assembly elections – FPÖ votes by employee group

Year	Blue-collar	White-collar	Self-employed	Pensioners
2002	10 %	4 %	18 %	15 %
2008	28 %	20 %	12 %	18 %
2013	33 %	25 %	18 %	17 %
2017	59 %	26 %	23 %	16 %
2019	48 %	12 %	19 %	13 %

Proportion of party preference within the individual status groups, in per cent. Read in separate columns only, e. g., 59 per cent of workers voted for the FPÖ in 2017 in National Assembly elections. Source: electoral analysis 2002–2009, [www.sora.at](http://www.sora.at)

Table 2  
Voting behaviour by trade union membership – Austrian National Assembly Elections (2013 and 2017)

	Member 2013	Non-member 2013	Member 2017	Non-member 2017
FPÖ, BZÖ & TS	33.40%	36.50%	31.40%	34.60%
ÖVP	8.90%	16.80%	19.90%	21.40%
SPÖ	38.10%	17.40%	34.90%	22.30%
Green Party	12.70%	19.70%	2.90%	4.40%

Source: Wagner et al. (2018), AUTNES 2013 (N=1874), 2017 (N=2081), own calculations.

and a small majority of non-members voted for the FPÖ candidate (Zandonella / Perlot 2016). However, the data also show that a significant proportion of trade union members are willing to vote for a right-wing party. For example, in the 2016 run-off election for president, almost 45 per cent voted for the far-right and anti-union FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer (ibid.; see Table 3).

Voting behaviour, however, provides only limited insight into people's attitudes; these decisions are complex and can be made for a multitude of reasons, including strategic motives or to express protest. Therefore, a vote for a party does not guarantee that the person agrees with the positions. Attitudes toward political issues (especially migration and distributive justice) and proximity to right-wing parties are,

Table 3  
Voting behaviour by trade union membership – run-off election for Federal President (2016)

	Member	Non-member
<b>Alexander Van der Bellen</b>	55%	49%
<b>Norbert Hofer</b>	45%	51%

Source: Election Day polling from the 2016 Federal Presidential Election (Zandonella/Perlot 2016).

therefore, also of interest for the study of right-wing extremism among trade union members. As detailed studies on the attitudes of trade union members in Austria have not yet been conducted, data from the ESS is used to provide a rough overview.

A comparison of trade union members' and non-members' attitudes on migration does not produce a clear picture. In individual waves of the ESS survey, a high degree of openness on the part of trade union members on specific issues related to migration is evident, but this is also accompanied by stronger polarisation. In other waves, no significant differences between members and non-members can be observed within individual questions; indeed, a slightly more constrained attitude can be observed among trade union members. Overall, the results can best be interpreted as demonstrating that trade union members have a slightly more positive attitude towards issues related to migration, with no clear difference between the two groups identified (see Table 4). With regard to distributive justice in the form of a state-led reduction of income disparities, significant differences can only be seen in the individual survey waves. In both 2006 and 2018, trade union members were significantly more in favour of a redistribution of income by the state. In other years, there are no significant differences between the groups.

The data on party affiliation, in contrast, shows a clear picture. Fewer trade union members are affiliated with right-wing parties (FPÖ, BZÖ, Team Stronach, and ÖVP) in all survey waves compared to their non-member counterparts.<sup>9</sup> However, when looking at support for the FPÖ in isolation, a growing closeness to the FPÖ among trade union members can be observed over time. In 2002, party affiliation

<sup>9</sup> The Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ; Alliance for the Future of Austria) is a splinter group from the FPÖ, founded by Jörg Haider in 2005. Today the BZÖ is a minor political actor and is only truly relevant in Carinthia. *Team Stronach* is a right-wing party founded by the industrialist Frank Stronach. This party entered the 2013 elections and won 11 seats before disbanding at the end of 2017.

Table 4  
Attitudes towards migration, distributive justice, and party affiliation by trade union membership

	2002	2004	2006	2014	2016	2018
	Member / Non-member					
<b>Migration is ... for the Austrian economy.</b>			n.s.	n.s.		n.s.
Good	52.3/44.9	47.7/36.7			47.0/37.0	
Not sure	26.2/28.4	21.8/24.3			16.4/24.3	
Bad	21.5/26.7	30.8/39.0			36.7/38.7	
<b>Immigration enriches/undermines Austrian culture.</b>	n.s.		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Enriches		48.0/42.7				
Not sure		18.3/25.4				
Undermines		33.7/32.0				
<b>Migration makes Austria a better/worse country.</b>	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.			n.s.
Better				24.6/27.1	28.8/23.3	
Not sure				25.7/33.6	26.1/33.0	
Worse				49.7/39.3	45.1/43.7	
<b>How many immigrants from poorer countries outside of Europe should be allowed to come and live here?</b>	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.			n.s.
Many				11.0/13.3	5.8/12.1	
Some				36.3/32.9	33.2/30.8	
Few				32.6/38.7	42.4/37.6	
None				20.2/15.1	18.7/19.6	
<b>The state should take measures to reduce income inequality.</b>	n.s.	n.s.		n.s.	n.s.	
Agree			75.0/66.1			84.4/77.1
Neither			15.2/19.7			12.1/13.1
Disagree			9.8/14.1			3.5/9.8
<b>Proximity to the right</b>						
FPÖ, BZÖ, & TS	2.6/6.4	2.1/5.2	5.1/8.8	8.7/14.5	15.3/22.6	13.9/12.7
ÖVP	31.3/38.1	35.4/45.1	34.2/48.6	26.5/32.5	22.2/29.4	24.7/37.7
<b>Proximity to the SPÖ</b>	48.7/23.3	45.0/26.8	50.0/22.5	44.9/24.2	47.8/19.8	43.7/25.7

Source: European Social Survey (ESS) Austria, own calculations. \* Figures in per cent; n.s. = no statistically significant difference; data for Austria from 2006 and 2014 is not available; percentages for FPÖ, BZÖ and TS are combined in this table.

\* Variables were recoded and analyses based on cross-tabulations as follows: 1. Trade union membership was reduced to two categories (current trade union members and non-members), folding in the category "former trade union member"; 2. "Migration is good/bad for the Austrian economy" is reduced to three categories (good, not sure, bad); 3. "Immigration generally enriches/undermines Austrian culture" is reduced to three categories (enriches, not sure, undermines); 4. "Migration makes Austria a better/worse country" is reduced to three categories (better, not sure, worse); 5. "The state should take measures to reduce income inequality" is reduced to three categories (agree, neither, disagree); 6. Party proximity to the right is reduced to the respective right-wing populist parties running (FPÖ, BZÖ, Team Stronach) and the ÖVP, all others to "Other"; and 7. Party proximity to SPÖ is reduced to two categories (SPÖ and Other).

for this group was still significantly lower than that of non-members, but the difference diminished over the survey waves until 2018 when it exceeded non-members for the first time. Lower support for right-wing parties among union members in 2018 was only due to the low levels of member affiliation with the ÖVP. Conversely, party affinity to the SPÖ is significantly higher among trade union members than non-members across all survey waves.

This data allows for only a rough overview of the attitudes of trade union members and does not allow for detailed analyses, e. g., by job type, sector, or region. Results from studies in Germany (Fichter et al. 2008) clearly demonstrate that detailed analyses are critically important in order to assess where right-wing tendencies exist or are gaining strength among trade union members.

## TRADE UNIONS' PERCEPTION OF THE PROBLEM

The subsequent presentation of the trade unions' perception of the problem at hand is primarily based on interviews with trade unionists conducted as part of this study. A deliberate attempt was made to include diverse perspectives when selecting interview partners. To achieve this, we first contacted trade union members from a variety of sub-unions. Second, we aimed to recruit interviewees from different levels in company hierarchies and with different political orientations (within the left). The results of the interviews were also contrasted with those from the comparative study by Bieling and Erben (2020). Interview results demonstrate a shift in problem perception on behalf of trade unionists: The largest threat is no longer the "implementation of 'neoliberal' anti-worker laws in concert with a simultaneous propagation of a social justice in the interest of the workers" (Bieling / Erben 2020: 64) as in 2020 by the FPÖ. After two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the context of the current inflation crisis, right-wing discourse (sovereignty) and social and workplace divisions have emerged as central problems.

## CURRENT PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

According to the interviewed trade unionists, the current challenges and problems posed by the right in Austria can be grouped into three main topics: First, shifting discourse and social division; second, the labour market; and third, workers' voting behaviour.

The most important challenge at present, as identified by the majority of the interview partners, is the strengthening of right-wing interpretive power in workplaces. On the one hand, this is linked to an increase in independent works councils and the 'louder' voices of the Freedom party members. On the other, the social climate favours right-wing interpretations of contemporary problems. Our interviewees identified the discursive shift towards the social normalisation of right-wing narratives within the past decades as a serious deterioration. As recently as the 'Summer of Migration' in 2015, the problem no longer only affects 'others' but is also noticeable in their own ranks. There is a clearly observable increase in right-wing positions within the FSG and among FSG works council representatives. There exists, at least in part, a struggle for ideological hegemony within the union's own ranks, especially with regard to xenophobic remarks at the company level and the FSG's relationship with the FPÖ.

Against this background, trade union members who participated in interviews identified current challenges not primarily in terms of an increase in FA works councillors, as numbers remain very low, but in terms of the risk of a tipping point in the environment among FSG works councillors, and the dangers of divisions within companies and trade unions, as well as an accompanying de-tabooisation of right-wing sentiments within trade union collective bodies. Interviewees, in this context, identified climate, migration, and hostility towards science as potential hotbeds of right-wing crisis interpretation. This was demonstrated by the social polarisation during the COVID-19 crisis and its associated conflicts and upheavals. Works councils were faced with the nearly impossible task of keeping the workforce together despite deep ideological divides. Moreover, the pandemic had the additional potential of having an impact on the power of the union to organise; for example, *Menschen-Freiheit-Grundrechte* (MFG; People-Freedom-Fundamental Rights), a small political party critical of vaccination, primarily active in Upper Austria, formed works council rosters at short notice.

Secondly, some interview partners pointed toward the labour market and its fluctuations as a gateway for right-wing demagoguery. Susceptibility is particularly present where there is a disproportionate fear of displacement. In the working-class milieu, for example, the danger is particularly great in sectors characterised by unskilled labour, a high proportion of 'non-core' workers, and temporary work contracts. Accordingly, clearly differentiating between different social positions and groups of workers when it comes to their receptiveness and susceptibility is key to garnering a comprehensive understanding of the extent of the problem. Furthermore, trade union members emphasised the role of local factors in contributing to

openness to right-wing politics at the company level. Above all, works councils differ greatly in their tendency to intervene in political and social matters.

In their assessment of tensions in the labour market that may arise in the future, some of the union officials interviewed for this project emphasised the growing role of conflicts related to sustainability. According to the interview partners, conflicts about the coming ‘green transition’ will give the political right a boost, warning that they will become stronger as changes to the economic landscape incite fears about job security. Calls for maintaining the status quo among the workforce will be fertile ground for right-wing discourse to grow. This is in line with previous findings from Germany, where research on precarity identified a ‘preservationist variation’ (Dörre 2008: 248) of right-wing populism among the traditional core of the workforce. This attitude is characterised by the defence of the remaining social security net and job placement guarantees from attacks from ‘above’ and future rivalries from ‘below’. Moreover, the challenges posed by the transition to clean energy point to future conflicts between job guarantees and necessary climate policies, as recently documented in the phasing out of coal in the Lausitz region (Köster et al. 2022).

The third challenge is connected to voting behaviour and workers’ attitudes. However, the interview partners’ interpretation of this problem varied greatly. On the one hand, the success of Freedom Party-aligned or independent works councils is seen as being closely linked with the councils’ quality of work. A ‘protest vote’ at the workplace level functions similarly to how it does at the ‘big’ political party level. In this context, agitation against works council bodies, trade unions, and the AK, pushed by liberal and supposedly independent works councils, can thus deliver attacks on institutional power ‘from within’. Other interviewees described a separation between the workplace and the regional and national levels: While Freedom Party-aligned representatives are elected as the opposition at the political party level, works councils in the workplace primarily vote for people they trust in the craft of workplace representation. Thus, most works council, AK, and ÖGB elections, as well as elections for staff representatives for sub-unions, have elected social democrats. This raises questions that can only be briefly touched upon here. Trade unionists’ statements do not point to a clear, definable relationship between socio-political attitudes and viewpoints at the company level.

The evaluation of challenges faced by companies and their workers and the challenges at the societal level, broadly speaking, thus leaves the question open whether and to what extent a social and, ultimately, political differentiation exists between the ‘microcosm of the company’ and ‘society at large’ (Dörre 2013).



## THE WORKPLACE CONTEXT

In Austria, there is currently no publicly available data on the development of right-wing activities at the company level. Some of the only relevant data for this sector are the results of staff representative elections. The *Freiheitlichen Arbeitnehmer* (FA; Freedom Party Workers) is an officially recognised political group within the ÖGB but is not accepted within all sub-unions. Moreover, in the *Gewerkschaft Öffentlicher Dienst* (GÖD; Public Service Union), for example, the *Aktionsgemeinschaft Unabhängiger und Freiheitlicher* (AUF; Independent and Free) faction is not recognised but is, nevertheless, particularly strong. During the GÖD staff representation elections in 2019, AUF representatives received 7.15 per cent of the vote. Representatives from the FA are frequently elected in constituencies of the executive (government and public administration) and the Austrian Armed Forces. For instance, in the *Zentralausschuss* (ZA; Central Committee) for National Defence, the AUF received about 28 per cent, while the ZA for the executive received about 22 per cent (both showing slight losses compared to 2014; GÖD 2019).

Most of the trade unionists interviewed were (yet) relaxed about the development of overt right-wing activities in the workplace. According to their assessments, the right has not been able to establish a foothold. Nevertheless, there have been repeated attempts to do so, most recently by extreme right-wing Identitarians and anti-vaccination activists. They have not been very successful. The number of independent works councils is also manageable; they do not typically last long when they do declare themselves to be politically motivated. However, there is no current consensus on whether or not there is a growing trend towards the right among works councils. In sum, the majority of our interviewees ruled out a sharp increase in the number of works council members who identify as FPÖ-aligned. The growth of the list of non-partisans should not be taken at face value, as some hide a right-wing worldview under a supposedly independent candidacy.

The success of the Freedom Party's works councillors also varies by sector and province. The FA is particularly strong in Upper Austria, where the website for the Upper Austrian FA lists around 40 works councils ([fa-ooe.at](http://fa-ooe.at)). This high number also corresponds to the interview partners' assessment that the FA works councils are particularly strong in the regions where the FPÖ also receives a large share of the votes in regional elections or is represented in the regional government. In rural areas, FPÖ members take aggressive action, under the slogan "Red strong-

holds must be stormed” [*Rote Bastionen müssen gestürmt werden*], against trade unions or the FSG. Particularly problematic contexts are those in which the FPÖ functionaries depart from trade union agreements, i. e., when works councils “entrench” themselves in the company and subsequently restrict contact to the ÖGB or when these functionaries ascend to committees and then replace the legal sphere of responsibility with a primarily political mandate. In the current context, sub-unions that primarily employ blue-collar workers (BAU-HOLZ, PROGE) are much more affected by the influx of the FA. Within the sub-unions themselves, the degree of sympathy for the right varied by sector. For instance, sectors particularly vulnerable to wage dumping or labour market fluctuations showed a higher affinity.

In order to assess the present situation in companies, our interview partners stressed that FPÖ trade union works councillors and independent candidates generally do not succeed in embedding themselves in the company long term. Accordingly, the danger of right-wing functionaries and works council members infiltrating the trade union apparatus is still considered to be low by most trade unionists. With regard to the actual work within the ÖGB, the threat from the right is considered to be relatively mild since it is coordinated with other parliamentary groups and the FPÖ sides with the workers in some decisions. Interview partners were far more serious in their evaluation of the past, including failed attempts by identitarians and the MFG to establish themselves as workplace representatives in works councils. In addition to this risk assessment, trade union-related activities taken by the extra-parliamentary and party-political right are being documented and observed by trade union leadership in order to be able to act on short notice, if needed.

## TRADE UNION EXPERIENCES AND SPHERES OF ACTION

The primary challenges for trade unions when it comes to right-wing populism are played out in the following three arenas: In the discourse (shift in discourse and social cleavage), on the structural level (labour market context), and in the organisational power of trade unions (voting behaviour of workers). The following section describes how the problems described above be addressed, with a focus on positive and negative experiences. Structural obstacles are also described, which, according to some interview partners, make the fight against the political right more difficult or favour the successful dissemination of the right-wing interpretation of problems.

## TRADE UNIONS' PRACTICAL APPROACHES

When it comes to the ÖGB and its individual sub-unions' approach to right-wing populism in Austria, the trade unionists interviewed emphasised both positive actions as well as formulated points of criticism. What action to take in response to the right-wing incursions was often left to the individual trade unionists, thus resulting in diverse practical approaches to the problem. Other trade unionists interviewed, however, did outline a comprehensive strategy. This variation in response may be attributed to a lack of a healthy debate culture and a lack of transparency identified by individual respondents (please see the section on structural barriers for more details).

In the specific conflict, the basic anti-fascist consensus and formal non-partisanship are used to argue against right-wing politics in the workplace and in the trade union. Thus, the official guidelines of trade union politics are employed to demonstrate the incompatibility of the right in these spheres. At the same time, the non-partisanship of the ÖGB also guarantees or requires a pragmatic approach to the FPÖ (see also Erben / Bieling 2020). From the perspective of the ÖGB, the starting point for assessing (right-wing) works councils is the quality of the work, not the political affiliation or factionalism. The argument here focuses on non-partisanship and the primacy of the practical aspects of the trade union. As the next step, FPÖ members and independents should be convinced of the importance of trade union bodies through practical work. This is reflective of the hope of winning over works councillors at the substantive level through training and guidance in order to eventually change their minds on political matters. However, this is in part countered by the assessments made by other trade unionist interview partners, who state that functionaries who are aligned with the FPÖ or are otherwise ideologically entrenched should be excluded because they are beyond convincing. Nevertheless, it appears that support for maintaining dialogue with right-wing works council members and taking their fears and feelings seriously is nearly unanimous.

A widespread strategy is to try to convince independent candidates who may still be receptive to pro-worker policies. This is followed by attempts to subtly politicise practical trade union issues in educational events. Only through the actual response to right-wingers do the different assessments come to the fore. First, some operate on the assumption that trade unionists should play the role of the de-escalator and remain as neutral as possible in order to avoid cleavages among the workforce. Then, this is juxtaposed with another approach taken, wherein trade unionists take a clear stand and enforce red lines where possible. The distinction between the company level and the (party) political level, as well as between liberal and right-wing extremist

works councillors, is implicitly dominant in the official approach to the problem posed by the rise of right-wing politics. Against this backdrop, the ‘non-political’ attempts by trade unions appear plausible but are juxtaposed against the existing factionalisation of the present political context. Some of the interviewed trade unionists reported not knowing under what conditions open political communication and positioning would be considered legitimate in the internal trade union context.

Positive examples of the ÖGB’s handling of the fight against the further strengthening of right-wing power can be found in a range of sectors and spheres of action. First, they can be found in practical work in international class solidarity; second, in national and international networking with other organisations actively fighting the right; third, in trade union educational work; fourth, through the successful improvement of working conditions and social contexts; fifth, through measures to reduce anti-women policies at the workplace (female chairpersons in works councils); and sixth, in the involvement of the grassroots in socio-political disputes.

A positive example of practical experience related to international class solidarity is the Drop-in Centre for Undocumented Workers (UNDOK). International class solidarity is found through counselling and the direct support of workers without or with uncertain residence permits. These workers are particularly vulnerable to extreme exploitation because their employers can take advantage of their precarity through wage fraud, excessive working hours, and sexual or physical assault. By supporting the enforcement of labour and social rights for this group, both solidarities among workers and labour and social standards in writ large are strengthened. This also counters right-wing propaganda by emphasising the importance of class belonging rather than national borders when it comes to worker exploitation. The UNDOK centre is an initiative of several trade unions, including the AK Vienna (Arbeiterkammer Wien), the Austrian National Students’ Union (der ÖH Bundesvertretung), immigrant and asylum law NGOs, self-organised migrant organisations, and grassroots trade union activists. Networking and support for national anti-fascist organisations and international networking with other trade unions is seen as a positive step towards dealing with the growing strength of right-wing populist forces. Examples of this include the Austrian Mauthausen Committee (MKÖ)<sup>10</sup>, the

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**10** The Austrian Mauthausen Committee (MKÖ) is an apolitical and non-religious association that stands for a free and democratic society, as well as the protection of human rights for all. The MKÖ works against all kinds of fascism, racism, neo-Nazism, chauvinism, and anti-Semitism. The committee is supported by its three founding organisations, the ÖGB, the Conference of Roman-Catholic Bishops, and the Austrian Jewish Community ([www.mkoe.at](http://www.mkoe.at)).

trade union's support for the DÖV, and the international networking with and exchange between trade unions in other countries.

The ÖGB's educational work, as well as educational projects of sub-unions, was mentioned by all respondents as a central and positive achievement in the handling of right-wing developments. The educational offerings were consistently considered by interview partners to be important. However, several respondents did note that there was little interest in educational programs that dealt explicitly with this topic. The union has two strategies to counter this low demand. First, a seminar has been included as a compulsory module in works council training. Second, attempts are made to fold the topic into various seminars that do not address the theme explicitly. Participant feedback on these seminars is reported to be primarily very positive. According to a seminar leader, some participants who had not attended the mandatory seminar voluntarily were pleasantly surprised.

These educational activities exist alongside a conflict management structure that offers concrete help with workplace issues. Two central aims lie at the centre of these strategic considerations: To teach communication skills and to empower their "own people" to take a stand against right-wing demagoguery in their daily work. One trade unionist interviewed stressed having learned from the example of Germany's Industrial Union for Metalworkers (IG Metall) and wanted to head off the development of the juridification of trade union work without socio-political entitlements through the politicisation of basic seminars.

The successful improvement of working conditions and workers' social contexts is seen as an important component to counter the increased support for right-wing parties among workers. Improved quality of life has the potential to mitigate worries and fears about social exclusion, thus implicitly countering the success of right-wing demagoguery. Moreover, this can also strengthen the trade unions' credibility as a valid representative of workers' interests.

At the workplace level, the fight against right-wing extremism also involves the institutionalisation of measures preventing misogynist and racist policies. For example, a trade unionist interviewed emphasised the positive impact of female chairpersons in the works council; these women working as contact persons for the works council are resolutely countering structural and situational right-wing attacks. Another functionary commented on the importance of having people with migration backgrounds in key positions, their expertise can help ensure equitable inclusion and communication. Finally, we observed attempts to anticipate

internal developments by the right through stronger involvement of the base. Examples of this include targeted anti-fascist youth work and the inclusion of youth demands in rounds of negotiation, self-reflection on the organisational structure of the union, the creation of a code of conduct, and the attempt to build a leftist hegemony within workplaces. This final point is particularly exciting, as it partially addresses criticisms levied in the face of structural obstacles, described in more detail in the following section. The aim could then be to promote an internal discussion within the trade union on best practices and strategies for dealing with right-wing populist parties and works councils.

## STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES TO COUNTERING RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

In connection to the actions taken by trade unionists regarding right-wing populism and extremism, trade unionists and experts on right-wing extremism interviewed for this report pointed to structural aspects of the Austrian trade unions that make it difficult to successfully oppose right-wing populist forces or that facilitate the success of right-wing demagoguery. These can be divided into four groups.

The first group is a problem cluster created from the combination of formal non-partisanship juxtaposed with the reality of a faction-heavy system. While the ÖGB is formally a non-partisan organisation, in reality the factional affiliation of the functionaries and the proximity of the factions to “mother parties” plays a central role in decision-making and in the composition of relevant committees, which can determine who is in charge of negotiating collective agreements. Taking this into account, the ÖGB is thus not truly (politically) independent. This is most noticeable in that the ÖGB’s opposition to legislative decisions that would be harmful to workers would be contingent on which parties are in power. Specifically, for example, open protest would be very unlikely if the SPÖ were in government. According to some respondents this weakens the credibility of the ÖGB as an independent organisation. It also makes it difficult or even impossible of the ÖGB to consistently stand up for the interests of the workers and thus fight to improve working conditions and expand the social safety net. Deterioration in these areas has the additional impact of increasing workers’ susceptibility to right-wing interpretations of problems (e. g. Hoffmann 2016). This indirectly favours the workers’ receptiveness to right-wing propaganda on the one hand, and structurally supports the self-identification of right-wing parties as

the “true representatives of the little man” on the other. Accordingly, the non-partisanship of the ÖGB in itself is not an obstacle in the fight against the right. In fact, it supports solidarity between workers in principle by promoting the experience of a shared context and struggle. The presently prevailing factionalism and the primacy of loyalty to “mother parties” are the central problem in this cluster.

Another structural problem, as identified by the interviewees, is the hierarchical structure of the ÖGB and its sub-unions and the widespread lack of transparency for members and company employees, i. e., the base. This opacity is also strongly linked to the primacy of the social partnership, which itself is a part of this problem cluster. For example, employees sometimes feel that transparency in negotiation processes is neglected in favour of cultivating a harmonious relationship with employers. This is reinterpreted by right-wingers as confirmation of trade unions’ “backroom politics”. A lack of transparency also bears the danger that trade union members and workforces will not identify with the workers’ organisations or identify with them only to a limited extent because their own power to shape policy is neither comprehensible nor experienced in practice. Trust in trade union bodies, on the other hand, is strongly based on the performance of their service policy. According to respondents, this development encourages the depoliticisation of trade union structures. This is also shown by the fact that the social partnership’s “we’re all in the same boat ideology” is a structural obstacle to oppositional behaviour. Attacks on the workers’ movement in Austria were sometimes reduced to brief moral judgements in order not to jeopardise a future agreement with the government or employer.

In conjunction, some respondents also mentioned the top-down management style of the Austrian trade union apparatus as an obstacle. On the one hand, this hinders internal reflection and discussion processes. On the other, it promotes the merely rhetorical adoption of opinions rather than the consolidation of members’ political positions. The resulting disenchantment with politics within some of the works councils is a weak point in the union’s organisational power through which the danger of influence from the right increases.

The third structural problem, as identified by individual interview partners, is the poor demarcation of the right and the exclusion of left-wing positions. According to Astleithner and Flecker (2017), the trade unions’ primary strategy for consolidating organisational power in recent decades has been to increase membership. This finding is also reported by trade unionists interviewed for this report. A few interview partners criticise the focus on membership numbers as contributing to



the neglect of member orientation; interest in members' attitudes has fallen to the wayside. Resolute opposition to right-wing positions is contingent on the ability to connect with members and workers and respond to their fears and needs. The concern is to avoid scaring off (potential) members into the arms of the right by taking situationally appropriate and de-escalatory behaviour. However, this approach is problematised by some interviewees, who explain that workers who seek a decisive political position on social conflicts could instead turn to the right-wing group whose stance is clear. The underlying prioritisation of membership growth is also interpreted by some respondents as a neoliberal tendency within trade union politics and, thus, a threat to long-term and sustainable issue and position development.

At the same time, there is a somewhat naïve approach to the issue of right-wing attitudes among trade union members. Some trade unionists complain the presumption that trade union membership protects against right-wing orientation leads to the downplaying of the current problem, and thus, the challenges associated with it are prevented from being discussed internally. The political attitudes of trade union members can still be described as a "black box", as put by Sylvia Erben and Hans-Jürgen Bieling in their study (2020: 74). This also takes place in the larger context, which includes the previously mentioned lack of internal transparency, especially regarding data on right-wing works councils and the resulting threat scenario. Here, a lack of evidence-based internal discussion is seen as a central problem. Due to the lack of information, the individuals interviewed made assessments based on their own experiences.

A lack of a delimitation between the right and the rest of the political spectrum can also be seen in practice in the workplace. According to some of the interview respondents, the result of needing to come to terms at the company level is leading to a creeping acceptance of FPÖ and independent trade unionists running for office. This encourages the increasing palatability of right-wing politics in the trade union.

The right-wing extremism experts interviewed for this study attributed the lagging demarcation of the right to the historical context of the reconstitution of the Austrian workers' movement from the 1950s and 1960s onward. After 1945, those who had been politically persecuted by the Nazi regime were closely connected to the trade union movement and formed a basic anti-fascist and non-partisan consensus within the trade union. However, this changed during the Cold War. Anti-communism was a strong and influential factor in the resurrection of the "Third



Camp”<sup>11</sup> in parliament and in factories, especially in nationalised industries. Many candidates from the “Third Camp” entered the trade union and workplace structures through social democrat rosters due to personnel shortages that resulted from the dismantling of the Austrian labour movement under National Socialism. Thus, the normalisation of right-wing functionaries in both workers’ bodies and the social democratic political party started relatively early. According to some interviewees, the anti-communist tradition is still influential for the trade union’s boundary to the left, which is combined with other obstacles (i. e., factionalism) and thus stands in the way of a discursive shift leftwards. This strengthens the right wing’s ability to present itself as a critical force both within and outside of the trade union movement. This is a serious problem; a connection can be found between the exclusion of the left-wing positions and a lack of a clear demarcation of the right.

The fourth problem is closely related to the criticism of the previously mentioned obstacles that prevent the successful handling of right-wing politics; some respondents see a great need for structural reforms within the trade union apparatus itself. There is a distinct lack of a broadly supported and reflexive process of organisational development in which existing problems and weaknesses, as well as necessary adjustments to changing external circumstances can be identified, and solutions can be discussed. The lack of organisational development is understood as a consequence of the lack of an internal culture of discussion and reflection. For example, one respondent described the need to professionalise processes that would recognise misguided work by works council members in a timely manner. Otherwise, this could be a gateway for right-wing works councils to present themselves as an anti-establishment alternative. Moreover, the sluggish apparatus limits trade unions’ ability to act. Alongside the lack of politicisation or development of clear positions by members, trade unionists interviewed mentioned a lack of decision-making and leadership capacity at the middle levels and a non-transparent communication structure within the organisational hierarchy. Trade unionists also criticise both formal and informal trade union playing rules, which puts the lack of a boundary to the right in a broader context. A prominent example is the implementation of passive voting rights for third-country nationals within the Austrian workers’ representation. Spurred by a complaint brought by a Turkish worker to the Court of

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**11** In Austria, the term “Third Camp” refers to the camp of the German National, German Liberal, and National Liberal electorate, represented today primarily by the FPÖ, as a distinction to the two main political “camps” in Austria, the Christian-democratic-bourgeois camp (ÖVP) and the socialist-social-democratic camp (SPÖ), see [wikipedia.org/wiki/Drittes\\_Lager](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Drittes_Lager).

Justice of the European Union, this anti-discrimination measure was first passed in the National Assembly in 2006. In general, the integration of migrant workers in the workplace varies regardless of the factional affiliation of the works council bodies. Structural discrimination and place-based nationalism are therefore starting points for addressing right-wing positions and shifts in discourse.

The experiences and spheres of action described above are very similar to those identified in the country study by Erben and Bieling (2020). Notably, open confrontation with the FPÖ is still being avoided. Right-wing populist discourse continues to be criticised against the backdrop of workers' interests without a direct attack on the right-wing party. The focus is on a subtle politicisation with a focus on the lines of division between labour and capital. The associated ambiguities, especially when it comes to migration, are also of relevance in 2022. The importance of this issue is very clearly reflected in the assessment of one trade unionist who, in his experience, sees no difference between FSG works councillors and those of the FA on issues related to migration. Thus, our interview data is in broad agreement with the findings of Erben and Bieling, particularly regarding the ÖGB's internal organisational sphere of action and strategies for managing (right-wing populist affiliated) members. Trade unions seem to be, in essence, sticking with the same empowerment strategies for dealing with members with right-wing populist affinities and providing the "appropriate tools" (ibid.: 94) to provide practical orientation help, in particular for works councillors. Finally, the organisational strategies to improve the involvement and mobilisation in response to the institutional exclusion that took place in 2020 differ across the board. Since the government has since changed, government policy and social partnership are of less import. Instead, structural obstacles that hinder the successful fight against right-wing populist ideologies are now more strongly emphasised, not the least of which is the importance of the exclusion of left-wing positions and the factionalisation within the ÖGB and the associated party loyalties.

Altogether, there are three main differences or variations between these results and those presented by Erben and Bieling (2020). First, the right is recognised by nearly all respondents as a problem for trade unions, workplace cohesion, and appropriate measures are discussed. Meanwhile, Black-Green (a possible coalition ÖVP – Greens) is not seen as a threat to the institutional power structures the way Black-Blue (ÖVP – FPÖ) was. Secondly, this allows for greater leeway when it comes to possible strategies. To counter the right wing's successful discursive shift, alternative crisis narratives should be conceived of and staged, at least briefly. Respondents recognise that the current inflation crisis, if not attended to by the left, will play into the hands of

right-wing agitators. Thirdly, the shift in political discourse to the right is a key factor in the loss of the discursive power of trade unions themselves. It is unclear whether the concurrent organisational weaknesses, as manifested at the workplace level in workplace divisions, should be interpreted as a corollary or as a cause of the loss of discursive power. The relationship between the ÖGB's socio-political mandate and the representation of workers within the structural and institutional sphere of power also remains open. The central challenge, therefore, is the "double strategy of developing internal policies while using existing social partnership communication channels" (ibid.: 88) and, in addition, thus ensuring adequate legal representation of workers. As before, Austrian trade unions continue to strike an uneasy balance in dealing with the political right. This case study shows that the processes of generation and protection of diverse power sources can be in conflict with one another.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The Austrian trade union has traditionally had a heavy reliance on institutional and political power resources. Political influence via the social partnership, proximity to the SPÖ, and personal ties with the SPÖ have all been particularly important. Previous governments with a right-wing populist orientation or with FPÖ participation have strongly attacked and even successfully curtailed these very resources (Tálos / Obinger 2020). The trade unions' respective ability to exert influence has thus been strongly dependent on the political constellation of the government. An expansion of the trade union's organisational power is an obvious answer to counteract this dependency. The Austrian trade union has pursued this for some time, primarily by seeking to increase its overall membership. To strengthen organisational power, i. e., by activating the trade union base for political action, it would be important to be able to better assess the attitudes of trade union members and thus also their responsiveness to right-wing agitation and to identify potential problem areas at an early stage. Previous studies and data do show that trade union members generally vote for right-wing parties less often than non-members. However, they also show that a considerable proportion of trade union members may be open to voting for right-wing populist and extremist candidates. ESS results for Austria also indicate that proximity to the FPÖ has increased among trade union members over the last two decades; in 2018, it was higher than among non-members for the first time. It cannot be assumed that trade union membership "immunises" against right-wing ideology since there are also no clear differences between members and non-members when it comes to attitudes towards migration and distributive justice.

Clear differences are apparent between regional / national elections and works council elections. All trade unionists interviewed reported that right-wing candidates rarely manage to gain a foothold in the workplace. Similarly, the FA is much weaker in AK elections than the FPÖ is at the federal level. The greater threat is understood to be within the independent or non-partisan rosters, FSG works councillors, and within the workforce itself. Furthermore, the central problem, the loss of discursive power resources and the normalisation of right-wing ideas, is currently being addressed through educational offerings. This strategy appears to be quite successful. Among the trade union youth, in particular, there is a strong focus on anti-fascist work. For the trade union and works council work, according to one trade unionist interviewed, whether education starts early enough or not makes a significant difference.

The interviews also reveal a noticeable discrepancy between the trade union leadership and those in the lower levels of the hierarchy in their assessment of the strategic handling of right-wing developments and the threat potential. This may be an expression of the lack of inclusion of the knowledge and experience of functionaries who come into closer contact with right-wing elements at the company level in their day-to-day work. Moreover, communication channels within the trade union and its sub-unions do not seem to function smoothly, as the answer to whether or not a unified strategy exists varied greatly across respondents. The following recommendations for action are based on the results from trade union activists and officers and can therefore be seen as an internal knowledge resource. Positive examples that are already in practice are also included in the following recommended action items:

- 1) Reflection and organisational development: Jointly supported strategies for dealing with the rise of right-wing populism, as well as with other central issues such as the lack of (internal) trade union representation of different groups of workers (especially migrants) and opportunities for the involvement of interested trade union members should be developed through a wide-ranging trade union reflection and discussion process on socio-political changes. This could promote the exchange of knowledge and experience within the union and strengthen communication channels. In addition, this could counteract the feeling reported by some trade unionists that there is no common strategy for addressing the encroachment of right-wing populism, only an arbitrary approach dependant on individual views. A stronger representation of migrant and immigrant workers could also increase the awareness of the issues that workers with migration backgrounds face and thus

promote solidarity. Structural integration of interested union members could promote proximity to the union while strengthening the active union base.

- 2) Maintenance of the social partnership communication channels, but with greater involvement of the trade union base: This may look like undertaking collaborative demand development with workers, worker involvement in the negotiation process and transparency with the base during negotiations. Vida, Austria's transportation and service industry trade union, has made progress in this field and could serve as a positive example for other unions.
- 3) A clear stance against right-wing ideologies, including on immigration: Rapprochement with right-wing positions promotes a further shift to the discourse rightwards. It is instead advisable to promote a clear counter-model with the help of an open and strong emphasis on left-wing positions. At the same time, the strategy of communicating eye-to-eye with "undecideds" should be maintained.
- 4) No consideration for social partnership or political party loyalties: The strengthening of the ÖGB's non-partisan and independent nature could support its credibility as a representative of workers' interests and counter the right-wing interpretation of "backroom politics" as the trade unions' modus operandi. Consideration of the social partnership or political party loyalties should be abandoned in favour of a stronger orientation towards members.
- 5) The expansion of socio-political education, especially for youth: Educational work appears to be very successful, especially among trade union youth. Strengthening educational offers that address socio-political issues and their importance for workers could counter the loss of discursive power and the normalisation of right-wing ideas among works councillors and trade union members.
- 6) Making international solidarity a reality: The UNDOK counselling centre can be seen as a positive example of a clear leftist position on migration issues and the strengthening of solidarity among workers. On the one hand, this shows that undocumented migrants are not the opponents of native workers; rather, the problem lies with the people who exploit migrant workers' precarity. On the other hand, the labour and social standards of all workers are protected as a result of the policy advocacy work of UNDOK, and thus the importance of international solidarity can be experienced in practice.

*Translated from German by Tanager*

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# COUNTRY STUDY DENMARK

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## INTRODUCTION

At a meeting held in June 2021, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) launched a roadmap<sup>1</sup> for the trade unions with the explicit aim of building responses to the rise of the far-right. The document begins with these words:

*Trade unions and the far-right are opposites. Not only because of trade unions' history and proud tradition of opposing the far-right in past, but because of what trade unions stand for today. Trade unions, above all else, believe in solidarity: we seek better lives, social justice and opportunity, for all working people. We stand for unity over division.*

The statement is followed by a list of fifteen concrete actions that aim to combat the spread of populism and far-right positions within trade unions and society. The strategies include the mapping of the far-right at the workplace and in the public opinion; the incentivizing of internal communication and training, education, networking activities; and the promotion of alliance building and mutual learning. Concern about the growing electoral support for the far right in recent European elections was reiterated by ETUC president Laurent Berger, who warned:

*Without more dialogue between institutions, trade unions, and civil society, Europe will see chaos and the rise of the far-right,*

Adding to these words that:

*[...] Hungary, Poland, Italy, or even Sweden. The far-right comes out on top every time in elections, [although] Europe has never enjoyed freedom, equality and fraternity in extremist regimes*

Labour unions have over the past decades experienced the pressure of hyper-globalisation and de-industrialisation processes, the effects of economic and financial crises, the constant decline in party and union membership (Lehndorff / Dribbusch / Schulten 2018) and the rising electoral support for the radical right among

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<sup>1</sup> ETUC Roadmap – Building the Trade Union Response to the Rise of Far-right, <https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/ETUC%20Roadmap%20Adopted-%20Building%20the%20Trade%20Union%20response%20to%20the%20rise%20of%20far-right.pdf>.

workers (see Rydgren 2013; Salo / Rydgren 2021; Oesch / Rennwald 2018). The growing disaffection of the working class with labour union organisations and their general decline in influence are today highlighted by the scholarly literature in relation to a twofold transformation. On the one side, there has been a change in voters' political identification and voting preferences, particularly in terms of class-based alignment and support (Kitschelt 1994). On the other side, the role played by trade unions in their negotiations and bargaining strategies has narrowed and become more limited by sector (Dancygier / Walter 2015). On the top of these transformations, the multiple global crises that followed the 2008 Great Recession have reinforced workers' belief that uncertainty and risk are now permanent. National as well as transnational cycles of protests and mobilisations have responded to the political and societal accelerations in society, either by deepening, or by narrowing the range of democratic opportunities (Della Porta 2013). Citizenship and democracy studies warn against the profound implications that the rising polarisation and distrust in democratic institutions might have on the very structures and the stability of liberal democracy (Crouch 2003; Krastev 2017; Levitsky / Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2022).

With the above backdrop in mind, we began to ask questions about the role the major trade unions play in today's Denmark; a context where the effects of the crises have been comparatively less harmful than elsewhere in Europe, but where the political influence of the populist right has been on the rise in the past decades (Meret 2021a, 2021b). Furthermore, the appeal that right-wing populism has for manual labourers raises questions about the kind of responses labour unions have been able to put up to tackle these issues over time. Apart from few sporadic studies (Rathgeb/Klitgaard 2022; Mosiman / Rennwald / Zimmerman 2019; Arndt / Rennwald 2016) the research within this field is still limited in Denmark. This is in contrast with other Scandinavian and Nordic countries, such as Sweden, where these issues have been more widely discussed (see e. g., Oskarson / Demker 2015; Neergaard 2017; Mulinari / Neergaard 2015) and are matter of specific focus and targeted activities. An example is the resolution *Crush Right-wing extremism! (Krossa högerextremismen!)* drafted at the Nordic Forum in the summer of 2021, which addressed the topic explicitly:

*The trade union movement must contribute to the fight against right-wing extremism by educating our own members. Right-wing extremists work across national borders and within the labour movement in the Nordic countries and Europe we need to start a network of activists who can exchange experiences and cooperate in the fight against these forces.*

## STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

Our study consists of three main sections. In the *first section* we introduce some of the main features characterising the Danish labour market model and the Danish political system. We examine in particular the development and consolidation of right-wing populism in the country. In the *second section*, we focus on the Danish labour unions, their history, organisation, membership, and on the role these play in Danish society today. Within this section we look at how union representatives formulate and perceive the challenges coming from the far right and how they understand the functions and responsibility of their union to contend with these. Our data consist of semi-structured interviews conducted in August and September 2022 with fifteen trade union representatives of the three major Danish trade unions. We then consider the trade union strategies aimed at preventing the spreading of racism, discrimination and sexism. This encompasses trade unions' anti-racist, anti-discriminatory, and anti-sexist initiatives and campaigns, issues of trans-sectoral and transnational worker solidarity, and other relevant actions aimed at promoting inclusion, equality, and solidarity among members. *To conclude*, we strive to put forward a few recommendations for action, based on an assessment of the trade unions' experiences, but also on the ideas of how to counter extremism and exclusions that emerged during the interviews.

## MAIN FEATURES OF LABOUR MARKET AND POLITICAL SYSTEM IN DENMARK

### THE DANISH LABOUR MARKET MODEL AND ITS VOLUNTARY NATURE

Alongside with Sweden, Denmark is among the countries with the highest labour union density in Europe (Sjölander 2022). In Scandinavia, the labour movements have historically developed a close party-union relationship between the main trade union confederations and the Social Democratic Party. In Denmark, the labour movement originated as a single organisation, and only at a later stage the two realities formally parted.

Another main feature of the Danish labour market today is the degree of voluntary participation in collective bargaining supported by the *flexicurity* model (*flexibility* for employers, *security* for employees). It is a system that has been endorsed at a European level and framed as an innovative approach to labour market or-

ganisation and regulation (Klindt 2011). Hence, Denmark is a very interesting laboratory for an example of how labour unions have reacted to the electoral support for the populist right, growing immigration grievances, and welfare concerns in a context of (nationally) institutionalised workplace collaboration and collective bargaining.

The *flexicurity* model relies on high-quality working conditions and on regulated welfare security measures that can guarantee labour flexibility at comparatively lower insurance costs (Klindt 2011). In Denmark, employment and working conditions are traditionally and historically laid down by a collective bargaining negotiated between the trade unions and the employers' organisations (Rasmussen / Høgedahl 2021). This is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the labour market conditions and agreements in the country (including Sweden and Norway), as it varies from labour market legislation in the rest of the EU. The arrangement is based on a main agreement (*Hovedaftale*) from the end of the nineteenth century. In short, the agreement infers that employer organisations shall recognise trade unions' right to collective bargaining, while the unions must recognise the employers' right to administer their company interests (Knudsen / Lind 2011). The Danish state still plays a significant role among the parties, albeit a less central one, when compared to other countries. Its function is mainly to mediate between the parties and to facilitate negotiations. This means that agreements between unions and employers take place through a rather elaborate institutional set-up arranged by the Labour Court (*Arbejdsretten*) and the three-part agreements, in which the government only intervenes on specific areas of wage, pension, and health-related matters (for instance with the state subsidised support packages under the COVID-19 global health emergency).

While employer organisations are primarily organised by the Confederation of Danish Employers (*Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening*; DA), the largest trade unions' umbrella association is the Trade Union Confederation (*Fagbevægelsens Hovedorganisation*; FH). This was established in 2019 through a merger of the former and historical Danish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen i Danmark*; LO) and the Confederation of Professionals in Denmark (FTF). The FH organises today about 1.2 million members and it includes sixty-four different unions. Yet, despite such a centralised organ with a confederation representing different interests on each side of the negotiating table, collective bargaining has become increasingly decentralised since the late 1980s (Knudsen / Lind 2020: 383). Not only each union can negotiate its own collective agreement directly with the relevant companies, but bargaining can also take place between the local trade union department and local companies (Høgedahl

2021). For instance, The United Federation of Workers in Denmark (*Fagligt Fælles Forbund*; 3F) representing non-skilled and service workers, is comprised of sixty-four local departments spread all-over the country and each is said to be “sovereign”, in the sense that it can make independent negotiations. In this respect, 3F seems to be the most decentralised of all Danish unions in the labour movement system.

In Denmark, about 66 per cent of the workforce is member of a trade union (Rasmussen / Høgedahl 2021) which is comparatively high, although the rates of unionisations have been decreasing since the 1990s. The country still has a deep-rooted welfare state system, and a relatively strong Social Democratic party (25–26 per cent of the votes), whose history is strongly interrelated to the development of the labour movement. The party-union relationship was extremely close for more than a century, up until the 1990s (see Allern / Aylott / Christiansen 2007). This mutual relationship guaranteed representation in the respective executive organs, and sizable economic support was secured for the party by the union members. These structures were heavily disapproved of and came to an end in the first years of the Liberal and Conservative government, which was supported by the Danish People’s Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*; DF). In 2002, the passage mentioning the affiliation with the Social Democratic Party was taken out from the confederation statute, ending the long historical and organisational bond between the two wings of the Danish labour movement. Structural transformations in the union membership and in the way political parties and unions organise urged this change, but in the Danish case this was also an outcome of the criticism from the DF of what they saw being the interdependence between the main trade union confederation and the Social Democratic Party.

Negotiation and bargaining power have changed over the past decades: Smaller companies can opt out from regulated agreements with trade unions, given that Danish collective agreements are not applicable *erga omnes*. Additionally, trade union membership and negotiating strength are today also affected by the flourishing of the so-called ‘yellow’ unions. In 2022, these encompassed about 400,000 of the unionised members. Yellow unions do not take direct part in collective bargaining and have contributed to the weakening of the negotiating power and workers’ rights. The Danish model of voluntary and consensual agreement is thus exposed to accelerating societal and political developments, including: 1) The overall decline in trade union membership; 2) the increase of non-unionised migrant workers; and 3) the need to comply with the latest EU labour market legislation. It is perhaps a truism to avow that the Danish model is under

increasing pressure, from inside and out, but it shows that the model, which has gained increased appreciation at the European level (Klindt 2011), has not remained unaffected by the crises and rapid transformations of the past decades. The Danish labour market model also plays a significant role in Danish politics as a symbol of both national Danish “exceptionalism” and as a marker of the comparatively high standard of living, state benefits, and higher trust usually associated with the Danish welfare state regime (Martela / Greve / Rothstein / Saari 2020). This has repercussions on the way trade unions explain and elaborate on their approach to nationalism, inclusion, and solidarity.

## THE DANISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

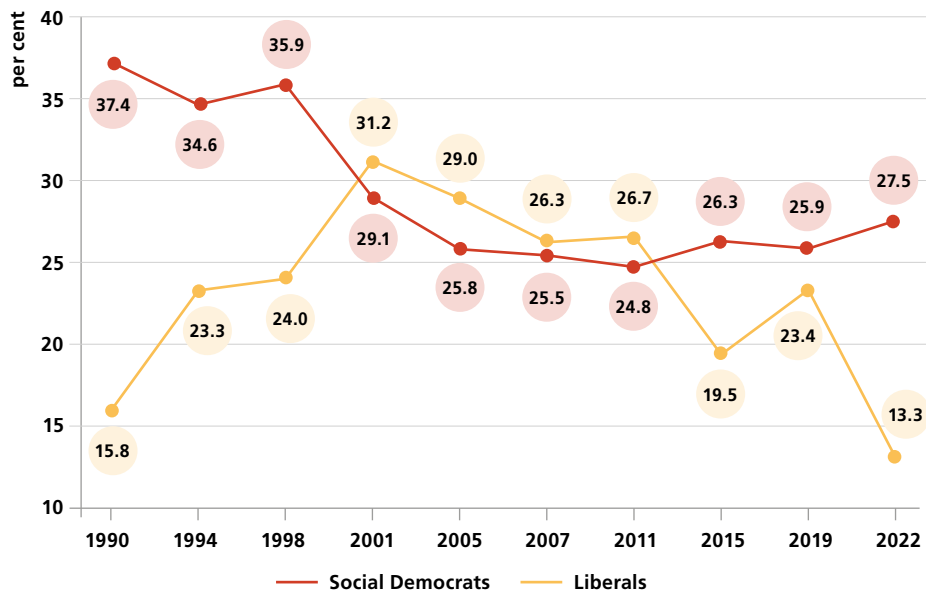
Compared to other countries in Europe, Denmark is still characterised by relative political stability and comparatively high levels of political and interpersonal trust (Sønderskov / Dinesen 2014). This is also reflected in the rather stable parliamentary democracy with a multiparty system and by the durability of the Danish minority governments. Denmark’s political system is otherwise similar to other Nordic countries in terms of taxation and public spending, corporatist traditions and interest groups, as well as for the historical role played in the country by the Social Democratic Party. In the last decades, it has most often been the Social Democrats and the Liberal Party *Venstre* that have competed for the role as main governing party, having each their prime minister candidate in parliamentary elections.

Right-wing populism gained electoral momentum in the 2000’s (Meret 2010) with the Danish People’s Party. The DF was established in 1995 by a splinter group coming from the anti-tax party, the Progress Party (*Fremskridtspartiet*) that in the years 1995–2012 had Pia Kjaersgaard at its lead. Based on anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and welfare chauvinist positions, the DF exerted influence on Danish politics through the party’s crucial role as a support partner for centre-right governments during the years 2001–2011 and 2015–2019. However, since their most successful election in 2015, where the party got 21.1 per cent of the votes, things have become rough for the DF. In 2019, the party’s electoral support was halved, and the endeavours of former party leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl to regain his position remained unsuccessful.

After yet another disappointing electoral result in the November 2021 municipal elections, where the DF got only about 4 per cent of the vote, Kristian Thulesen Dahl decided to step down. This triggered inner-party divisions and ignited per-

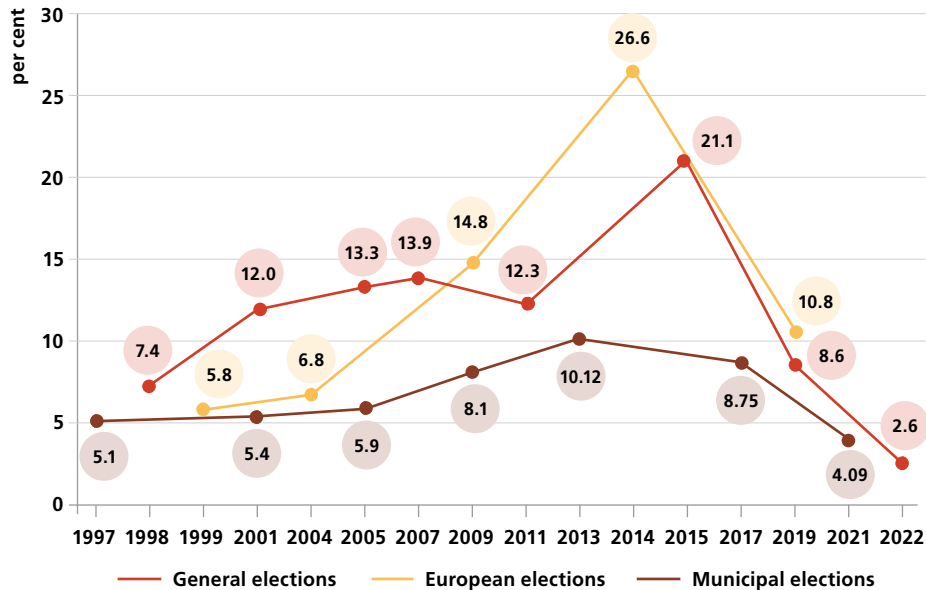


Figure 1  
Social Democrats and Liberals electoral results (1990–2022)



Source: Meret 2021b (updated)

Figure 2  
Dansk Folkeparti (DF) electoral results (1997–2022)



Source: Meret 2021b (updated)

sonal conflicts and internal dissent as for who should follow in the political leadership. The choice of Morten Messerschmidt as new party leader at the party convention in January 2022 was not approved by many of the DF MPs. Within a few months, more than half of the DF parliamentary group exited the party in protest. Eight of the former party MPs have since joined the Denmark's Democrats (*Danmarksdemokraterne*), which is a new right-wing populist party founded by former Liberal Inger Støjberg just before the elections. Støjberg served as Minister of Immigration and Integration in the years 2015–2019 and she was known for being a hard liner on migration, integration, and asylum. In 2021 she was sentenced 60 days in prison after an impeachment trial that found her guilty of forcibly separating asylum-seeking couples including individuals under 18 years of age.

The weakening of the Danish People's Party should not be unsophisticatedly interpreted as the decline of the populist demand or anti-immigration grievances among the electorate. It rather suggests a more nuanced set of explanations, including the repositioning on some issues in Danish politics. Both the Liberals and the Social Democrats have implemented several restrictive policies on asylum, immigration, and integration in the past decades. Moreover, two new right-wing populist parties have emerged on the political scene: The New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*; NB) and Denmark's Democrats (*Danmarksdemokraterne*; DD). Both parties bring forward anti-establishment, anti-immigration / anti-Islam, and welfare chauvinist positions, albeit in slightly varying political formats and approaches. Differences among them are mainly connected to the redistribution / economic programmatic dimension: Like the DF, the DD are more pro-welfare, whereas the New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*) supports ultra-liberal stances.

In the November 2022 parliamentary elections, the populist right (DF, DD, and NB) received a combined 14.7 per cent of the votes.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the DD, a new centre-right party, The Moderates, was launched by former Liberal PM Lars Løkke Rasmussen and entered Parliament with more than 9 per cent of the vote. Interestingly, The Moderates is a centre-seeking party that aims to break up so-called bloc parties and pursue agreements with the mainstream parties, leaving the radical left and right wings outside decision making and influence. This middle-seeking strategy was appreciated also by the Social Democrats, who have opened themselves up to opportunities in this direction in the post-election peri-

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2 This includes the Denmark Democrats (8.1 per cent), the Danish People's Party (2.6 per cent) and the New Right (3.7 per cent).

od to form a new government. Since both the Liberals and the Conservatives lost votes, it is likely that the interim PM Mette Frederiksen will use her mandate to achieve this.

In the context of Danish politics, it is worth mentioning the ‘phenomenon’ Rasmus Paludan and his attempts to gain notoriety and influence. The bigoted anti-Islam and anti-immigration leader has long rallied against immigration and Islam in both Denmark and Sweden, burning the Quran in urban areas with higher ethnic minority populations. Paludan advocates for the mass expulsion of immigrants, and of Muslims in particular, from Denmark. His stunts have not earned him any significant electoral support. In the 2019 elections, his party “Hard Line” (*Stram Kurs*) did not come above the 2 per cent threshold and in 2022, running as independent, he only got a total of 379 votes.

## DANISH TRADE UNIONS AND CHALLENGES POSED BY THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT

### A SHORT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Our analysis concentrates on the three main workers’ trade unions in Denmark, with respect to number of registered members: The Danish Metal-Workers’ Union (*Dansk Metal*, DM), the United Federation of Workers in Denmark (3F) and The National Union of Commercial and Clerical Employees (*Handle og Kontor*, HK).<sup>3</sup> Both DM and HK organise skilled workers in, for instance, office work and the retail business with regard to HK. 3F organises skilled and non-skilled workers, primarily within industry, construction, and transport sectors. 3F is the largest trade union in Denmark in terms of members, with approximately 261,000 members. 3F is also the trade union that comparatively pays more attention to migrant workers amongst members, representatives, and employees. To give an example, the 3F’s official website can be read in five different languages besides Danish: English, German, Polish, Russian, and Romanian. However, this does not necessarily indicate that there is internal agreement about the role of migrant workers in the Danish labour market or the way 3F ought to approach the question of labour, mobility, and migration.

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<sup>3</sup> 3F organises more than 260,000 workers. HK about 218,000 and DM 105,000. 3F and HK are the two largest trade unions in Denmark.

The organisational history of the three trade unions goes back to the end of the nineteenth century. The Danish Trade Assistants' Union (*De Danske Handelsmedhjælperes Forbund*) was founded in 1897, as a precursor to the HK. 3F was first established in 2005, through the fusion of two unions organising unskilled and semi-skilled laborers, namely The Semi-skilled Workers' Union (*Specialarbejderforbundet*, SAF) and the Women Workers' Union (*Kvindeligt Arbejderforbund*, KAD). Until 1971, SAF was only for male workers, while KAD organised the female workers' section. The influential role of particularly SAF reached its climax when their leader, Anker Jørgensen, was appointed as leader of the Social Democrats in 1972, and Prime Minister in five different governments in the decade 1972–1982.

DM has been influential in a more indirect way, for instance by being the first major union that, together with the confederation CO-industry (*CO-industri*), introduced collective bargaining with the largest employer organisations at every new round of negotiations. This set a standard for every time a new round of collective bargaining commenced.<sup>4</sup> The HK was, until the end of the 1950's, a union mainly organising women workers, and it helped bringing the discussion of women's labour conditions and rights to the political agenda.

In terms of redistributive politics, the 3F is considered the most left-wing leaning of the three unions. This difference is also reflected in the fact that many of 3F's local branches still support traditional mainstream left-wing parties, while both DM and HK are today reluctant to display straightforward political preferences and support. When it comes to the political attitudes of the trade union members on issues concerning, for instance, questions of national identity and immigration, or more specifically their support for radical right-wing populist parties, data are still limited.

## CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES – PERCEPTIONS AND REACTIONS

We interviewed fifteen trade union representatives from the 3F, DM, and HK who work in different levels of their organisation and are geographically spread over the country. Most interviewees lead their local union sections, which either cover a single municipality or a whole region. The interviews were semi-structured with

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<sup>4</sup> It is most likely not an accident that the current leader of Dansk Metal, Claus Jensen, was found to be the most powerful person in the whole country through a network analysis of the Danish "power elite" elaborated by Christoph Houman Ellersgaard, Anton Grau Larsen, and Sarah Steinitz in 2016.

questions clustered according to three main themes: 1) The relation between trade unions today and the radical right; 2) the trade union's approach to counter racism and discrimination; and 3) international relations and cooperation, particularly at the EU level. Additionally, several topics seemed to be of particular concern to most of the interviewees, which included the role of migrant workers from Eastern European countries and the directive on adequate minimum wages being currently negotiated in the EU. These issues were elaborated upon in detail during some of the interviews.

The perceptions of who is positioned on the radical right of Danish politics seems to have changed in the past decades, including among trade union representatives. To some degree, the normalisation of populist positions, for instance, on migration and asylum question has likely affected trade unionists' views about who belongs to the populist and radical right in today's Denmark. Certainly, things have changed from 1998, when Social democratic PM Poul Nyrup declared in his address to the parliament opening that in his eyes "the Danish People's Party will never become *salonfähig*". For many of those interviewed, it is reasonable and appropriate to politically cooperate with the Danish People's Party. When asked about his perception of the increased popularity of the far-right in Denmark, 3F union organiser Jakob Mathiassen mentions for instance "Hard Line" (*Stram Kurs*), as an example of the extreme positions some of his colleagues now might sympathise with, which can be seen as problematic. Ole Kjær, representative of the HK section in Southern Jutland and a member of the Social Democrats, distinguishes between the Danish People's Party and the "other parties on the far right". He further observes that DF MPs have a pragmatic approach to politics and that they support the Danish welfare state and social security policies. This, in his view, makes the DF appear "less problematic than other parties". The Danish People's Party is today considered an acceptable political referent, compared to other parties. In other words, the trade union considers the DF a suitable interlocutor, despite the party's ethnonationalism and anti-immigration views.

Jesper Thorup, leader of the HK-section in Eastern Jutland, deems Hard Line and The New Right as 'extreme right-wing', yet the Danish People's Party is not mentioned as belonging to this category.

*But the Danish People's Party [...] they are an interesting case, you know, in the sense that if it were not for their positions on immigration, they agree with us on most matters. The Danish People's Party is sometimes easier to agree with than some of the governing parties.*

This approach is also the result of decades of normalisation of right-wing populism in the country (Meret 2021b). Nowadays, the focus upon cultural and ethnic background and the framing of non-Western and Muslim immigrants as a problem for integration and social cohesion are also propositioned by the mainstream parties. Besides, the DF “reputational shield” (Ivarsflaten 2006) and the party positioning on welfare might have helped to the process of acceptance. Yet, this can seem a bit at odds with trade union’s emphasis on the “everybody is to be welcomed” principle, that is: regardless of ethnic origin, race, sexual orientation, or religion. International solidarity is in fact still perceived as an important guiding principle among trade unionists, although this commitment seems less concrete when discussing who they perceive as radical and populist challengers to these positions.

Most of the trade unionists we interviewed did not perceive their members’ support or sympathy for radical right-wing populist parties to be a matter of concern. For Christina Madsen Kristiansen, Head of HK in Northern Jutland, the fact that HK needs to represent a broader segment of workers within the clerical and retail sector implies that they also include members who might vote for parties and standpoints not in line with the policies and positions supported by the HK. Their political attitudes and behaviour are seen as a private matter. However, Kristiansen also recognises that HK and the other trade unions should better explain and clarify to their members the need to distinguish between their private political opinions and preferences from HK’s official stance and requirements. The challenge for the trade union is thus to unequivocally and adamantly advocate for gender equality, anti-sexism, and anti-discrimination position that are based on cultural, racial, ethnic, or religious differences, while at the same time still being able to encompass different political positions and standpoints among the members of the union. According to Anthony Sylvester, a 3F Copenhagen-based trade union consultant on migrant labour, this tension entails the need to foster more dialogue among the members, to disclose differences, tensions, and conflicts instead of trying to censor or avoid them. Yet, neither Sylvester nor the other trade union representatives we interviewed indicated whether the unions actively try to develop and sustain dialogue among members with different political approaches and opinions, for instance about immigration and migrant workers.

The lack of concrete initiatives and actions on how to cope with the spreading of radical right-wing positions among unionised workers is perhaps connected to the idea that supporters of the radical and populist right parties are not particularly active in trade unions, or that they do not see their trade union as an advocate of in-

clusiveness, anti-discrimination, or democracy. As Ole Kjær observes, radical right-wing members are more likely to perceive their trade union's role as their personal 'insurance ticket', which provides a specific service (for which they pay for) in case of labour conflicts and wage regulation. These members do not see trade unions as actors that should stand for anti-discrimination and social justice. In this sense, Kjær means that these members are not more likely to engage with their trade union than they do with their bank or their local supermarket. They buy a service they might need at some point, and do not engage further than the required monthly membership fee. But as Jesper Thorup points out, such different perceptions of the role of one's trade union can produce a deep internal divide between the active and 'silent' members of the union. If it is true that European trade unions must conceive themselves as "communities of values" that counter right-wing extremism, as Richard Stöss claims (Stöss 2017: 42), it is clearly a problem that a growing part of the members conceive the trade union as neither a community nor a place of value but a service provider for the benefit of the individual paying customers.

During our interviews, issues of racism and ethnic discrimination are also discussed as minor problems for trade unions, compared, for instance, to the constant pressure that the exploitation of migrant workers in Denmark wields on the survival of the Danish labour and welfare model. This does not entail that trade unionists mean that these issues are negligible in Danish society as such, but they do not see this as the primary reason for why immigrants can be abused and exploited. The problem is not so much discrimination, but rather the poor working conditions of the workers coming from Poland, Romania, and the Philippines, creating a backlash on the Danish model and stability. In this sense, it is social dumping that is the main concern.

Some of the trade unionists interviewed also mentioned that they understand why manual labourers might sympathise with the radical right. The main explanation behind this can be exemplified by a "dissatisfaction theorem": voters' and thus workers' opinions and attitudes are not formed independently, but they arise as a reaction to a loss of status and out of fear for their security on the labour market. This is particularly noticeable amongst the trade union representatives in 3F, which organises most of the unskilled workers within sectors such as transport, agriculture, and construction, where workers with a migrant background today often outnumber Danish workers. Yet, there is sparse elaboration or reflection about why it is that such dissatisfaction and perceived threat transforms into a nationalistic response and not, for instance, toward a demand for a restructuring of the workplace and a stronger unionisation and socialisation of the workers

within same sector or locale. In this respect, it is interesting to note that when, for instance, Jakob Mathiassen speaks of the “local workers” and/or the “local working class,” he specifically means ethnically Danish and white workers.

## COUNTERING THE RADICAL RIGHT

Even though several of our interviewees argue that unions are historically internationalist in their advocacy and perspective, and that they should remain so, nationalism in a Danish context is still accepted as an unescapable political framework for trade unions, also in view of the Danish model and its prized “exceptionalism”. This means that even though the need for more European and transnational cooperation amongst trade unions is seen as indispensable, or to put it with Anthony Sylvester’s words that “we are already more European citizens than we think”, several trade unionists still advocate the need to contain these developments so as not to cause backlashes during the transition. Jakob Mathiassen argues, for instance, that were Danish trade unions to suddenly drop “welfare chauvinism” and advocate for time and resources to be invested in global struggles, workers would withdraw their trade union membership and the Danish model would succumb.

According to Mathiassen: “what the trade union movement really does, which can restrain right wing populism, is to take the edge off the globalisation tsunami”. In this sense, it is important for trade unions to try to stem the tide of radical right populism, by making sure that the ‘tsunami’ of migrant workers and foreign companies in the country does not undermine Danish working conditions, bargaining traditions, and privileges. Jakob Mathiassen speaks of a general sentiment and concern amongst many of the trade union representatives that some control and regulation of migration is necessary to address radical right-wing tendencies in the public opinion and their members. However, with this perspective they also risk positioning themselves in the liminal space between two contrasting argumentative stances: On the one hand, the idea that it is the number of migrant workers that trigger competition and the ‘race to the bottom’ in the labour market and, on the other hand, the principle that everybody is welcome no matter where they come from. This approach is perhaps a pragmatic appraisal of the primacy of nationalist interests amongst Danish workers. In order to organise and mobilise towards international solidarity, trade unions need to pragmatically accept a strategic nationalist protectionism, to paraphrase Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1984) ‘strategic essentialism’, that is: To embrace a pragmatic approach to achieve higher political goals.



Understanding and recognising the role that trade unions play in an increasingly globalised and transnationally organised world requires knowledge and education about both national and international / global developments and contexts. This is not to be taken for granted for labour union members and perhaps can explain the “lack of logics” inherent in supporting radical right wing and populist stances and policies, as Ole Kjær seems to suggest:

*The whole labour movement has always been internationalist rather than nationalist. There has been a divide in that sense. But [this role] is not given the importance that in reality it should have, in my opinion. You know, it is like when you hear [the song] “When I see a red flag billow on a shiny, fresh, spring day” [a famous Danish labour movement song from 1923] too many people still get to picture in their minds the Danish flag, you see. But it is not! It is the red banner of the labour struggle.*

Along similar lines, Jan Overgaard Gregersen, leader of Dansk Metal in Aalborg, claims that radical right-wing populism offers “easy solutions to complex problems”, but avoids proposing realistic and long-term policy changes and alternatives. Gregersen sees social media as loudspeakers for an oversimplified vision of world. Facebook has for instance become “the fools’ paradise” for public debate. Yet, such a critical perspective might also buoy inaction if radical right supporters are perceived as being too uneducated to understand the complexity of today’s society.

Nevertheless, lack of knowledge can be countered by education. Ole Madsen, leader of Dansk Metal in the municipality of Himmerland, strongly believes that it is possible to educate supporters of the radical right opposing fake news about, for instance, criminality rates among ethnic minorities, and by arranging meetings between radical right-wing supporters and members with migrant background.

*The best strategy is first of all education. And if we can manage to also organise the new Danes, because many are still not members of the union, and do not participate in the various activities we organise and what we otherwise offer. To meet each other can strongly contribute to breaking down prejudices.*

Madsen here refers to his own personal experience about the importance of befriending people with immigration backgrounds to challenge views and stereotypes about non-natives. Yet, contesting radical right-wing prejudices and stigmatisation can also be a strategy that yields positive results:

*We must also be better [at informing] our members [...] Not that we should be afraid, or critical or anything, but when there are these [anti-immigrant] allegations coming from the right wing, we should ask them to provide evidence for [their statements] because I think that there are an awful lot of undocumented allegations in the media nowadays.*

The lack of a critical perspective and reflection of the implications that relate to a nationalist approach to the Danish model and to Danish “exceptionalism” can be difficult to reconcile with international solidarity and action. Ultimately, how can international solidarity among Danish and foreign workers be achieved considering this approach seems to set limits to working-class solidarity beyond borders? Why does this issue remain unaddressed among trade unionists? In this respect, the strategy towards the radical right challenges in Denmark seems to ignore rather than to confront the type of nationalism and populism that Danish radical right-wing populism stands for and has elaborated upon during the past decades. For instance, trade unions such as 3F and DM have run campaigns and lobbied politically against the European Commission’s proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages. Their core arguments are not necessarily nationalistic, in the sense that they are protecting a labour market model with voluntary agreements instead of bounding these to a formalised legislation, which is a model that does not only work in Denmark. Yet, as Jakob Mathiassen argues in relation to his own union, these campaigns are predominately focused on the potential threat and harm that such a directive might do to Danish workers, while the potential benefits this would bring for workers in the other EU countries remains unstated. Trade unions do not seem to critically address the implication that this strategy and rhetoric, on the one hand, supports the Danish model, and on the other thus ends up strengthening ethnonationalist and welfare chauvinist positions and, perhaps indirectly, also the radical right Eurosceptical agenda.

In Denmark, the reference to the trade union movement in the singular (*fagbevægelsen*) signals that there is a certain alignment among Danish trade unions in terms of interests, demands, claims, and campaigns. That the Danish Trade Union Confederation now organises 1.3 million trade union members from different unions clearly evinces that there is an alignment at institutional level. Yet, at the ideological level, differences remain, for instance between 3F and DM, whose understanding of Danish nationalism and interests on the question of migrant workers differs. In this regard, 3F representatives tend to emphasise the importance of international solidarity more than HK and particularly DM. Even though they also directly criticised the EU directive on minimum wages, their reasons for

being so critical are not quite the same. For instance, in their “fact sheet” about the EU minimum wage, the 3F carefully acknowledges that many EU workers live in condition of precarity, underpayment, and exploitation, before arguing that this cannot be properly solved by law. According to 3F, the Danish model should become the European model. In contrast to this, the leader of Dansk Metal, Claus Jensen, published several critical letters and posts on the EU directive, arguing that it threatens the Danish model. These communications did not mention the conditions of workers in the rest of Europe, who cannot rely on a similar model.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Danish trade unions are, at least to some degree, nationalistic in their focus and approach to protecting the Danish model and in their prioritisation of collective bargaining for the Danish labour market. Yet, this approach suffers from an ambivalent nationalism in constant tension with solidarity beyond borders and with what this means for the migrant workers within the EU space. Overemphasising Danish exceptionalism might have unanticipated effects on the trade union movement’s inclusion and solidarity. It is not only about Denmark but also about crossing borders and fighting for workers’ rights internationally.

The scholarly literature distinguishes between different strategies that mainstream parties may resort to in countering the radical right (Heinze 2018; Bale et al. 2010; Downs 2001; Meguid 2005). They can choose to disengage from the radical right by ignoring, blocking, or perhaps even demonising their political opponents. On the other hand, they may also choose to engage the radical right by either confronting them in an adversarial way or rather by collaborating and adopting some of their policies. Even though trade unions are different political actors than parties, they can also draw from similar strategies when reacting to the radical right and populist challenges. In the case of Danish trade unions, it is difficult to pinpoint straightforward strategies – this is perhaps because there is a lack of a cohesive strategy. Trade unions oscillate between a range of strategies, that include ignoring that some of their trade union members may sympathise with the radical right. Trade union representatives also express a dismissal and demonisation of the radical right as inefficient and rabid. Interestingly, however, it is the shifting positions that characterise the trade unions approach: Positions avowing that trade unions should go into dialogue with supporters of the radical right is mentioned soon after or just before the idea that radical right supporters are “ill-informed and misguided”. In this sense, Danish trade unions advocate a dismissive

and a collaborate strategy which reflect an ambivalent approach to the radical right, or at least discloses a lack of a thoroughly discussed and planned strategy.

This differs from the mainstream parties' reactions in Denmark, which have adopted co-option of anti-immigration discourses in particular (Heinze 2018: 293). Except for the more extremist *Stram Kurs*, which failed to be elected to Parliament in 2019, the *cordon sanitaire* has never been considered a viable option. The lack of a clear strategy among Danish trade unions needs to be considered within the broader Danish political landscape, where radical right-wing populism has increasingly been normalised. In this sense, it does not seem entirely clear which political actors the trade unions must be aware of when developing strategies against radical right-wing populism. Since mainstream parties such as the Social Democrats but also the Liberals and the Conservatives have moved towards nationalist and arguably populist directions, it would come with a political cost for trade unions to openly advocate for international and cross-border solidarity. Being more internationalist would probably reduce their political influence considerably.

Furthermore, Danish trade unions have changed their self-understanding over the past decades. Since the beginning of 2000's, most Danish trade unions decided to abolish economic support to the left-wing parties. For instance, HK stopped their annual support to the Social Democrats in 2005, 3F did the same in 2007, although local departments may still provide support for specific political activities organised by the left-wing. Among our interviewees, this is reflected in an overall shift towards a looser cooperation with the Social Democrats. René Nielsen, deputy chairman in Dansk Metal, emphasises that this is not a "disengagement", at least for DM, since they still advocate for a Social Democratic government as the one which best serves the interests of their workers. According to Nielsen, it is rather an expression of a reversal in the accentuation among trade unionists on how to conceive their role in society. When Nielsen began as leader of *Metal Hovedstaden* ("Metal Capital") in 2007, one's identity as a unionist was "more political than professional", but this relationship slowly shifted over the years so that political identity and belonging faded more and more into the background. Representing a certain profession, and thereby a large group of workers with specific interests on the labour market, began to matter more than whether an elected representative was a member of the Social Democrats.

According to Richard Hyman (2001), it is possible to distinguish between three ideal types of European trade unionism: 1) Trade unions as interest organisations with primarily labour market functions; 2) trade unions as platforms for raising work-

ers' status in society more generally; and 3) trade unions as "schools of war" in a potentially revolutionary struggle between labour and capital (Hyman 2001: 1–2). Danish trade unions do not simply perceive themselves as belonging to the first category, where political involvement is to be kept outside of the labour market. Instead, they perceive of the political developments in Denmark as being dynamic, in the sense that shifting interlocutors from different parties can enhance opportunities to advance the workers' interests on the labour market.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the perspective associated with this approach that understands trade unions mainly as interest organisations with labour market functions, does seem to play a stronger and stronger role in today's Denmark. In this regard, it has become easier to dismiss the rising influence and consequences of the populist and radical right, as long as this is not perceived to directly and negatively affect labour market regulations and labour interests and achievements. As several interviewees emphasise, they are aware of radical and populist right-wing tendencies on, for instance, social media and in different youth subcultures, but they do not know of any examples of such tendencies arising in ways that are directly relatable to the workplace. This, however, could also be understood as a sign of broader acceptance, particularly since political standpoints and core beliefs have faded into the background.

## BEST PRACTICES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The influence of radical right populism in Denmark has also to do with labour market developments and thereby with the way Danish trade unions react to such trends, discourses, and political (or paradigm) changes, whether this concerns newly arrived refugees seeking asylum and employment, or the discussion about the minimum wage and Denmark's role in the European Union. As emerges from our interviews, Danish trade union representatives still believe that their interests and political demands are best represented by left-wing parties. Therefore, Danish trade unions have different reasons for developing a more coherent and ambitious strategy to counter the spread of radical and populist attitudes and positions; this not only because they disagree with the ethnonationalist-populist agenda, but also because this agenda 'steals' voters that might otherwise go to the left-wing.

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**5** Given that the idea of the Danish model presupposes a basic agreement between workers and employers and thereby a cessation of class struggle as an 'either-or' antagonism, Danish trade unions are definitely not "schools of war".

But how to go about with this task? Can trade unions in other countries learn from each other's strategies, ideas and experiences? Is it possible to create a list of strategies that takes into account different contexts, history, and welfare developments? As we have seen, Danish trade unions are more focused on engaging in dialogue and cooperation with available political actors. They privilege consensus rather than having to set-up a *cordon sanitaire*, or emphasise 'unbridgeable' differences. Many interview respondents expressed hope that they would be able to engage with, listen to, and understand those who sympathise with the radical right. This can be done and mediated through *ad hoc* educational activities and dialogue that can help mobilising engagement and participation and show that perceived identity and cultural differences prevent the achievement of common goals for people working in similar sectors. Several interviewees recognise, however, the difficulty of reaching out to those members. Social media could provide an opportunity for union members and union representatives to meet, express their opinions, and start to dialogue with each other, providing this happens in a moderated setting. There are several online platforms trade unions could purposely use to engage members in a discussion respectful of differences, ethics, and conduct.

The strategy that Danish labour unions to a certain degree already pursue is to defuse the salience of issues that are typically dominated by the radical right, particularly in the public perception. Enhanced focus on social and economic justice for workers and on the relationship between macroeconomic processes and identity formation (Stankov 2022) could allow trade unions to reduce the saliency of questions focussed on nationality, homogeneity and cohesion, cultural differences, and/or religion. At the moment, unionists do not seem to ask themselves how they themselves may contribute to the framing of political issues and identity formation. For instance, how do they persuade workers that social class is just as important, if not more important, than their perceived belonging and identity? In this regard, a reflection on the content and implications of populist and nationalist positions within the union could be a fruitful way where to start. Trade unions such as 3F and HK offer to their representatives' courses on what racism, discrimination, and sexism are about and how it is possible to detect and counteract the spreading of prejudices, racism, and discrimination in the workplace. Given that ethnonationalist and protectionist views constitute the ideology of the Danish radical right, it would also be worth discussing whether courses on what nationalism is about and how it connects to globalisation processes should be included as a core component of trade union educational curriculum. This could help enhance the contact and exchange with other trade unions in Europe (and beyond) and possibly help to reframe the understanding of the Danish model within an increasingly international setting.

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# COUNTRY STUDY FINLAND

Oula Silvennoinen



## TRADE UNIONS IN FINLAND

The history of unionising in Finland stretches back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the first worker's unions were founded in the 1880's in the country's industry centres. A salient feature in the early unions was the strong presence of employer interests. The first union leaders were either employers themselves, or members of the educated classes, and the central idea of such unionising was moderate reformism aimed to defuse potential for labour market conflicts, and to reduce worker interest towards socialist politics.

A new wave of unionising soon buried this type of conciliatory trade unionism. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the spread of socialist trade unions across the country. The process culminated in 1907 with the founding of *Suomen Ammattijärjestö*, the first umbrella organisation for industrial trade unions. From the outset, these unions adopted a socialist outlook on the labour market based on the Marxist concept of class struggle. Consequently, they developed an integral relationship to the major political force of Finnish socialism, the Finnish Social Democratic Party.

With this grounding orientation, conflict with employers fearful of the spread of socialist ideas was a given. As a countermove, the employers began early on to organise their own employers' unions and specific policies to coordinate countermeasures to unionising and industrial conflict. One countermeasure was to form wage cartels, in the form of multi-employer agreements on industrial wages, and jointly coordinated and distributed lists of known troublemakers, agitators, and strikers.

The Finnish Civil War in 1918 marked the final culmination of the early phase of contest. Inspired and encouraged by the Bolshevik coup in Russia, the radical wing of the Social Democrats in Finland set out to take power with the help of the paramilitary Red Guards, strongly based on the personnel of the existing trade unions. Against them rose the non-socialist Whites, with their own paramilitaries, the Civic Guards. The result was a crushing defeat for the Reds, the escape of many of their cadres to Soviet Russia, a wave of White terror against the remaining Reds, and the founding of the Finnish Communist Party in Moscow in August, 1918.

The aftermath of the Civil War came to define the interwar Finnish republic and labour market. Throughout the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the main goal of the unions was to establish themselves as recognised representatives of worker interests at large, and to make collective bargaining and collective agreements the

standard of Finnish industrial life. Employers would counter with anti-union policies. These policies in action included an industrialist-backed countrywide strike-breaker organisation, collective propaganda aimed at the workers, the creation of competing, non-socialist unions, industrial espionage, and efforts to create and maintain centralised files and blacklists so companies could find and isolate potential troublemakers.

Towards the 1930's, the trade unions came under an increasingly concerted attack by employers and their organisations, who aimed to extinguish socialist trade unionism altogether. The methods were already familiar from union-busting and strike-breaking efforts tried and tested in the United States and Sweden. At its heyday in the early 1930's, the Finnish strike-breaker organisation *Yhtymä Vientirauha – Koncernen Exportfreden* counted some 34,000 members in its ranks. At the same time, the socialist trade union movement itself became a zone of conflict between its by now traditional leaders, the social democrats, and the communists, who were operating in Finland clandestinely under numerous and shifting front organisations. The struggle would continue long after the Second World War, and would shape the organisational culture within the trade unions.<sup>1</sup>

The Second World War ushered in the modern era of Finnish labour market relations and the birth of the modern trilateral system, where the state acts as a mediator between the employer and trade unions. A key precondition was the employers' grudging acceptance of socialist trade unions as negotiating partners and the principle of collective agreements binding entire sectors in 1940.<sup>2</sup>

After the Second World War, rivalry between social democrats and communists continued to characterise trade union politics. The struggle eventually led to the communists becoming marginalised within trade unions, and their influence limited to the handful of unions they were able to dominate. Yet, the strong association between trade unions and the left-wing parties, and a consequent enduring mistrust towards the unions among the political right have endured within for Finnish labour market policies.

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1 Silvennoinen, Oula (2018): "Demokratins framgångshistoria? Skogsindustrin, arbetsmarknaden och en fascistisk samhällssyn, 1918–1940", in: Meinander, H. / Östberg, K. / Karonen, P. (Eds.): *Demokratins drivkraft. Kontext och särdrag i Finlands och Sveriges demokrati 1890–2020*, Stockholm, SLS/Appell Förlag, pp. 204–209.

2 Bergholm, Tapio (2005): *Sopimusyhteiskunnan synty I. Työehtosopimusten läpimurrosta yleislakkoon, SAK 1944–1956*, Helsinki, Otava, pp. 55–56.

## MODERN FINNISH RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND RIGHT-WING RADICALISM

The Cold War era foreign political position of Finland strongly curtailed the political prospects of right-wing populist parties and movements. The only notable and moderately successful of them was the *Suomen Maaseudun Puolue* (SMP, Finish Rural Party), which represented non-socialist, centre-right populism through rhetoric seeking to portray the party as an agent of the ordinary small farmers, workers and entrepreneurs. The SMP was able to gain significant parliamentary electoral successes in 1970 and 1983, but failure in government and continuous infighting led to a steady downward spiral in its fortunes.

In 1995, the party was declared bankruptcy. The party leadership immediately set up a new party, *Perussuomalaiset* (PS; The Finns Party, formerly True Finns), with a single MP at the time. Under the next chair, Timo Soini, the party grew into a characteristically right-wing populist movement with a rhetorical mix of conservatism, xenophobia, and Euroscepticism (Finland joined the EU in 1995). The Finns Party grew during the late 1990's into the early 2000's, an era marked by increasingly voiced concerns about the sustainability of the Nordic welfare state, and an interlinked rise of exclusionary nationalism, both of which have helped right-wing populist movements thrive. The central point of their rhetoric has been the threat to the welfare state by increasing immigration and ethnic diversity, thought to lead to increased crime, decline of national solidarity, and other social problems, and to be an unsustainable strain on the welfare system.<sup>3</sup>

The political breakthrough came in the parliamentary elections of 2011, after which the party has consistently enjoyed a seemingly stable level of support among the voters. After the 2015 parliamentary elections, the party attained its greatest success so far, entering the centre-right government of prime minister Juha Sipilä (*Suomen Keskusta*, Kesk, Finnish Centre Party). During the same period, PS party membership grew from the minuscule 2,700 in 2004 to an almost quadruple figure of 9,500 in 2016. Support for the party remained equally high throughout the 2010's and into the 2020's, even though changes in party outlook and internal dynamics have been considerable.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Pyrhönen, Niko Johannes (2015): *The True Colors of Finnish Welfare Nationalism. Consolidation of Neo-Populist Advocacy as a Resonant Collective Identity through Mobilization of Exclusionary Narratives of Blue-and White Solidarity*, SSKH Skrifter 38, Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, pp. 24–28.

4 Palonen, Emilia / Saresma, Tuija (Eds.) (2017): *Jätkät & jyttyt. Perussuomalaiset ja populistimin retoriikka*, Vastapaino, Tampere.

PS's participation in the government proved short-lived, as Soini was ousted from the position of chair in the party conference of 2017. He was replaced by Jussi Halla-aho, a former Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for the party, who had gained influence and a devoted base of supporters as a racist and pro-authoritarian blogger.<sup>5</sup> Halla-aho was unbearable as a partner to other government coalition parties at the time. This quickly caused the entire Finns Party to split: Acting Finns Party government ministers resigned from the party, set up a new one, and continued in the government. The Finns Party, now led by Halla-aho, moved to the opposition.

Despite all the drama, Halla-aho soon proved markedly successful in restoring the level of support previously enjoyed by the Finns Party. Under his leadership, the party moved from Soini's right-wing populism into more radical rhetoric, making it a typical European right-wing radical party with distinctly authoritarian, anti-immigrant, and anti-establishment themes. This was in line with Mr. Halla-aho's statements to Finnish news media in the spring of 2017, when he stated that the party needs to become more radical and learn from the more successful European radical nationalist parties.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, the Finns Party's has 38 MPs in the parliament, which means it is currently tied as the second largest party in the parliament alongside the moderate-right *Kansallinen Kokoomus* (Kok.; National Coalition Party). The largest group is the *Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue* (SDP; Social Democrats) with 40 MPs. In the European parliament, the Finns Party is a member of the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group, currently represented by two MEPs.

The present-day Finns Party continues to define itself as national-conservative or, as the party program states, a "patriotic and Christian-social movement". Its current politics are characterised by anti-immigration-, anti-EU-, and anti-environmentalist themes, as well as with identity politics seeking to cast the political left and liberals as antitheses to what the Finns Party stands for. The party has continued to attract a coterie of far-right characters, antivaxxers, cultural warriors and conspiracy believers and occasionally made common cause with neo-Nazis and other fringe far-right actors.

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5 Sundqvist, Vesa (2012): "KKO kovensi Halla-ahon tuomiota", in: *yle*, 6.6.2012, <https://yle.fi/a/3-6171365>.

6 Waris, Olli (2017): "Halla-aho MTV:lle korkeimmalta oikeudelta saamastaan tuomiosta: 'Poliittinen paine ohjasi'", in: *iltalehti*, 19.4.2017, <https://www.iltalehti.fi/politiikka/a/201704192200104748>.



Ever since its creation, the Finns Party has acted as broad umbrella for right-wing populist, as well as right-wing radical themes. Some party actives are notorious for their close ties to neo-Nazi, white supremacist, and fascist groups, and members of the party, its leadership included, occasionally make public appearances in far right / conspiracist events. The party leadership has been notably passive in expelling these elements, usually only doing so after public outcries have threatened to turn them into net liabilities for the party. With its open-door policy towards even the extremist right, the party has been able to be the absolutely most credible funnel for every hue of right-wing radicals to political power and influence. Among the consequences is that no rival group has been able to establish a level of support and stability that would come even close to that enjoyed by the Finns Party.<sup>7</sup>

The interlocutors interviewed for this study – all of them active trade union functionaries – were uniform in their assessment that other right-wing populist, radical, and far right parties and movements are not readily discernible among the trade union membership. Such groups consist of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement and its successor organisations, as well as the Finns Party splinter groups *Valta Kuuluu Kansalle* (VKK; Power Belongs to the People), *Vapauden Liitto* (VL; Freedom Alliance), and the fascist *Sinimusta Liike* (SML; Blue-and-Black Movement), which are all tiny despite their status as registered parties. The Finns Party remains an absolute dominant force among the Finnish far right in general, as the only successful right-wing populist/radical party to enjoy consistent electoral success and a consequent stability, with no comparable peers. Thus, any discussion of right-wing populism and the trade unions in Finland has to concentrate on the Finns Party and its complex and contradictory relationship to the unions.

## "THE FINNS PARTY" AND THE TRADE UNIONS

To date, the Finns Party line towards the trade union movement in general, and trade union politics, has been weakly and inconsistently articulated. All the interlocutors within the trade unions interviewed for this study said that the party has

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<sup>7</sup> At the moment, there are several splinter groups, all composed of individuals (e.g. far right activists, anti-vaxxers, pro-Russia contrarians, and conspiracy theory enthusiasts) who entered politics as Finns Party candidates but later left on their own initiative or were expelled from the party. These groups attempt to rival the Finns Party. None of them have been able to build similarly steady bases of support, and will, in all likelihood, remain minuscule and thus unable to challenge the Finns Party's dominance in any way.

failed to formulate coherent policies relevant to worker or trade union issues. “They tend to say one thing, do another, and perhaps think of a third”, says one respondent. There is thus both an awareness of the not inconsiderable latent support for the Finns Party among trade union membership, as well as an understanding that, so far, the party has been unwilling or unable to capitalise on its successes. The rise of the party into a position within the trade union movement that would reflect its ascendancy in countrywide politics has been anticipated for years. So far, it has failed to materialise.<sup>8</sup>

According to the party program, the emphasis of the Finns Party “is on the value of the ordinary Finnish citizens and their role and voice in politics, economy and culture of Finland. The focus is neither on any particular professions nor ‘interest groups’ but on the Finnish nation as a whole.”<sup>9</sup> The Finnish-language original further states that the party positions itself “above outdated and unjust interest-group politics”.<sup>10</sup>

This is a hardly veiled reference to traditional trade unions politics. Such an attempt to keep oneself above the fray of everyday politics is most readily explained by the membership and voter structure of the Finns Party itself. According to a 2017 study by the University of Turku, roughly half of the party members in 2016 were employed, and one third were retired. Furthermore, the Finns Party members were overwhelmingly (75 %) male, and overwhelmingly (70 %) employed in private businesses. While the membership was relatively young compared to most other parties, the share of the unemployed was the highest and the share of students among the lowest. The party members were characterised by a slightly lower median income than Finns in general, as well as by lower than average education and a relatively high number of entrepreneurs among the membership.<sup>11</sup>

8 Huusko, Markku (2020): “Valtaako perussuomalaiset pian ay-liikkeen?”, in: *Uusi Suomi*, 30.1.2020, <https://www.uusisuomi.fi/uutiset/valtaako-perussuomalaiset-pianay-liikkeen-nousua-duunaripiireissa-kuvataan-jo-dramaattiseksi/5663e9c6-f5c9-4fad-a43d-4b4761136609>.

9 Perussuomalaiset (2018): “The Finns Party Principle Program”, 19.10.2018, [https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Periaateohjelma-19.10.2018\\_SU\\_In-English.pdf](https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Periaateohjelma-19.10.2018_SU_In-English.pdf)

10 Perussuomalaiset (2018): “Perussuomalaiset RP: Periaateohjelma”, 19.10.2018, <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/periaateohjelma.pdf>. Finnish original: “Perussuomalaisten huomion keskiössä ei ole yksittäinen ammattikunta tai muu suppeaeturyhmä vaan suomalaiset kokonaisuudessaan. Olemme vanhanaikaisen ja epäoikeudenmukaisen eturyhmäpolitiikan yläpuolella.”

11 Koiranen, Ilkka / Koivula, Aki / Saarinen, Arttu / Räsänen, Pekka (2017): *Puolueiden rakenteet ja jäsenistön verkostot*, Kunnallissalan Kehittämissäätiön Tutkimusjulkaisu, 103, KAKS, pp. 19–20, 29.

The Finns Party counts among its members and supporters a good share of people who also form the core of trades-union membership, especially in male-dominated sectors. Yet there are a number of factors that keep it from becoming a worker's party in any traditional sense of the term – despite former chair Timo Soini's adage that the Finns Party would be “a worker's party without socialism”. One inhibiting factor is the strong attachment, inherited from the predecessor SMP, to the ethos of the independent small farmer and small entrepreneur. The Finns Party has a strong wing of entrepreneurs with a traditionally hostile outlook towards trade unions and the political left, who consequently make occasional outbursts of anti-trades-union rhetoric from the ranks.

On the one hand, the Finns Party trade union activists clearly identify with traditional trade union political themes, such as the importance of upholding the principles of collective bargaining and collective agreements. In practical politics within the trade unions, says one interlocutor, “they are in a similar way as the representatives of any other party on the side of an ordinary worker.”

The result of voicing trade union issues through right-wing populist or radical right vocabulary can be an awkward union of traditional worker's movement language and anti-left-wing incitement. “Part of the politicians under the leadership of [social democratic] prime minister Sanna Marin are offering as an alternative stricter legislation [with] mini[mum] wages [and] criminalisation of underpayment”, says a March 2021 bulletin of *Peruspuurtajat*, an association of Finns Party trade union actives. “This would move collective bargaining through the parliament and into the courts of law — It is truly sad to watch how the social democrats are demanding equality, improvement in the position of women, and the narrowing of wage differentials, yet remain silent when the employers in an unprecedented manner attack the conditions of employment.”<sup>12</sup>

An interlocutor from *Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö* (SAK; Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions) says there is a clear potential for the Finns Party affiliation among their members. “According to questionnaire studies we've done

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<sup>12</sup> Perussuomalaiset (2021): “Peruspuurtajat: Ay-liikkeen on noustava taistelemaan työehtosopimusten puolesta”, 30.3.2021, Press Release. <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/ajankohtaista/peruspuurtajat-ay-liikkeen-on-noustava-taistelemaan-tyoehtosopimusten-puolesta/>. Finnish original: “Pääministeri Sanna Marinin johdolla osa politiikoista tarjoaa vaihtoehdoksi tiukempaa lainsäädäntöä minipalkkoineen alipalkkauksen kriminalointineen [sic] – On todella surullista seurata, kuinka Marinin demarit yhtäällä vaativat tasa-arvoa, naisten aseman parantamista ja palkkaerojen pienentämistä, mutta toisaalla ovat hiiren hiljaa kun näiden alojen työehtojen kimppuun käydään ennenkuulumattomalla tavalla työnantajien toimesta.”

among our members, there is a significant structural potential for the Finns Party”, but when one looks at the level of individual unions and their politics, “it is surprisingly invisible – it is as if they were somehow embarrassed or ashamed of their party affiliation.” All the interlocutors agreed that the Finns Party has been uniformly unable to turn their potential support into actual gains across the trade union movement. Where they do have leadership positions in unions, they are either underrepresented, or wield a substandard level of influence, tending to go along with more experienced and determined actors.

As potential sources for this impotence, the interlocutors cite organisational inexperience and a resulting incompetence, possible lack of interest among the Finns Party voters towards traditional trade unions issues, even sheer disinterest within the party towards the “tedium” of trade union politics, not easily turned into identity political themes or representing commanding terrain in the culture wars. Perhaps, said one interlocutor, there are even doubts within the party whether the trade union movement is even a particularly valuable target worth taking over.

The interlocutors shared a sense of the divisive potential of some of the key themes of the Finns Party among the trade union membership. The party rhetoric is openly racist, portraying immigration as a root cause for a variety of social problems. It is easy to see how such positions can aggravate conflicts in increasingly multi-cultural trade unions, factory floors, and the job market. Neither is the basic premise of Finns Party populist rhetoric of trade unions as bastions of a pampered elite of the political left apt to defuse conflict. However, a consistent push for confrontation seems largely absent to the interlocutors. “I don’t really know what they [Finns party members and supporters] think of the world”, says one of them, “or what they actually want.”

## TOWARDS FURTHER UNEASY COEXISTENCE

The Finns Party has not shown particular eagerness to engage voters with themes related to trade union or their issues. The likely reason for this is that the party voter base remains ambiguous in their relationship to trade unions and unionising in general. While the voter base contains a significant number of traditional blue-collar voters, another significant bloc are the small businessmen and self-employed entrepreneurs, whose rhetoric is often sharply anti-left and anti-union in tone. Identity politics has proved to be the dominant driver, making

anti-left rhetoric much less problematic than a direct assault on the unions as such, also considering that many party members are also union members.<sup>13</sup>

This is, in all likelihood, the major reason why there has been little in the way of coordinated efforts within the trade union movement at countering the right: the threat hasn't really materialised. By way of their constitutions, Finnish trade unions tend to be well secured against takeover attempts. This is a legacy from the long period of struggle between the social democrats and the communists, who aggressively tried to expand their influence within the movement from the 1920s onwards.

When it comes to effective counter-strategies, campaigns to activate union members to vote for union issues clearly have potential, says one interlocutor. For example, “[i]n one of them, we were able to achieve a notable shift in opinion among our members, and demonstrate that through a questionnaire study.” Of key importance is not to let the right-wing populists or radical right determine the agenda: “That way we can have a discussion about actual working-life issues, not over immigration.”

One way of defusing the potential of right-wing populist and radical right parties is also to engage with them as part of normal intercourse between the unions and parties. Such communication also gives insight into the developments within the right-wing populists and radical right themselves. According to one interlocutor from inside the *Toimihenkilökeskusjärjestö* (STTK; The Finnish Confederation of Professionals) changes in the Finns Party orientation towards trade unions have been restrained but discernible during the recent years. Nowadays, organisations like the STTK are in regular contact with the Finns Party leadership to hear their opinions and engage them in discussion regarding policies and social issues.

Yet, meaningful discussion is often hampered by the programmatic vagueness of the Finns Party. The party tends to lack coherent political policies for engaging in wide and complicated social and structural issues in a consistent manner. This could make the Finns Party something of a force to be reckoned with but so far it has been impotent due to its own volatility and unpredictability. Moreover, its tendency to concentrate on posturing in lieu of consistent policy-making and mi-

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13 Koiranen, I. / Koivula, A. / Saarinen, A. / Räsänen, P. (2017): *Puolueiden rakenteet ja jäsenistön verkostot, Kunnallissalan Kehittämissäätiön Tutkimusjulkaisu*, 103, KAKS, 19–20, 29.

nor details in lieu of overall views have limited its efficacy. The message of the party regarding core trade unions issues, like collective bargaining, is often obscure and timid. This may change in the future but so far, the Finns Party are a challenge, not an outright danger to trade unions, says the interlocutor.

The Finns Party has proven adept at stirring up feelings of resentment necessary to mobilise their potential supporters to vote. This has helped them achieve a string of electoral successes and maintain a steady support level on both sides of 15 percentage points in polls between elections. However, the party has proven singularly unable to govern or to exercise influence proportional to its size outside government. Thus far, the singular Finns Party venture into government from 2015 to 2017 ended with voter disappointment and a split party. Within the trade unions, the Finns Party has not gained its standing among the membership by speaking about trade union issues but by incessantly haranguing about conservative values and identity. It is thus conceivable that the current party leadership does not see a need to depart from this fundamental strategy that so far has served them so well.

In the parliament and on lower levels of politics and governance, the Finns Party tends to limit itself to authoritarian posturing, rhetoric, and hand waving instead of policy-making. Inciting rhetoric is perceived as the most potent and is the only tool consequently applied to any and every problem. This is the mind-set of culture wars, not of the reality of parliamentary and coalition politics. The Finnish multi-party system only reinforces this source of impotence. To make anything happen in the Finnish system, one almost always needs to be able to gather temporary majorities by collaborating with other parties. Convincing others to vote with you and your party is the bread and butter of conventional politics; the Finns Party has so far failed to master this basic skill.

Can this change? The interlocutors were all cautiously sceptical towards the idea of rapid changes in the Finnish situation. “If there were some kind of a strong Finns Party presence building up among some union, I would have heard of it by now”, says one interlocutor. Yet, for trade union activists pondering these questions, introspection is a good starting point. Austerity policies enacted under governments where left-wing parties participate, and general feelings of disappointment “in traditional worker’s parties’ ability to actually further the key issues affecting worker’s lives” are the “primordial soup” from which right-wing populist and radical movements draw their strength. “There are many answers to be found from taking a look into a mirror”, one of the interlocutors concludes.



# COUNTRY STUDY FRANCE

Michel Noblecourt





## FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS OF THE TRADE UNIONS IN FRANCE

The French trade union landscape is characterised by its fragmentation into eight competing confederations of various sizes, each representing different ideological and strategic positions. According to trade union figures, they have a combined membership of almost three million (including both workers and pensioners). According to the Ministry of Labour, 10.3 per cent of employees are organised (7.8 per cent in the private sector, 18.4 per cent in the public sector and state enterprises). These statistics show membership today to be 0.7 per cent less than it was in 2016 and put France as one of the European countries with the lowest level of union membership. Five major confederations are recognised as having the power to negotiate and with which state and employers' organisations can join in agreements at the national, occupational, and sectoral levels: *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT; French Democratic Confederation of Labour); *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT; General Confederation of Labour); *Force ouvrière* (FO; Worker's Force); *Confédération française de l'encadrement – Confédération générale des cadres* (CFE-CGC; French Confederation of Management – General Confederation of Executives); and *Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC; French Confederations of Christian Workers). These organisations are also represented in most sectors and fare the best in company worker representation elections. Other relevant federations include the *Union nationale des syndicats autonomes* (UNSA; National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions), *Union syndicale solidaires* (Solidaires; Solidarity Trade Union Federation), and the *Fédération syndicale unitaire* (FSU; Unitary Trade Union Federation).

Election results for workers' representation at the company level are a critical component of a trade union's capacity to negotiate and be recognised as a partner. In France, unions need to receive at least 10 per cent of employee votes in a company to negotiate agreements with the employer. The election results from the past four years paint a valuable picture of the influence and balance of power of trade unions in the French social system.

Each trade union confederation consists of local and regional inter-occupational federations and branch organisations. These organisations are responsible for collective bargaining in all of the sectors and branches in which they are represented. The organisational uniqueness of the French system is exemplified by the high number of branches in each confederation and that their sphere of responsibility

Table 1  
Trade unions and workers' representation elections

Union	Union Membership	Share in the elections for the term of office 2017–2020 (in per cent)
<b>CFDT</b>	610 144	26.77
<b>CGT</b>	600 000	22.96
<b>FO</b>	350 000	15.24
<b>CFE-CGC</b>	148 000	11.92
<b>CFTC</b>	140 000	9.50
<b>UNSA</b>	200 000	5.99
<b>Solidaires</b>	110 000	3.68
<b>FSU</b>	160 000	n.d.

Source: Data from the Ministry of Labour, Full Employment and Vocational Integration, and the Confederation of the French trade unions; own calculation (2021). N.d. = no data.

does not always coincide with the economic structure. Therefore, the fragmentation of the trade union ecosystem can be found not only between confederations but also within them.

Because the overarching inter-occupational federations are involved in the negotiation of important topics related to employment and social policy, the sector-specific organisations' scope of action is smaller in France than it is in other European countries. The most important sector-based organisations can be found in the public sector (public services, health, and the social sector). The teacher-based *Fédération syndicale unitaire* (FSU; United Federation of Trade Unions) is particularly influential in the education sector.

The French Constitution (specifically, the preamble to the 1946 and 1958 Constitutions) guarantees trade unions' freedom of organisation and association. At the national level, trade unions are recognised as negotiating partners by the state and must, at a minimum, be formally involved in discussions on government so-

cial policy reforms. The rights and duties of trade unions as they pertain to the companies and sectors in which they operate are regulated by law and can be expanded upon through the social partnership.

The Labour Code (*code du travail*) establishes important labour relations regulations, including the national minimum wage, the 35-hour work week, minimum vacation time (5 weeks per year), and occupational safety. For these, the provisions outlined in the code take precedence over regulations negotiated between social partners. At the national and inter-industry level, social partners negotiate with state and employer organisations on employment and social policy issues. At the sectoral level, the social partners are able to negotiate on items such as wage floors, occupational classifications, and provisions on equality, as well as deviate from the national and legal standards on issues such as probationary periods and fixed-term employment contracts.

## THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN FRANCE

Since the passing of the 1958 Constitution in France, the country has operated under a presidential-parliamentary system of government. The President of the Republic has been elected by universal suffrage since 1962 and wields considerable political power: He (no woman has ever been elected to this position) appoints the Prime Minister, is the head of the armed forces, and has the capacity to dissolve the National Assembly. In special circumstances, the president can also order a referendum. Thus, he is untouchable, unaccountable, and can only be held responsible in cases of high treason. While France might appear to be something of a ‘Republican Monarchy’, there are strong parliamentary oppositional forces. The Republic is represented by three chambers: the National Assembly, the Senate, and the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (CESE; *Conseil économique, social et environnemental*). The Prime Minister determines and directs national policy and answers to the National Assembly. They do not have to win the parliamentarians’ confidence but can be removed through a no-confidence vote supported by a majority in the assembly. Furthermore, the National Assembly has the final say in the passing of legislation.

France has many political parties. The party of the current president Emmanuel Macron was founded in 2016 under the name *En Marche!*. From 2017 to 2022, it went by the name *La République en marche!* (LREM; The Republic on the Move!). A merger between LREM and *Agir* (Action) and *Territoires de progrès – Mouvement*

*social-réformiste* (TDP; Territories of Progress – Social Reformist Movement) led to the party being renamed *Renaissance* (RE) on 17 September 2022. RE's current General Secretary is Stéphane Séjourné.

The government majority is a coalition that includes the party *Mouvement Démocrate* (MoDem; Democratic Movement). This party was founded on 10 May 2007 by François Bayrou after he received 18.57 per cent of the vote in the presidential election that year. He ran again in 2012 and only received 9.13 per cent. In 2017 and 2022, he supported Macron in the first round of voting. As of 2022, the party has 51 representatives in the National Assembly. *Horizons*, another political party, was founded on 9 October 2021 by former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, is also part of the present government, and has 27 representatives in the National Assembly.

*Les Républicains* (LR; The Republicans) is the strongest centre-right party, founded on 23 April 2002, through an initiative of Nicolas Sarkozy, emerging from the *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP; Union for a Popular Movement), which ended in 2015. Defining itself as a Gaullist party, LR follows in a long line of parties espousing this ideology.<sup>1</sup> The party's presidential candidate for the 2017 election, François Fillon, came in third with 20 per cent of the vote; since then, the party has found itself in an existential crisis. In December 2022, it elected Eric Ciotti as new chairperson to fill the seat held by interim chairperson Annie Genevard. As of 2022, LR has 61 representatives in the National Assembly and 138 in the Senate.

The *Union des démocrates et indépendants* (UDI; Union of Democrats and Independents) self-identifies as a centre-right party. Founded on 21 October 2012, the party sees itself as a continuation of former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's party, *Union Pour la Démocratie Française* (UDF; Union for French Democracy), which existed from 1978 to 1998. The UDI supported François Fillon in 2017 but split from the LR in October of that year. Nevertheless, the party supported LR candidate Valérie Pécresse in 2022. The chair of the UDI, Jean-Christophe Lagarde, elected

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<sup>1</sup> *Rassemblement du peuple français* (RPF; Rally of the French People) from 1947 to 1955; *Les Républicains sociaux* (RS; Social Republicans) from 1955 to 1958; *Union pour la Nouvelle République* (UNR; Union for the New Republic) from 1958 to 1967; *Union des Démocrates pour la V<sup>e</sup> République* (UD-V<sup>e</sup>; Union of Democrats for the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic) from 1967 to 1968; *Union des Démocrates pour la République* (UDR; Union of Democrats for the Republic) from 1968 to 1976; and *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR; Rally for the Republic) from 1976 to 2002.

on November 13, 2014 and subsequently compromised by several legal disputes, resigned on 20 October 2022. The party has six representatives in the National Assembly, 38 in the Senate, and has grown closer to Emmanuel Macron. However, it has not joined his majority government.

The political centre is also populated by several smaller parties, including the *Parti républicain, radical et radical-socialiste* (PR or Parti Radical; Republican, Radical and Radical-Socialist Party or Radical Party); the *Mouvement Radical (social libéral)* (MRSL; Radical, Social, and Liberal Movement), which was formed on 9 December 2017 by PR; the *Parti Radical de Gauche* (PRG; Party of the Radical Left); the *Alliance Centriste* (AC; the Centrist Alliance); and *Les Centristes* (LC; the Centrists).

The left wing of the political party spectrum in France is also diverse. As of 2022, the most important party on the left is *La France Insoumise* (LFI; France Unbowed), which was founded on 10 February 2016, by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The LFI is, however, more of a movement than a party, not unlike RE. Mélenchon led the party until 2021. As of 2022, LFI has 75 members of parliament (MP). The *Parti Socialiste* (PS; Socialist Party) was founded in 1969 and given a new orientation during the Epinay Congress in 1971 by François Mitterrand, who was PS' first secretary. This post has been held by Olivier Faure since 2018. The party has 31 MPs in the National Assembly and 61 senators. The older *Parti Communiste française* (PCF; French Communist Party) was founded in 1920 and has been led by National Secretary Fabien Roussel since 2018. It has 12 MPs and 14 senators. *Europe Ecologie-Les Verts* (EELV; Europe Ecology-The Greens) was founded on 13 November 2010, after several environmentalist movements joined forces. Julien Bayou held the National Secretary post for this party from 30 November 2019 to 26 September 2022 resigning after allegations of psychological violence were brought about by an ex-girlfriend. His successor Marine Tondelier was elected on 10 December 2022, with 90.8 per cent of the vote. The party has 16 MPs and eight senators.

Right-wing populism in France is dominated by Marine Le Pen's party, *Rassemblement National* (RN; National Rally), which evolved out of the Front National (FN; National Front) in June 2018. FN was founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen's father, on 5 October 1972. Marine Le Pen took over as party leader on 16 January 2011 at the Tours Congress and held the post until 13 September 2021. On 5 November 2022, Jordan Bardella won the party's top seat in an election against Louis Aliot, the mayor of Perpignan. The RN has 89 MPs in the National Assembly.

The extreme right-wing party *Reconquête!* (R!; Reconquest) was founded on 30 April 2021, to represent Éric Zemmour's candidacy in the 2022 presidential election. Initially called *Les Amis d'Éric Zemmour* (Friends of Éric Zemmour), the party's name changed to *Reconquête!* on 5 December 2021. It has two senators and three MPs in the European Parliament but has no MPs in the National Assembly.

The small, national-populist party *Debout la France* (DLF; France Arise) was initially a faction within the *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR; Rally for the Republic) from 1998 to 2008, before Nicolas Dupont-Aignan left and founded *Debout la République* on 23 November 2008. The party was renamed *Debout la France* on 12 November 2008. Nicolas Dupont-Aignan has run for president three times, in 2012 (winning 1.8 per cent of the vote), 2017 (4.7 per cent), and 2022 (2.06 per cent). He is his party's only MP in the National Assembly. *Les Patriotes* (LP; The Patriots) was founded on 29 September 2017 by Florian Philippot after he split from the FN. LP joined forces with DLF in the 2022 parliament elections and does not have any elected representatives.

Anti-immigration sentiment in French politics is concentrated in the RN and R! parties. However, the most radical and violent (youth) movement was *Génération Identitaire* (GI; Generation Identity), the direct descendent of *Unité Radicale* (UR; Radical Unity). UR was administratively dissolved in August 2002 after an attempted attack on Jacques Chirac. As the successor to the 2002 *Jeunesses Identitaires* (Identitarian Youth) and the 2009 *Une autre jeunesse* (Another Youth) movements, GI initially came to prominence through their occupation of a construction site for a mosque in Poitiers in 2012 as the youth arm of *Bloc Identitaire* (BI; Identitarian Bloc). The movement became independent in 2016 when the "Bloc" was renamed *Les Identitaires* (The Identitarians). GI has had multiple run-ins with the justice department for their violent actions, notably in the Calais "Jungle" migrant camp and the Hautes-Alpes department on the border with Italy. GI was dissolved by decree from the Council of Ministers on 3 March 2021 for inciting discrimination and violence against others through hate speech targeting people for their origins, race, or religion. Furthermore, the group had some of the characteristics of a private militia as well as links to extreme right-wing groups that espouse theories of racial hatred and supremacism. GI's appeal before the state was rejected on 2 July 2021. A number of former members participated in Éric Zemmour's presidential campaign and started the group *Argos France*.

The results of the 2022 presidential election are as follows. In the first round, Emmanuel Macron received 27.85 per cent of the vote, Marine Le Pen 23.15 per cent,

Jean-Luc Mélenchon 21.95 per cent, Éric Zemmour 7.07 per cent, Valérie Pécresse 4.78 per cent, Yannick Jadot (EELV) 4.63 per cent, Jean Lassalle 3.13 per cent, Fabien Roussel 2.28 per cent, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan 2.06 per cent, Anne Hidalgo (PS) 1.75 per cent, Philippe Poutou (*Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*) 0.77 per cent, and Nathalie Arthaud (*Lutte Ouvrière*) 0.56 per cent. In the second round, Emmanuel Macron was re-elected with 58.55 per cent. 41.45 per cent of the vote went to Marine Le Pen.

The results from the second round of the 2022 parliamentary election are as follows. The presidential party alliance *Ensemble pour la majorité présidentielle* (Ensemble!; Together for the Presidential Majority) received 38.57 per cent of the votes and a relative majority with 244 MPs. The new party alliance *La Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale* (NUPES; The New Ecological and Social People's Union), formed by the parties LFI, PS, PCF, and EELV, occupied 127 seats in the National Assembly with 31.60 per cent of the votes. In addition, there are 22 MPs from other parties on the left. The RN, with 17.30 per cent of the vote, took 89 seats. The LR, with 6.98 per cent of the vote, won 61.

## THE RIGHT-WING FRONT AGAINST TRADE UNIONS

Marine Le Pen's anti-unionist sentiment was on hold during the 2022 presidential campaign. Nevertheless, a few weeks after the elections, her original stance returned. Louis Aliot, the Perpignan mayor, let his mask fall when he declared on France's BFM TV channel on 25 August 2022, "Trade unions are the morticians of the economic and labour world. They aren't good for anything".

A bitter hatred of the trade union movement appears consistently throughout the FN and the RN's electoral programme. In 2002, FN described the movement as trying to get "different representatives of workers to discuss and build something together [...] in large trade associations and on equal terms, i. e., where workers and employers have an equal weight". Moreover, "freedom of labour is restored through the criminalisation of picketing and the requirement of a secret ballot before every strike".

In 2007, the FN decried trade unions for being "obsolete and unrepresentative", stating that the "misguided and moribund French trade union movement is one of the main reasons for the stagnation of our economy and one of the largest obstacles to the necessary reforms in French society. [...] Opting exclusively for a disrupt-



tive strategy (strikes and systematic opposition to any form of change), the trade unions prevent individual sectors from collective bargaining, the only honest and concrete component of the social dialogue”. To “accomplish a much-needed renewal of the trade union movement”, the FN called for an abolition of the “monopoly of the first round” of voting in works council elections.

In 2012, Marine Le Pen praised “a major trade union reform”, demonstrating absolute ignorance on the subject: “The monopoly of representativeness that was established after liberation will be abolished and the system for electing workers representatives will be reformed”; “More representative unions will be in a better position to adopt the logic of constructive voting and less tempted to engage in power struggles (i. e., strikes and demonstrations) to compensate for their lack of legitimacy”.

Item ten of Marine Le Pen’s 144-point presidential plan from 2017, reaffirmed in 2022, was formulated as follows: “Establish proper trade union freedom through the abolition of the monopoly of representativeness and improve the ethicality of the trade union system through public control of funding”. It must be made clear here that the “trade union monopoly” is a fabrication. In order to participate in lists in the first round of elections, trade unions must be independent and respect the republic’s values. Public control of trade union funding was already established by a 2008 law. In October 2022, the RN even brought forward several amendments to the National Assembly, which were, of course, rejected. One amendment intended to prevent foreigners from participating in works council elections through the ‘*priorité nationale*’ principle (‘national priority’; the ‘French nationals first’ policy gives French citizens priority over foreigners for housing and jobs), another demanded proficiency in French as a condition for participation in representative bodies. For Laure Lavalette, RN representative for the Var department and the author of these proposed amendments, the intention is to prevent “any attempt at foreign influence or communitarian demands through the representation of foreigners in these bodies”.

Nevertheless, the FN previously tried to infiltrate the trade union movement by suggesting candidates in Labour Court elections for seats not reserved for representatives from trade union confederations. Thus, the FN has created its own unions and attempted to strategically infiltrate trade unions known for being unstable.

In the Labour Court elections of 10 December 1997, the *Coordination française nationale des travailleurs* (CFNT; French National Coordination of Workers), which does not self-define as a trade union, put 132 lists forward in 34 French depart-



ments. It received an average of 5.91 per cent of the vote, with its best results in Mantes-la-Jolie (10.1 per cent), Dreux (9 per cent), and Nice (8.9 per cent). While 18 CFNT candidates won in this election, they were declared ineligible by the courts due to their ideological dependence on the FN. Elisabeth Guigou, Minister of Labour and Solidarity, led the passing of an anti-discrimination law on 16 November 2001, which banned political parties and all organisations that praise discrimination and thus “pursue a goal contrary to the institution of the labour court” from participating in labour court elections.

Since 1996, at the instigation of FN General Secretary and advocate of a “social front on the labour front” Bruno Gollnisch and FN General Delegate Bruno Mégret, the FN has tried to strengthen its involvement in various work sectors. By the 6 November 1995 elections, a police union, the *Front National-Police* (FNP; Police Union of the National Front), affiliated with the FN had already been established, winning 7.4 per cent of the vote in workplace elections. This was followed by the establishment of a number of sector-specific FN unions, including for local public transport (February 1996), the Front National des territoriales (May 1996), for prison workers (September 1996), postal workers, and an educational movement known as the *Mouvement pour un Enseignement National*. All these unions were subsequently banned by the courts. The 10 April 1998 landmark ruling by the *Cour de cassation* (Court of Cassation) on the FN’s Police Union was binding. France’s highest court confirmed that “the FNP is simply an instrument of the political party that founded it, whose interests and objectives it exclusively serves by emphasising differences based on race, skin colour, and national or ethnic origin”. According to the court, the FNP was founded with an illegal purpose, which meant it could not legally call itself a trade union. Thus, de facto or de jure, all these organisations have since disappeared. Dominique Andolfatto and Thierry Choffat, in their book *Les faux semblants du Front national* (The false claims of the National Front), highlight how the split from the FN had “fatal consequences for them, as they were led by Bruno Mégrets supporters” (2015).<sup>2</sup>

Despite this setback, the FN did not give up. Instead, they followed Bruno Mégret, who said: “We have to circumvent this problem, that they’re banning our unions, by infiltrating companies in disguise.” The CFE-CGC and the CFTC had already

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2 Bruno Mégret resigned from the FN following a disagreement over the future strategy of the FN and personal differences with Jean-Marie Le Pen in December 1998. He then founded the *Mouvement National Républicain* (MNR; National Republican Movement).

been targeted by the FN in the 1980s, as they were seen as weak points. These attempts, however, failed in the face of trade union resistance to their efforts. While it was not possible to prevent trade unionists from also being members of the FN, in a few rare cases, FN members who were also union members were barred from participating in positions of responsibility in a trade union or *Union départementale* (UD; Departmental Union). No unions forbid their members from belonging to a political party, but a clear emphasis on a political direction during a union election is not permitted.

## ELECTION CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES OF RIGHT-WING POPULISTS

The Solidaires union describes the FN as adopting a predatory strategy targeting a populist electorate for election campaigns. Six union members ran in the March 2011 cantonal elections on the extreme right's lists, though they emphasised their union affiliation: Fabien Engelmann (CGT), Daniel Durand Decaulin (CFDT), and Thierry Gurlot (CFTC) ran in the Moselle Department; Annie Lamahieu (FO) in Nord; and Robert Demassieux (CFDT) and Franck Pech (SUD) in Pas-de-Calais. The CFTC withdrew all mandates from SNCF employee Thierry Gurlot, who is known for having founded the *Cercle National des Travailleurs Syndiqués* (CNTS; National Group of Unionised Workers) with Louis Aliot. He subsequently left the CFTC to join Éric Zemmour's controversial political party.

The most outstanding case is that of Fabien Engelmann. Coming from the extreme left, with involvement first in *Lutte ouvrière* (LO; Workers Struggle) and later in *Nouveau parti anti-capitaliste* (NPA; New Anticapitalist Party). He even ran in the Thionville municipal elections as an LO candidate before later switching to the right via the website *Riposte Laïque*. On 9 March 2011, then General Secretary of the CGT Bernard Thibault sent a letter to all the unions in the CGT confederation stating: "Despite all the protests, the FN cannot be considered a normal political party, neither by the CGT nor by other trade unions. The FN's positions, and specifically the priority given to French nationals, are against the principles of the Republic and international conventions. [...] In this regard, it is our responsibility to be vigilant and respond collectively."

Pascal Dubay is an educator in Meurthe-et-Moselle, General Secretary of his trade union sub-district (UD), and member of the Executive Committee for the CGT. At the CGT, he led the collective aptly named *Lutte contre l'extrême droite et le racism*

(Fight against right-wing extremism and racism; henceforth the Collective for Combating Extremism) and remembers this affair as a “real trauma”. Dubay remembers Engelmann, former CGT union secretary for the mayor’s office in Nivange, as a “lively activist [...] including in defence of the LGBT community”. In this affair, “the Moselle UD and the *Fédération des Services Publics* gathered all the members of Engelmann’s union to take on the story. It was only when a majority of members deemed the situation abnormal that proceedings against the union were initiated by the Executive Committee; the union was eventually removed from the federation”. Engelmann was elected mayor of Hayange in 2014 as a member of the FN political party. As a member of the regional council, he represented Laurent Jacobelli, then RN deputy for the department of Moselle. This served as a precedent for the events that unfolded with the CGT. A memo by the Collective for Combating Extremism published on 10 October 2022 was titled *Memo on the extreme right’s attempts to instrumentalise the CGT*. While confirming “the freedom to run in political elections,” the memo reiterates that “it is unthinkable to have the CGT represented at any level from an activist or member who openly proclaims to adhere to the concept of ‘priority for nationals’, which is a central tenant of the extreme right and the *Rassemblement National* in particular, in the name of freedom of expression in the CGT. The acceptance of the far right’s theses, including the ‘French nationals first’ concept, the blaming of immigration as a cause of unemployment, or the rejection of the integration of irregular immigrants, is absolutely incompatible with the CGT’s values”.

“Therefore, the CGT cannot permit trade unionists who have violated these principles to remain members,” the memo goes on to explain by providing the following procedures: “First and foremost, the organisation implicated must initiate appropriate procedures in strict compliance with their rules and regulations. The Executive Committee of a UD or FD may not replace union leadership when it comes to initiating expulsion proceedings. [...] The affected party must be given a summons and granted a hearing before a final decision can be made, even if the statutes do not expressly mandate such a hearing in their internal disciplinary guidelines. [...] It is crucial that the disciplinary procedures be supported by a political work of debate and argumentation within the affected organisation, so the motive for the process can be established.”

Pascal Dubay mentions about 50 activists, extreme right candidates for the elections, especially the municipal elections: “Either we had to exclude them or they left on their own”. He cited the case of an FN candidate for municipal elections in Saint-Avold in Moselle in 2014; “He was not shut out. But he was quite upset and admitted that he had ‘messed up’”.

Marine Le Pen's FN list for the 2015 departmental elections included "8 CGT, 9 CFTC, 5 CFDT, 7 FO" candidates on her FN list. The independent mayor of Rans in the Jura department and CFDT representative for Solvay, Stéphane Montrelay, was an FN candidate and was subsequently expelled. In the 2014 municipal elections, a labour judge with CFDT Paris, Dominique Bourse-Provence, was an FN candidate in the 10<sup>th</sup> arrondissement and refused to resign. The story unfolded as follows: when he was a CFDT trade unionist, "the motto was: 'we accept all parties except the FN'". As an FN regional councillor for Ile-de-France, he had advocated for the 'national priority' policy, which had led his union, the *Syndicat National des Personnels des Organismes* to expel him. In response to his expulsion, he took legal action under the name of "freedom of expression". In November 2017, the appeal was dismissed by the *Tribunal de grande instance* (TJ; now renamed *Tribunal judiciaire de Paris*, Judicial Court of Paris) on the grounds that his expulsion was "due to his consistent behaviour of taking a public position on specific topics that are absolutely contrary to the beliefs and guidelines" of the union to which he had belonged. Since leaving the CFDT, this particular trade unionist has joined Florian Philippot's party *Les Patriotes* and participated in a demonstration against so-called "Anti-Corona-Madness". The CFDT invokes this particular ruling as an example of a rare 'betrayal' of its values.

In the *Force Ouvrière* (FO) union, the newspaper *La Voix du Nord* revealed that a regional deputy belonged to the FN in the 2011 cantonal elections. She was subsequently stripped of her authority. In 2021, after 30 years of activism in the CFTC-Dunlop union, Philippe Théveniaud, who was at the time the President of the *Caisse d'allocations familiales* in Somme, ran in regional elections. As the top candidate on the FN list for Somme, he subsequently gave up his CFTC membership. While he was not a member of the RN, he was close to the party and self-identified as a "socialist Gaullist" and an activist in the *Avenir Français*, which "often opposed Jean-Marie Le Pen". As a deputy for the RN's MP for Somme, Jean-Philippe Tanguy, Théveniaud left the CFTC in 2022 "because those responsible did not respect the statutes for independence when they called for votes for Emmanuel Macron". The RN MP for Oise, Philippe Ballard, continues to present himself as a CFTC representative.

## FRENCH TRADE UNIONS AND THE EXTREME RIGHT

Uncompromising opposition to right-wing extremism is part of the DNA of France's trade unions. After the Vichy regime dissolved the unions on 15 November 1940, the CGT and CFTC secretly drew up a joint text on French trade union

principles. Titled the *Manifesto of the Twelve*, this document affirmed from its start the centrality of “respect for human beings without regard for race, religion, or creed”.

In this manifesto, “under no circumstances and in no way can the French trade union movement accept differences between people based on race, religion, origin, opinions, or wealth. Every human being deserves equal respect. They are entitled to free and full development so long as it does not oppose the interests of the community”. The document rejects “above all, anti-Semitism”.

In the preface to the 1995 and 2016 revisions of the union statutes, the CGT, which was first founded in 1895, sets a clear tonal precedent: “Through its analysis, proposals, and actions, it acts so that the ideals of liberty, equality, justice, secularism, fraternity, and solidarity [...] prevail in society. It is for a democratic society, free from capitalist exploitation and other exploitation and domination and is against all kinds of discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and all exclusions.”

For the CFDT, originally founded in 1964, the preface to the 2018 amended statutes proclaims that the “alienation of people and any form of violation of their dignity and fundamental rights are incompatible with humanist, democratic, and secular values, social progress, and long-term performance of the economy. This can take different and sometimes complex forms, depending on the status, gender, place, time, origin, or beliefs of each individual”. Article 1 places individual and collective emancipation, solidarity, and equality in the foreground, alongside democracy, i. e., “combatting all forms of exclusion, discrimination, sexism, racism, and xenophobia”.

As the former General Secretary of the *Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes* (UNSA; National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions), Alain Olive, underlined at a Jean Jaurès Foundation and Friedrich Ebert Foundation joint conference held in March 2022, “Marine Le Pen’s RN places importance on specific issues that were close to her father’s heart, especially [...] his intense hostility toward trade union confederation and the trade union movement as a whole”. This anti-union sentiment has a long history. Under the Vichy regime, the *Charte du travail* (Labour Charter) established by former CGT functionary René Belin, and who was Philippe Pétain’s Minister of Labour, sought to make a “definite break from the old system of class struggle [...] Trade unions will therefore be mandatory so as to be strong, united in order to be free. Their activity will henceforth be strictly limited to their respective sectors”.

## TRADE UNIONS UNITED AGAINST THE RIGHT

The first united trade union response against the far-right in France can be dated to 17 March 2011. In a joint statement, the unions CFDT, CGT, FSU, Solidaires, and UNSA shared the decision: “to no longer express casual indifference to the use of the social sphere to promote specific ideas in the public debate, as practised by the National Front. The ‘priority for French nationals’ is incompatible with the basic values of the trade union movement. Exclusion, rejection of others, the isolation of France and the closing of its borders, the use of scapegoats, and the denunciation of immigration as the basis of all evil are all attitudes that, as history has shown us, can only lead to the worst. [...] Trade union actions are grounded in the values of the trade union movement, such as solidarity among all workers and the fight against all forms of discrimination.” The five unions announced their readiness “to prevent the instrumentalisation of the trade union movement by the National Front, which is not a typical party and whose inclinations are in conflict with union values”.

On 15 June 2015, a few months after the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, the unions went much further. In a carefully organised production at the Bourse du travail (France’s labour council) in Paris, seven trade union leaders unveiled an unprecedented and historic declaration. Laurent Berger (CFDT), Philippe Martinez (CGT), Philippe Louis (CFTC), Carole Couvert (CFE-CGC), Bernadette Groison (FSU), Luc Bérille (UNSA), and Cécile Gondard-Lalanne (Solidaires) presented a manifesto titled *Living and Working Together after January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015*. The groundwork of this text, which is eight pages long and includes five chapters, was first laid out on 20 January 2015 and then revised during five joint working meetings led by Jean-Louis Malys (CFDT) and Pascal Dubay (CGT). The manifesto is a “call to assemble in companies to oppose populism, the ideas of the extreme right, demagoguery, and to resolutely stand up for the values of the trade union and the principles of the Republic”.

Without “wanting to erase diverse sensitivities”, the seven unions underlined that the “trade union movement is enriched by the very diversity that is the basis of a democratic society. Equality, fraternity, solidarity, and respect for human rights and freedom are at the very centre of the trade union’s values. Its actions are incompatible with the logics of discrimination, sexism, racism, or anti-Semitism”. “The growth of populism”, the declaration continues, “radical right-wing ideas, xenophobia, sectarianism, and fundamentalism correspond to an extremely unsettling reality in all of Europe and in France in particular. [...] History has shown

that exclusion, rejection of others, the isolation of France and the closing of its borders, and the denunciation of immigration as the basis of all evil are attitudes that lead only to discord, conflict, and failure”.

The only downside to the declaration was that the worker’s movement FO was not included, and the FN was not named explicitly. Nevertheless, the message was strong. In April 2017, FO General Secretary Jean-Claude Mailly affirmed: “Crises are the soil in which far-right ideas grow.” The FO declared that it was “in its genes to fight against racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. The principles of the republic, such as fraternity, secularism, and democracy, are indispensable values”.

On 5 June 2015, Philippe Martinez directly decried the FN in front of the press, stating “this party only represents the employers’ interests” and called for discussions to take place in the companies themselves so that “nothing is swept under the rug”. Seven years later, Laurent Berger and Pascal Dubey jointly stated that “this declaration has led nowhere”. Even in 2015, there was hardly a response. In December 2015, a number of trade unions – the CFDT, CGT, UNSA, and the FSU – called for open opposition to Marine Le Pen’s party and Philippe Louis, the president of CFTC who had put Christian values in the forefront in order to “bring down the National Front”.

Indeed, the trade union wall of protection against the right turned out to be rather weak. In 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen defeated Lionel Jospin, thus qualifying for the second round in the presidential election, all unions mobilised against the FN on the First of May. Only the FO held back, in the name of trade union freedom. With help from the leftist parties as well as numerous associations, 1.5 million demonstrators took to the streets across France. However, this was not repeated when the same scenario presented itself in the second round of a presidential election in 2017 or 2022. The unions each celebrated May Day in their own way, each giving priority to their own movement.

## THE ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR OF TRADE UNIONISTS

When focusing solely on France’s presidential elections, though the same trends can be observed in regional, parliamentary, and European elections, there is an unsettling increase in votes for FN by trade union members. Several polling institutes analysed the votes in the first round of the presidential election by trade un-



ion affiliation. These surveys should be treated with caution, as they indicate an affinity for the party, not party membership. Nevertheless, there is a clear picture of a recent slight weakening but an overall strong rise of the FN among workers and those living in increasingly desolate rural areas.

According to the *Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel* (CSA; Superior Audiovisual Council), in the first round of the 2002 presidential election, Jean-Marie Le Pen received 19 per cent of the vote of CFTC members, 15 per cent of FO members, 12 per cent of CGT and CFE-CGC members, 10 per cent of CFDT, and 3 per cent of *Solidaires* members' votes. As per Harris Interactive's data from the first round of the presidential election in 2012, Marine Le Pen was the candidate of choice for the following percentage of union members: 25 per cent of FO supporters, 16 per cent of UNSA, 15 per cent of CFTC, 12 per cent of CFDT, 11 per cent of CFE-CGC, 9 per cent of CGT, 4 per cent of Solidaires, and 3 per cent of FSU.

In the first round of the 2017 presidential election, Marine Le Pen had 24 per cent of the vote from FO, 15 per cent from CFTC and UNSA, 13 per cent from CFE-CGC and Solidaires, 9 per cent from FSU, and 7 per cent from CFDT, according to a large sample study by Harris Interactive.

In another survey by Harris Interactive, an online survey of eligible voters with a sample size of 6,523, the candidate from the far right received 31 per cent of the FO members' votes (7 per cent more compared to 2017), 29 per cent of CFTC voters (up 15 points), 22 per cent from CGT voters (up 7 points), 19 per cent UNSA voters (up 5 points), 17 per cent CFE-CGC voters (up 4 points), 15 per cent CFDT voters (up 8 points), 14 per cent Solidaires voters (up 1 point) and 10 per cent FSU voters (up 1 point). Over five years, Le Pen won votes from unionists. In 2022, the RN candidate also made gains among civil servants, winning 38 per cent of their vote, up 9 points from 2017. In particular, 25 per cent of teachers voted for Le Pen (up 7 points from 2017).

According to an October 2015 survey of work council secretaries conducted by an institute specialising in works councils, 61.4 per cent of secretaries declared sympathy for a party: 28.6 per cent for the left, 20.1 per cent for the right, and 2.6 per cent for FN. In contrast, 38.6 per cent did not declare affiliation with any party. Numerous leaders of the CGT, UNSA, and several from the CFDT made anonymous observations of freedom of expression at the trade unionists' assembly. Others did not hesitate to declare their interest in the positions put forward by right-wing extremists.



“When it comes to the demands,” said an FO member, “we are unintentionally playing the Front National’s game, since they have taken over our demands. My comrades report that FN spies are present at meetings. After the meetings, we find the exact wording of our demands in their treatises”.

“The right-wing extremists have clever tactics,” says Pascal Debay, “I’d describe them as a chameleon. They know exactly how to talk to steelworkers in Moselle and to the craftsmen in Var, and to others too. They adapt their content and form. When they write, ‘no second-rate minimum wage’, that could have come from a trade union.”

Philippe Martinez expressed shock by this: “The FN is winning over more and more, including those in our ranks. On social issues, they don’t hesitate to peer in to our demands. This right-wing upwell must be fought relentlessly”. The trade union leaders, however, have not hesitated to resign themselves to a massive (masked) increase in FN/RN activists so long as it increases the expected number of new members.

The true proportion of RN voters with official union membership varies greatly across the union federations.

## **TRADE UNION POSITIONS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST RIGHT-WING POPULISM**

An analysis of trade unions shows their respective positions and approaches to the fight against right-wing populism.

### **CFDT**

The CFDT is consistent in its fight against right-wing extremism. In the second round of ballots for the presidential election in 2017 and again in 2022, it called for people to “use the only possible ballot to fight right-wing extremists and vote for Emmanuel Macron”. At the 50<sup>th</sup> congress in Lyon (13–17 June 2022), which took place just before the general elections, Laurent Berger said: “Don’t give a single vote to the right-wing extremists. But that alone is not enough. Civil courage is comprised of saying exactly who to vote for to defeat the far-right. Blocking the far-right does not mean condemning or despising those who vote for a far-right party. As the

oldest trade union in France, it is up to us to address the workers who succumb to this temptation. We have to show them that this derogatory attitude toward “others” is only a fallacy that in the end always works out to the workers’ disadvantage”.

According to Laurent Berger, the act of “blocking the extreme right” is comprised of “the daily search for solutions, democratic confrontation – in the best sense of the word: it sometimes leads to clashes, but mainly brings a conclusion to the fore”. The CFDT resolution adopted at the Lyon Congress underscores that it “does not support any party, but defends its values and social project”. It stands in opposition to the fanciful, monolithic, and homogeneous image of the people and fights the parties that incite hatred, sexism, or racism. The CFDT defends democracy, the separation of powers, secularism, the rule of law, the values of the republic, and civil society and rejects all forms of discrimination.

## CGT

It certainly cannot be said that the CGT has not displayed overt hostility towards the far-right. On 16 April 2022, during the presidential election, Laurent Berger and Philippe Martinez signed their first-ever joint column in the *Journal du Manche* calling for votes against the far-right: “We are two engaged stakeholders who, despite our differences, believe in the power of dialogue and collective action to create a more just society. We are both responsible for organisations that have not resigned to the concept of seeing the far-right in power. The Rassemblement National is a danger to the fundamental rights of citizens and workers. This party cannot be trusted to be a respectful party of the republic or guarantor of our motto, ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.’ We must not hand it the keys to our democracy, or we will lose it”. The General Secretary of the CGT has always affirmed that “due to the many promises that have not been kept, it’s undeniable that various governments are responsible for the citizens’ mistrust”.

In 2022, Philippe Martinez refused to publicly call for votes for Emmanuel Macron. During an Executive Committee debate on the subject, supporters of this “specified vote” were a minority. Previously in 2017, however, he dared to take this step, publicly wishing two days before the second round of votes that “Marine Le Pen would get the lowest result and Macron would get the highest possible result”. During that year, thirty CGT functionaries, including Pierre Krasucki, son of former CGT General Secretary Henri Krasucki, and Pascal Dubay campaigned in the newspaper *L’Humanité*, saying that “voting for Macron” was an

“anti-fascist vote”. However, they also warned that they would “be the first to fight his destruction of ‘social benefits’”.

## FO

In 2002, the FO General Secretary Marc Blondel refused to support Jacques Chirac in the second round of the presidential election in the name of trade union independence. This act was sharply criticised. His successors, Jean-Claude Mailly (2017) and Yves Veyrier (2022), also adhered to this principle. In 2014, the FN and one of its satellites, the *Collectif Racine*, put out a call for support for FO candidates in elections for the regional administrative body. This support was rejected by the FO and condemned as ‘provocation’. At the same time, the then second-in-command at the FN, Florian Philippot, proclaimed to have “observed a greater willingness in the environment of the FO than at the CGT or CFTD”. The FN threatened Jean-Claude Mailly with a trial when he responded to a question about a possible meeting with Marine Le Pen with the quip, “National Socialism isn’t my thing”.

The new FO General Secretary Frédéric Souillot is on the same wavelength and has assured that he would not have signed the 2015 Trade Union Confederation Declaration, specifying instead that the FO should send its demands to all presidential candidates with the exception of Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour. The FO has since strengthened its tone against the far-right. In November 2021, Yves Veyrier emphasised that the FO will “strongly defend its fundamental values without concessions: this means the rejection of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia, and the denunciation of slogans and policies that scapegoat foreigners and migrants instead of providing legal solutions in the economic and social spheres. We have nothing in common with these positions or practices that set people against one another, divide them into hierarchies, and separate and discrimination; not today and not in the future”.

A further sign of this hardening can be seen in the reaction of members of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) to the publication of puff pieces published by the Polish trade union *Solidarność*’s weekly magazine *Tygodnik Solidarność* with interviews of Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour. In response, Yves Veyrier, Laurent Berger (CFTD), Philippe Martinez (CGT), Cyril Chabanier (CFTC), and Laurent Escuré (UNSA), sent a joint letter to *Solidarność*’s president Piotr Duda to criticise initiatives that “violate the principle of independence in the trade union movement” when “participating in strengthening democracy and social progress in Europe”.

## CFE-CGC

President of the CFE-CGC François Hommeril does not regret signing the 2015 Declaration. However, he vigorously rejects making any recommendations about candidates or parties during political elections, as this is not part of the trade unions' tasks. "This rule protects us," he says. For the 2022 presidential election, the CFE-CGC sent its demands to all candidates without exception and took no ballot position in the second round of the election.

François Hommeril reminds that the union's statutes "forbids standing for election and pretending to be a member of the CFE-CGC". He's aware of the "tendency" of the members of the police union to be aligned with the FN; however, "we rely on intelligence in the face of populism. When the government says that the rights of the unemployed should be cut, that is populism and it panders to the lowest instincts". The CFE-CGC makes a case for its guidance document *Religion at the Workplace*, which promotes respect for "the principle of non-discrimination on the grounds of origin, gender, customs, sexual orientation, [...] actual or presumed membership or non-membership of an ethnic group, nation, alleged race, political opinion, trade union activity, or membership in a trade union, mutual society, or religious belief".

## CFTC

In the run-up to the 2022 presidential election, the CFTC's National Committee took a vote by hand after the Executive Director, Cyril Chabanier, brought up that a presidential candidate "did not respect the values of the CFTC". Like in 2017, he called for votes against the far-right, though not specifically for Emmanuel Macron. In 2016, the union's climate was marred by two events. First, its Vice President Joseph Thouvenel participated in a demonstration of the "La Manif pour tous" movement in October 2016 on the same side as Marion Maréchal Le Pen, the then-FN MP for Vaucluse. "As a private individual", he had previously denounced the "blogosphere" and proclaimed his desire to resist "the commercialisation of the human". His behaviour was frowned upon, and a communique was disseminated, reminding that "the Front National's positions, which in particular praise intolerance toward women and men of other origins, mean that the CFTC is in total disagreement with the party and this thus prevents any relationship". Second, the CFTC had to sever the ties between its police union and the *Fédération Professionnelle Indépendante de la Police* (FPIP; Independent Professional Federation of the Police) because of the group's nearing to the FN.

## UNSA

At the beginning of the 2022 presidential elections, UNSA General Secretary Laurent Escure put forth the following stance: “no invalid votes, no abstentions, no Le Pen”, fearing that support for Emmanuel Macron could “lead to more votes for Le Pen”. Nevertheless, he ultimately decided to support the incumbent president without endorsing his programme. “We have members who are happy with the union but vote for the RN anyway”, he complained.

In the foreword to the union’s charter, the UNSA affirms its “adherence to the secularism of the Republic, to democracy, liberties, social justice, solidarity, defence of the public service, right to work, fraternity, and tolerance, and faithfulness to the principle of trade union independence. At UNSA, the fight against discrimination belongs to its fundamental principles”.

## FSU

For Benoît Teste, FSU General Secretary, “the rise of the extreme right is linked to individualism and stems from the inability to form a collective. Many feel excluded from society and perceive the precarisation of their work. They ask themselves, why not the RN? Macron is partly to blame”, he adds.

The FSU statutes are silent on party affiliation for members. For officials, “there is no overlap between our activists and the FN”. True to the 2015 statement, Benoît Teste also affirms “the need for a united fight against the far right, though this could lead to complicated debates”. For the presidential election, he noted, “we called for mobilisation against the far-right before the second round, but not to vote for Macron. However, we do say that Macron is not the same as Le Pen”.

## SOLIDAIRES

For SNCF employee and SUD-rail activist Frédéric Bodin, who leads the working group Union response against the right-wing extremists, “the values of the trade union movement are incompatible with right-wing extremism”. In both the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections, Solidaires promoted the slogan “No vote for the far-right”, albeit without a call for voting for Emmanuel Macron. “We have two enemies,” explains Frédéric Bodin, “one wants to fight us [Macron], the other

wants us to disappear [Le Pen]. It's not about having the same project or the same oppositions. Politically, it's very different".

In the summer of 2022, Solidaires dedicated an issue of its magazine *Les Utopiques* to the "trade union movement against right-wing extremism". "Our statutes do not explicitly forbid the extreme right," explains Frédéric Bodin, "but it is clear that the supporters have no place here with us". Solidaires is heavily involved in the inter-union association *Vigilance et initiatives syndicales antifascistes* (VISA; Union Anti-fascist Vigilance and Initiatives); 80 out of the 115 involved are Solidaires unions. Other unions involved include some local CGT and FSU unions and a few from the CFDT. VISA is involved in educational actions and recently published a booklet of the 89 RN MP's biographies, the "imposters", titled *Light on a brown National Assembly*.

Education is a weapon used by all confederations. The CFDT has a module for combating right-wing extremism in all its educational courses. At the CGT, Pascal Dubey has been leading thematic training days since 2015: "In the first four months of 2022, we offered 48 training days." A four-day module was recently set up at the Confederal Educational Centre "to unmask the extreme right's programme". The module material included several learning sheets; "On labour issues, the FN is on the side of capital"; "the FN lies about purchasing power"; "the FN's legislative proposals on taxation are particularly favourable to the rich and to companies"; "the FN lies about the 'defence' of public services and 'on immigration'"; "the priority for nationals': the foundation of social protection"; "the FN hates the trade union movement and trade unionists", and so on. The module also includes an 11-minute film titled *Yesterday and Today: The Fight of the Extreme Right*. This film was made by the CGT's *Institut d'histoire sociale* (Institute for Social History) and is used similarly by the FSU and Solidaires.

On 30 September 2022, the CGT, Solidaires, and several organisations issued a communiqué that called for refrainment of "any contact with members of the RN parliamentary group" against the backdrop of muffled concern that a catastrophe similar to the results of the 2022 Italian elections where the extreme right came into power could happen in France in 2024. This looming danger may lead the unions to work together against the extreme right in the spirit of the 2015 declaration.

*Translated from German by Tanager*



# COUNTRY STUDY GERMANY

Sophie Bose





## FRAMEWORK

### THE SYSTEM OF LABOUR RELATIONS

Labour relations in the Federal Republic of Germany are characterised by a dual system, with works councils acting as bodies representing the interests of employees at the company level and trade unions taking over supra-company representation of interests, collective bargaining with companies and employers' associations, and participating in a social or "conflict" partnership (Müller-Jentsch 2017: 23). Works councils are elected by all employees, "designed for consensus and co-operation, and committed to company harmony" (Müller-Jentsch 2014: 517). Their legal foundation, the Works Constitution, provides for a tiered system of rights, including the right to co-determination, participation, and information. For example, works councils have the right to co-determination in matters related to personnel and workplace and workflow design. However, they only have the right to information when it comes to economic matters (Müller-Jentsch 2014: 519f.). In the public sector, personnel councils have similar rights, though grounded in a different legal foundation.

In the context of policies on collective bargaining, trade unions ideally negotiate sector-wide agreements. In recent years, however, the power of the sector-based collective bargaining system has eroded, in particular, due to the reduced organisation of employers' associations. Thus, the amount of people engaged in workplaces without collective agreements has grown, and company-specific 'in-house' collective agreements have risen in importance (Ellguth / Kohaut 2022). The rising prevalence of these 'in-house' agreements is also described as the "corporatisation of labour relations". The system of industrial relations in Germany has been in a state of upheaval since the 1990s due to globalisation, stagnating economic growth, and the far-reaching transformation of capitalism. This has led to a weakening of trade union resources and co-determination in the workplace (Dörre et al. 2017: 220–224). Meanwhile, with the help of political programs such as the Agenda 2010, the social security net, industrial relations, and previous market-limiting institutions were pressured to compete and change throughout the country. Consequently, the German arrangement, which consists of labour law, collective bargaining autonomy, co-determination, and a social safety net, has withered. Meanwhile the principle of competition has returned to all possible sectors and areas of life; moreover, company management systems and internal structures have been financialised and re-oriented toward capital markets (Dörre et al. 2017: 220–224).

Despite the formal separation between the works councils and the trade unions, in practice, the two are closely linked. For example, the vast majority of works council members are also members of a trade union and are often involved in that union's organisation and collective bargaining decisions (Dribbusch / Birke 2019: 7). However, this "unionisation of works councils" (Schmidt / Trinczek 1999: 107) is limited to East Germany, where the separation between works councils and trade unions dates to the reunification in 1990 and has gradually been decreasing in more recent years (Röbenack / Artus 2015; Goes et al. 2015). Alongside the institutionalised works councils, many companies elect voluntary shop stewards who act as the trade union's point of contact in the company.

## FORMS OF TRADE UNION ORGANISATION

The largest trade union umbrella organisation is the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB; *Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund*). Founded in 1949, the DGB currently has approximately 6 million members and a gross level of organisation of about 14.3 per cent (Kim et al. 2022: 64). The number of DGB members has fallen to about half of its peak of 11.8 million in 1991, which was associated with the reunification of West and East Germany (Kim et al. 2022: 65). The DGB brings together eight trade unions, which are diverse in occupation and status: IG Metall (*Industriegewerkschaft Metall* – Industrial Union for Metalworkers) which, in addition to the metal industry, also organises workers in steel, electronics, textile, and wood industries and skilled trades industries and businesses); NGG (*Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten* – Union for Food, Beverages, and Catering); ver.di (*Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft* – United Services Union); IG BAU (*IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt* – Industrial Union Construction, Agriculture, Environment); GEW (*Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft* – Union for Education and Science); EVG (*Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft* – Railway and Transport Union); IG BCE (*Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, Chemie, Energie* – Industrial Union Mining, Chemicals, Energy); and GdP (*Gewerkschaft der Polizei* – Police Union). Ver.di and IG Metall are the largest of these eight unions, with 1.9 and 2.2 million members, respectively. Together, these two account for 71 per cent of DGB membership (Greef 2021). The member unions of the DGB are non-denominational and ideologically and politically neutral. Nevertheless, in West Germany, a "privileged partnership" exists between the *Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands* (SPD; Social Democratic Party of Germany) and the DGB. However, this partnership has become fragile in the wake of the labour market reforms undertaken within the context of the Agenda 2010 package adopted by the SPD and the Grünen (Greens) in 2005 (Dribbusch / Birke 2019: 7). The DGB is directly in-

volved in key policy areas including labour market policy and social policy, as well as in corporatist mechanisms such as the Minimum Wage Commission and, most recently, in “concerted action” to address inflation and the energy crisis.

## THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND RIGHT-WING PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

The Federal Republic of Germany is a federal, parliamentary representative democracy, governed by a coalition of the SPD, the Greens, and the libertarian *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP; Free Democratic Party) since September 2021. Additional important parties include the conservative *Christlich-Demokratische Union* (CDU; Christian Democratic Union) and *Die Linke* (The Left). The Left was formed in 2007 through the merging of the *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* (PDS; Party for Democratic Socialism) and the *Wahlalternative Soziale Gerechtigkeit* (WASG; Social Justice – the electoral alternative), which split from the SPD amidst its criticism of the Agenda 2010. The PDS succeeded the *Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED; Socialist Unity Party of Germany) after the end of the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR; German Democratic Republic). The right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD; Alternative for Germany) was founded in 2013. As of 2022, the AfD has representatives in the European Parliament, in 15 of 16 German state parliaments, and has been in the German *Bundestag* (national parliament) since 2017. In addition to the AfD, there are several other extreme right-wing parties, including the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD; National Democratic Party of Germany), which is not represented in any German parliaments and is of marginal importance, and the locally active micro-parties *Der dritte Weg* (The Third Path), *Die Rechte* (the Right), *Freie Sachsen* (Free Saxons), and *Freie Thüringer* (Free Thuringians).

Founded in 2013 in the wake of the European economic and financial crisis as a primarily liberal-economic anti-Euro party, the AfD has since developed into an ethnonationalist, anti-immigration, anti-refugee, and, in some areas, extreme right-wing party rife with aggressive and anti-establishment rhetoric. Compared to other European countries where such parties have long been a part of the political landscape, the emergence and nationwide success of this right-wing populist party is a relatively new situation for the Federal Republic of Germany. Next to a current of neo-liberal economics, the AfD has had a conservative and “*völkisch*”-nationalist tendency from its very beginning. The propensity for the latter was exemplified by Thuringian party leader Björn Höcke. Even though his ‘wing’ of the party was officially disbanded, this aspect of the AfD remains quite strong and has, in fact, be-

come increasingly important over time. The party members on this side of the AfD spectrum maintain close ties to the New Right and extreme right, i. e., to the New Right think tank *Institut für Staatspolitik* (Institute for State Politics) and *Compact*, as well as to right-wing movements such as the *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA; Patriots Against the Islamicisation of the Occident), an anti-asylum, anti-establishment extreme right movement founded in Autumn 2014 and succeeded by many local offshoots. PEGIDA was able to draw a crowd of 20,000 participants at a rally during the peak of its popularity in January 2015. Moreover, AfD actors maintain ties with the heterogeneous yet extreme and right-wing dominated *Querdenken* movement, founded in 2020 in protest of the government's coronavirus pandemic mitigation measures.

The AfD's economic and social policy agenda is highly disputed within the party itself. Its programme continues to be primarily economically liberal, while the ethnonationalist forces strive for a "national-social", social-populist policy. They try to present themselves as the advocate for the "little people" and German workers, blaming "irresponsible immigration policies" for grievances such as child poverty, poverty among seniors, and unemployment (Kim et al. 2022: 68). The party's discourse thus reinterprets the conflict over wealth distribution between those at the top and bottom of society as a conflict between insiders and outsiders, i. e. between motivated Germans and unmotivated foreigners. This can be seen in Björn Höcke's speech in 2018: "The social question of the day is not primarily the distribution of national wealth from top to bottom or from the old to the young. The new social question for Germany in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the question of distribution of national wealth from the inside to the outside" (Hank 2018). Only in 2020 did the AfD finally adopt a social and pension policy programme, the result of a laborious compromise between economic liberals and ethnonationalist forces (Kim et al. 2022: 68). Nevertheless, the inner-party struggle for direction continues (Kim et al. 2022: 70).

In an effort to present itself as the party of the workers and the "little people", the AfD has made repeated attempts to gain influence in the workplace by attacking trade unions head-on as corrupt and part of the establishment (e. g. Köhlinger / Ebenau 2018: 6), presenting itself in contrast as a genuine representative of workers. The poster child for this effort, long-time SPD and IG BCE member Guido Reil, joined the AfD because of Germany's refugee policy and was elected to the European Parliament in 2019 (Kim et al. 2022: 70). The AfD has repeatedly joined protests, including those against the closure of the Opel manufacturing plant in Eisenach in 2018 and the Siemens site in Görlitz in 2019, attempting, each time, to instrumentalise the events for their cause (see Mayr / Rietzschel 2018).

In addition, there are a number of alternative workers' associations, including *Arbeitnehmer in der AfD* (AiDA; Workers of the AfD) founded in 2014, *Alternative Öffentlicher Dienst* (AöD; Alternative Public Service) in 2015, and *Alternativer Arbeitnehmerverband Mitteldeutschland* (ALARM; Alternative Employees' Association of Central Germany) in 2017. These associations boast slogans such as "Social without turning red" and "Red for workers is now blue". However, they are largely inactive and have not found a foothold in the workplace (Kim et al. 2022: 70).

## ELECTION RESULTS OF THE "ALTERNATIVE FOR GERMANY"

In the September 2021 federal elections, the AfD party received 10.3 per cent of the vote, garnering as much as 18.9 per cent of the vote in eastern Germany and 8.2 per cent in the west (Tagesschau 2021). Election analyses show that trade union members were slightly more inclined to vote for the AfD than the average voter, with 12.2 per cent of members voting for the party (DGB 2021). Among blue-collar workers, the AfD received 21 per cent of the vote, making it the strongest force after the SPD for this demographic group. Previously, in the 2017 federal elections, the AfD won 12.6 per cent of the vote; trade union members' members' and blue collar workers' support for the party was above average as well (15 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively) (DGB 2017; tagesschau.de).. State election results paint an even clearer picture (cf. election analyses on *tagesschau.de*). In 2019, 41 per cent of blue-collar workers in Saxony voted for the AfD (with 27.5 per cent of the total Saxon electorate voting for the party). In Brandenburg, this figure also came in at around 44 per cent (with 23.5 per cent of the total electorate). Finally, in Thuringia, 39 per cent of blue-collar workers voted for the party (with 23.4 per cent of the total electorate). More recently, the party received 35 per cent of the vote (20.8 per cent of the total electorate) from the working class in Saxony-Anhalt in 2021.

In each of these four federal states, the AfD was the strongest party for this voter group. Even in state elections for Baden-Württemberg, where the party lost 9.7 per cent of the vote from 2016 (falling from 15.6 per cent), it was able to maintain its status within this demographic sector, garnering 26 per cent of blue-collar workers' votes (down only slightly from 30 per cent in 2016).

This thus demonstrates that, although the AfD enjoys support from all sociodemographic groups, and despite its essentially liberal-economic orientation, it has a considerable amount of support among blue-collar workers, an important trade union membership group. The AfD consistently overperforms with this group

compared to the average across the electorate, and in some federal states, it is the most popular party among the working class.

## THE SITUATION ON ENTERPRISE LEVEL

### RIGHT-WING WORKS COUNCIL LISTS AS “EXTERNAL OPPONENTS” OF TRADE UNIONS

Not limiting their efforts to government, right-wing populists are also attempting to gain influence in the workplace. Alongside the AfD’s aforementioned, and rather insignificant alternative workers’ associations, a right-wing pseudo-union has sprung up in the auto industry. The *Zentrum Automobil* (ZA) was founded in 2010 in Baden-Württemberg and initially represented the Daimler Plant in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim in the works council (Kim et al. 2022; Aderholz 2021, 2022; Ackermann / Haarfeldt 2019; Häusler 2018; Herkenhoff / Barthel 2018; Neumann 2018; Strauch 2018). The ZA list won works council mandates in every election it joined, a total of 19 mandates in seven companies (Aderholz 2021: 323), including at Daimler sites in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim, Sindelfingen, and Rastatt and at the Leipzig BMW and Porsche facility under the name *IG Beruf und Familie* (IG Work and Family) (for an overview, see Schroeder et al. 2019: 189). In the Spring 2022 works council elections, ZA and its offshoots won less than 25 of the total 18,000 seats. In Stuttgart-Untertürkheim, they gained one seat, though lost votes overall (–11) and at the BMW and Porsche facility in Leipzig, Saxony, they lost two-thirds of the votes. At the Volkswagen facility in Zwickau, Saxony, the Free Saxons-affiliated Alliance of Free Works’ Councils gained one seat (2 out of 37); however, they were only able to do so because, in the 2018 elections, one stand-alone candidate was not able to fill the seats associated with the 20 per cent of the vote they received (Göpfert 2022; Riebe / Schröder 2022).

In 2020, the association renamed itself *Zentrum* (Centre), to signal its openness to other sectors (Aderholz 2022: 85) and is now attempting to enter companies in the health and social sector under the name *Zentrum Gesundheit and Soziales* (Centre Health and Social) in Baden-Württemberg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia (Interview 4; Interview 1; Göpfert 2022; Riebe / Schröder 2022). In this process, *Zentrum* has tried to piggyback off the success of the very heterogenous, often conspiracy theory-laden *Querdenken* movement, which was founded in response to the federal government’s coronavirus pandemic mitigation measures in 2020. For example, this group organised “five-minute vaccination strikes” against compulsory vac-

cination in the workplace. Notably, the *Zentrum* presents itself as inconspicuous and harmless, and its right-wing ideology is not immediately recognisable (see the *Zentrum*'s self-portrayal on its website: <https://zentrum-gesundheit-soziales.de/>).

Following its founding, the *Zentrum Automobil* initially took an “anti-class struggle” stance, switching later to an “anti-corporatist populist” strategy (Kim et al. 2022: 74). Analogous to the AfD's anti-establishment discourse (against the establishment or ‘system’ parties), their strategy is directed at the so-called “co-management” of the DGB trade unions and criticises the alleged misappropriation of membership fees for political work (Schroeder et al. 2020: 28) – alongside strong loyalty to company management. *Zentrum* presents itself as a “carer” (Schäfer et al. 2020: 83) for the interests of manufacturing plant workers; “The specifically anti-corporatist character of this populism can be found in the insinuation that company management and established trade unions are a unified, corrupt power bloc joined through the cover of a social partnership” (Kim et al. 2022: 74). *Zentrum* focuses its works council efforts on being present in manufacturing, neglecting committee and caucus work (Schäfer et al. 2020: 83; Interview 1) and agitates using issues such as freedom of expression, sub-contracting, electromobility, the energy transition, or climate policy and interprets these in the context of a conspiracy between the union and the company (Herkenhoff / Barthel 2018: 80f.; Monnecke 2021: 213f., Kim et al. 2022: 74, Aderholz 2021). *Zentrum* might not appear openly ethnonationalist due to the multinational composition of its workforce in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim, for example (Kim et al. 2022: 77). However, its lack of overt political positioning in its self-representation, close links between ZA and the AfD, as well as with the extreme right-wing Compact magazine, PEGIDA, and *Querdenken*, as well as ties between ZA founder Oliver Hilburger and the neo-Nazi band *Noie Werte* have been proven many times (Aderholz 2021: 326–327; Schroeder et al. 2019: 187). A resolution on incompatibility with ZA, surprisingly adopted by the AfD in 2021, was repealed on Höcke's recommendation during the AfD national party conference in June 2022 with over 60 per cent of the vote (Göpfert 2022). Höcke advertises for *Zentrum* on social media and portrays it as an “umbrella organisation” (Riebe / Schröder 2022).

## “INTERNAL RIGHT-WING POPULISM” WITHIN TRADE UNIONS

Alongside anti-union works council rosters, described by Klaus Dörre as “external opponents” of the trade unions, the trade unions are also confronted with “internal right-wing populism” (Dörre 2020: 199). This refers to the presence of trade



union members as well as union members with right-wing orientations, AfD sympathies, and voting preferences who do not see any contradiction between their workplace and trade union involvement and voting for the AfD or participating in right-wing movements (see the electoral successes of the AfD among trade union members described in the section on AfD election results).

It has long been known that right-wing attitudes are also widespread among trade union members and that their affiliation to a traditionally anti-fascist association does not ‘immunise’ them against them (Fichter et al. 2005; DGB 2000; Decker et al. 2016: 42; Hilmer et al. 2017). The studies mentioned above do not find any difference in extreme right-wing attitudes between trade union members and the general population (“mirror image thesis”). In the past decade, a right-wing populist party and extra-parliamentary movement has emerged, comprised of AfD, PEGIDA, and the *Querdenken* movement, and in a form not previously present in the Federal Republic of Germany. These groups have achieved significant electoral wins and have successfully mobilised the populace, effectively normalising right-wing discourses in the public sphere, such as anti-asylum positions. After decades of persisting as only a “right-wing populist undercurrent” (Dörre 2016: 264) in democratic parties and organisations, the far right is now openly emerging and forming itself as an independent political force. This is leading to a “climate change” (Detje / Sauer 2018: 199) in the workplace as well; corresponding statements and behaviour are becoming more overt, and people feel more self-assured in expressing right-wing ideologies, even among trade union activists and works councils (Interview 2; see Dörre et al. 2018; Bose et al. 2018; Sauer et al. 2018; Brinkmann et al. 2020). Accordingly, trade union secretaries have sometimes been met with rejection when making the New Right, asylum, and migration a topic at works council meetings, for instance; works councillors from their own camp occasionally discourage colleagues from bringing up such sensitive topics for fear of escalation (Sauer et al. 2018: 65–68; Schneeweiß 2019). Moreover, some active works councils organised busses to PEGIDA demonstrations in their spare time (Dörre et al. 2018: 59) and, in the security industry, there was a discussion of how to craft company contracts in a way that they would only benefit German employees (Schneeweiß 2019: 225–226). Finally, engagement in the workplace and participation in *Querdenken* protests are by no means mutually exclusive.

To better understand the reason for these trends, recent quantitative and qualitative studies have looked at the causes of right-wing populist success among trade union members and blue-collar workers (Hilmer et al. 2017; Brinkmann et al.



2020; Dörre 2020; Menz / Nies 2019; Dörre et al. 2018; Sauer et al. 2018; Bose et al. 2018). Like the earlier studies (DGB 2000; Fichter et al. 2005), these more recent investigations situate the increase in right-wing attitudes among workers and trade union members as a result of the broader profound transformation of capitalism and the resulting increase in social inequality and insecurity. The workplace is “fertile ground” for right-wing populism given the exacerbation of problems in the working world and increased pressure to perform, workloads, precarity, and competition, alongside a devaluation of skills caused by rapid technological change, loss of control, and concerns about individual’s ability to shape their own life (Sauer et al. 2018).

An effective response to the changes wrought by the globalised market is seen as difficult to achieve through the work of collective associations (Detje / Sauer 2018: 204) and trade unions are perceived as less capable of asserting themselves since “the traditional trade union instruments [...] no longer adequately address the process of decline, loss of control, or fears about the future held by large swaths of employees” (Detje / Sauer 2018: 206). Moreover, there are feelings of political alienation, powerlessness, and lack of political influence along with experiences and feelings of devaluation as both blue-collar workers and East Germans, and a fundamental “criticism of the system” (Dörre et al. 2018: 77). These can be capitalised upon by extreme right-wing and right-wing populist forces, who offer up the identity of a powerful German worker and an “ethicised” take on widespread social criticism.

Both internal right-wing populism and external opponents present challenges for trade unions. How to respond to both remains controversial; there is no magic formula, but a wide range of experiences.

## PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY THE TRADE UNIONS

### RIGHT-WING POPULISM CONTRADICTS THE TRADE UNIONS’ SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

An unambiguous anti-racist and anti-fascist position is part of the DNA of the DGB and its trade unions. The unions support campaigns, calls to action, and demonstrations against neo-Nazis, PEGIDA, and the AfD. For example, they organise large events on the International Day against Racism; support initiatives like that for the relatives of those murdered in Hanau; promote projects against

the right; carry out anti-racist and discrimination-sensitive educational work (including support for the Respect! Initiative [*Respekt!-Initiative*], the Stand Up Against Racism Alliance [*Aufstehen gegen Rassismus*], and the Yellow Hand – Don’t mess with my buddy! Association [*Gelbe Hand – Mach’ meinen Kumpel nicht an!*]); publish public brochures with arguments against the right; support refugees; and much more.

All DGB trade unions have enshrined in their statutes the commitment to a pluralist, democratic society and the fight against fascist aspirations, along with resolutions of incompatibility for “persons whose conduct has supported measures and crimes against humanity” (IG Metall statutes §3 para. 6, p. 11). In addition, trade unions have statutes prohibiting membership for people who are members of “oppositional” (anti-union and anti-democratic) organisations (ver.di statutes, §6 para. 2, p. 9), which, in the case of IG Metall, includes more than ten organisations classified as right-wing extremist groups, including the NPD. Section 80(1)(7) of the Works Constitution Act explicitly stipulates that the works council is tasked with acting against racism in the workplace, taking appropriate countermeasures, and opposing all forms of discrimination.

Even when right-wing populist actors appear to participate in a democratisation project, their nationalism and anti-pluralism are fundamentally in contradiction with the basic trade union values of solidarity, equality, self-determination, diversity, and democracy. As an “organisation of solidarity in an unfair society” and as a representative of all wage earners, no matter their origin, gender, or disability, the trade unions see it as their task to work against exclusion, misanthropy, and nationalism. This extends to responding to attacks on migrants and colleagues with an anti-fascist orientation.

## WITH THE SOCIAL QUESTION, RIGHT-WING POPULISM OCCUPIES A CORE TRADE UNION ISSUE

Right-wing actors take up justified criticisms of the system, social inequality, feelings of political impotence, conservative efforts to maintain the status quo, concerns about the future, including price increases, cost of living, climate change, energy transformation, and so on. However, their responses to their valid worries are exclusionary, backwards-looking, and ultimately anti-worker (Dörre 2020; IG Metall 2018; Köhlinger / Ebenau 2018; IG Metall 2019a: 56). The “social question” – the commitment to social equality, social security, redistri-

bution from top to bottom, co-determination, and participation of the disadvantaged – is at the heart of the trade unions (IG Metall official, quoted by Bose 2018: 239). With their co-option of the social question, right-wing actors are thus attacking trade unions at their core (IG Metall official, quoted in Bose 2018: 239).

The present constellation of multiple crises and recent political and economic developments (such as inflation, price increases, rising gas prices, and the threat of an economic crisis due to Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine) could further boost right-wing forces even more in the near future. Given their years-long and comprehensive mobilisation, first against refugees and asylum policy, then against the federal government's measures to mitigate the coronavirus pandemic, actors on the far right can adopt additional issues such as the rising cost of living and the energy crisis at their weekly "Monday demonstrations" with relative ease.

## RIGHT-WING POPULISM BENEFITS FROM PROBLEMS ARISING FROM THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRADE UNIONS AND THE SYSTEM OF ORGANISED LABOUR RELATIONS

Over the course of the 1990s, trade unions increasingly transformed from "traditional communities of value" to modern service organisations (Fichter et al. 2005; DGB 2000: 20; Bose 2018: 232). The primary motivation for joining a trade union is generally a wage increase; this motive alone says nothing about the nature of the member's commitment to the union. Being busy with securing production sites, serving as a representative for staff, and recruiting new members, the focus on social policy, participation, and strengthening basic trade union and political convictions in trade union work took a back seat. Furthermore, it is often not possible to provide close support in the workplace due to membership losses and subsequent restructuring processes. The low level of commitment to values and increasing distance between union officers and the workforce makes it easier for right-wing actors to present themselves as close to the base in the workplace (Aderholz 2022: 93). The right is able to make gains precisely in the spaces where trade unions are less present in companies due to a lack of staff and resources. For more than a few union members, union policy and social policy are not linked (Bose et al. 2018: 225); unions are seen as politically neutral and responsible only for improving working conditions. In this understanding, there is little that is incompatible with a right-wing worldview (ibid.).

## RIGHT-WING POPULISM WEAKENS TRADE UNIONS' OWN FIGHTING STRENGTH

Confronting right-wing attacks on their own workplaces shifts an additional burden onto the shoulders of volunteers and full-time union officials. Right-wing comments and related incidents sometimes lead to uncertainty and excessive demands; the effort to convince and educate and public relations work all take time as well as financial and human resources. These are often not readily available, especially in sectors with many small companies where there are only a few union members and much depends on the commitment of the individual activists. In companies, where right-wing lists have works council mandates, IG Metall works councils are also burdened by measures such as “shadow representation”, or the informal representation of employees who would not be entitled to representation according to the number of works council seats (IG Metall works council report in a company with a ZA mandate, quoted from Aderholz 2022: 95).

The division of the workforce by attacks from the right also weakens the capacity to organise for common interests in a time when union power is already weakened due to changes in the industrial relations system and the erosion of the collective bargaining system, among other factors. A strong stance against racism and right-wing populism can also lead to union membership losses. For example, between October 2015 and March 2016, around 200 members left IG Metall in protest because of the union's active involvement in the No PEGIDA Initiative in Passau (Sauer et al. 2018: 202). During the same general timeframe, one region in Saxony saw several hundred resignations, some of which explicitly named the DGB trade unions' solidarity with refugees as the reason for leaving (Bose 2018: 227). In some areas where trade unions are already weak, these resignations have the potential to be existential.

Trade unions are in a constant state of tension. As a membership organisation, it derives its power from the size of its membership force. At the same time, unions are political organisations with democratic values that cannot be thrown out the window.

## TRADE UNION SCOPE OF ACTION AND EXPERIENCES

The emergence of PEGIDA, the successes and establishment of the AfD, and the proliferation of right-wing actors in the workplace, combine to form a relatively new situation for the Federal Republic of Germany. This context poses a challenge

for trade unions, which are now looking for ways to handle this situation and for new counter strategies. How best to deal with right-wing actors in the workplace and with AfD sympathies and corresponding attitudes among union members and activists is an ongoing debate; there is no silver bullet. Trade union experiences and action strategies on company policy, internal organisation, educational work including on socio-political topics, and outreach work based on published field reports, discussion papers, resolutions, scientific studies, and four interviews with experts on the DGB-wide educational field, the educational work of IG Metall specifically, the IG Metall Executive Board, and the ver.di Federal Administration are described here. Three topics for discussion emerge:

- 1) Dealing with right-wing works council lists: “Keeping quiet is not an option”.
- 2) Handling racist hate speech and the AfD: “Hate speech gets you fired”.
- 3) Interacting with members with an affinity for the right: “Clear boundaries, open doors”.

The main focus here is on the large IG Metall union and, to a lesser extent, ver.di; the differences between the unions cannot be described in detail within this context. Nevertheless, it should be noted that IG Metall, as the German union with the most members, has significantly more resources and personnel than, for example, the much smaller NGG. Recommendations made here are thus not readily generalisable to the whole of the German trade union landscape. The structure of the organised branches also varies, with large, highly unionised industrial companies on one end of the spectrum and small-scale service industry and the food service sector on the other. This diversity has practical consequences for the intensity of care work and, thus, also on the work against right-wing extremism and populism on the ground.

#### DEALING WITH RIGHT-WING WORKS COUNCIL LISTS: “KEEPING QUIET IS NOT AN OPTION”.

IG Metall has been hesitant to deal with *Zentrum* and other right-wing company rosters out of concern that a public and offensive, as opposed to defensive, response would exacerbate the problem and enable the right to stage itself as the victim if one “jump through every hoop” (Schroeder et al. 2020: 38). However, Roman Zitzelsberger, head of IG Metall in the Baden-Württemberg district,

urged that “keeping quiet is not an option,” and called for unionists to learn how to best deal with right-wing rosters and right-wing populism within one’s own ranks (quoted from Schroeder et al. 2020: 35). According to one DGB employee, experience shows that offensive and strategic confrontation of right-wing infiltration is necessary; while union actors hesitated, ZA was able to prepare and develop almost undisturbed, apart from some responses from committed IG Metall works councils. A conflict of principle only began in IG Metall after the 2018 works council elections (Kim et al. 2022: 82). An interdepartmental anti-right working group at the IG Metall Board of Directors was founded following a decision made by the trade union congress in October 2019. This group aimed to develop an all-union strategy and hinder right-wing rosters from success in the 2022 works council elections (IG Metall 2019a: 84). In the run-up to these elections, right-wing lists were publicly discussed and problematised. IG Metall rosters juxtaposed their own positions and programme in a manner that demonstrated the sharp contrast.

### **Strategies on the enterprise level: Education, presence, and participation**

Within the framework of a case study at a company within the automotive industry in Baden-Württemberg, Kim et al. (2022: 80–82) examined IG Metall’s response to the presence of the ZA in the works council. First, IG Metall reacted with the strengthening and intensification of the active shop steward work in order to be more present in the company and to seek direct contact with workers so as to be able to take up their issues and concerns. ZA has concentrated its efforts on being present in the workplace and speaking directly with workers, so it can present itself as a “caretaker” in contrast to the supposedly far-removed IG Metall, which makes common cause with management. The expansion of the ZA presence poses a challenge for IG Metall, as most of its resources are dedicated to committee work.

Second, IG Metall has developed its own public outreach campaign in response to the ZA’s massive PR work, which focuses on presenting the diverse and clashing interests held by management and the union as a counter to the image presented by ZA of company management and the works council as a unified bloc. Activists and full-time supervisors on the enterprise level were supported by the *Verein zur Bewahrung der Demokratie* (Association for the Preservation of Democracy), which was founded in Baden-Württemberg in 2020 by the DGB, IG BAU, and IG Metall and is now active in other federal states. The two main officers of the organisation in Baden-Württemberg have the following responsibilities: 1) Analysing and mon-

itoring the public relations work of the ZA so as to serve as an “early warning system for IG Metall; 2) Raising awareness about the ZA and training IG Metall actors in argumentation and methods for debate; and 3) Providing and developing PR strategies, company-specific response strategies, and support for shop stewards and councillors in disputes with the ZA in their respective contexts, for example, by producing PR materials like leaflets with rebuttals to typical ZA statements to be distributed in factories before works council elections or by carrying out surveys at the company.

Kim et al. and a DGB employee both emphasise the importance of an unbureaucratic, rapid, contextualised, and company-specific response to ZA activities. Because *Zentrum* creates a problem at the company level, the counter strategy cannot solely rely on an intensification of educational work (Kim et al. 2022: 82); it must include concrete measures for the workplace. According to the DGB employee interviewed, in order to counter *Zentrum*’s demagoguery, IG Metall needs to present itself as a proactive, fierce, and inclusive trade union during warning strikes at the beginning of a round of collective bargaining and make participation, appreciation, and solidarity in the workplace tangible through its everyday work.

Furthermore, the interviewed DGB expert also explained that there is currently a high level of sensitivity to the current situation in companies where ZA is active. Whereas in the past, many voted for *Zentrum* out of naivety or ignorance, now those voting for *Zentrum* do so because they intend to vote right; there exists now an awareness that they are dealing with extreme right networks. Education and sensitisation are aimed at counteracting the right’s attempt to downplay themselves so as to not let them fly under the radar. Moreover, that *Zentrum* only won one more mandate in the 2022 BR elections in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim rather than the two in each previous election is understood as a sign that the thus-far developed educational strategies for the workplace are indeed working.

### **Inter-union exchange of experience**

In Baden-Württemberg, in addition to the two main officers at the Association for the Preservation of Democracy, there are two people responsible for carrying out DGB-wide monitoring, analysis, consultation, and strategy development. These officers also closely monitor *Zentrum*’s recent activities in the health and social sectors. Ver.di should draw on the experiences of IG Metall with ZA to develop strategies within their context; close contact and exchange of experience between the two unions is already established.

As soon as *Zentrum's* activities in a company or sector come to light, a participation-oriented counter-strategy should be developed by the relevant trade unions in close cooperation with one another. A first step can be, for example, to specifically inform the workers about *Zentrum's* activities and character. This also includes exposing their self-minimising tactics and demonstrating that there is also an ongoing extreme right project in *Zentrum Gesundheit and Soziales*. In the long run, the goal is to strengthen the presence of trade unions, so they are perceived as assertive, confrontational, and fierce, whereas *Zentrum* is not able to achieve anything for their co-workers. The experiences garnered in the context of the 24-hour strikes for a 35-hour work week in East Germany fall along these lines. The relative weakness of the right-wingers in the independent works councils compared to the success of IG Metall in the 2022 works council elections at VW Zwickau is attributed to the offensive stance against and differentiation from the right-wingers. Secondly, IG Metall's success can be traced to their observable assertiveness and substantial experience in participatory action, e. g. in the 24-hour strikes (Rothe 2022; Bose / Schmidt 2023 (forthcoming)).

With *Zentrum's* advance into the health and social sector, there has been a corresponding cross-union exchange between the Association for the Preservation of Democracy, IG Metall, the *DGB-Bildungswerk*, and the ver.di since the summer of 2022. The aim of this collaboration is to pool knowledge and support each other in the development of counter-strategies against *Zentrum Gesundheit and Soziales*, in particular.

## HANDLING RACIST HATE SPEECH AND THE AfD: "HATE SPEECH GETS YOU FIRED"

In an interview with *Deutschlandfunk*, a national public radio station, on October 24, 2015, IG Metall chairman Jörg Hofmann spoke up for a "zero tolerance for racism", encapsulated in the phrase "hate speech gets you fired" [*Wer hetzt, fliegt*] (Hofmann 2015). A number of members responded by leaving IG Metall (Dörre et al. 2017: 261). This motto is linked to the controversial debate in recent years on whether those who do not stand by trade union values or who are AfD members or supporters should be excluded from trade unions (see, for example, the discussion of related motions at IG Metall's trade union congress in 2019; IG Metall 2019b). Of the eight DGB trade unions, only EVG has passed a resolution on the incompatibility with AfD members (Schroeder et al. 2020: 30). IG Metall takes a separate approach. While it categorically rules out cooperation with the AfD



(IG Metall 2019a: 77) and establishes that AfD mandate holders or actors, as well as individuals who do not uphold the IG Metall principles and, for example, spread racist inflammatory speech, cannot concurrently hold positions at IG Metall as officials or works council members (IG Metall 2019a: 77). AfD and IG Metall memberships are not mutually exclusive (IG Metall 2019a: 94), the lack of incompatibility is, above all, grounded in a lack of legal certainty (IG Metall 2019b). However, for many IG Metall activists, the questionable legality is not the only reason for there not to be an incompatibility resolution. Next to the clear commitment to socio-democratic principles and the necessity of clearly opposing discrimination, inflammatory hate speech, and right-wing extremism, there is a great desire for a willingness to engage in dialogue, as exemplified by the third element: “Clear boundaries, open doors”.

#### DEALING WITH MEMBERS WITH AN AFFINITY TO THE RIGHT: “CLEAR STANCE, OPEN DOORS”.

The prominent, oft-held position, “clear boundaries and open doors” [*Klare Kante und offene Tür*] was formulated by IG Metall board member Hans-Jürgen Urban in 2018 at an *#unteilbar* alliance rally. In line with Hoffman’s slogan, in his speech, Urban demanded from IG Metall both “clear boundaries” against all racist messages, “ideologists, organisers, and figureheads of right-wing movements” as well as an “open door” for all “those pushed into the margins of society, who are threatened by social marginalisation, and who see their life history devalued and betrayed” – this on the condition of simultaneously “fighting against reactionary action and for solidarity-based solutions to social problems (IG Metall 2018).

#### **“Open doors” (1): Company and Social Policy**

According to advocates of the open doors policy, it is precisely because trade unions reach people in their everyday lives and their direct environment, in contrast to many other political organisations, that they have a democratic-political duty to counter right-wing populism. According to a ver.di employee, trade unions still enjoy a relatively high level of trust due to their access to the workplace and their potential to be assertive in concrete workplace disputes, collective bargaining, and the fight for workplace improvements. This can also be used in the fight against right-wing extremism and right-wing populism. This “credit of trust” (Brinkmann et al. 2020: 140) and the relatively high satisfaction with trade unions, according to a qualitative and quantitative study from the IG Metall-Bezirk

Mitte (Central District), is, above all, grounded in the successful resolution of disputes in the workplace (Brinkmann et al. 2020: 139): “Trade unions appear to offer something that, in society generally, appears to be eroding: A form of assertiveness and thus control over one’s own reality, at least within the field of work, as well as a feeling of not being completely powerless in the face of a new development” (Brinkmann et al. 2020: 147). In company work and in collective organising, trade unions offer opportunities for positive identity formation, the experience of cohesion and relationship building between employees both with and without a migration background, for example. This means trade unions play a key role in dealing with social crisis processes and can counter racist, exclusionary, and misanthropic interpretations and policies with solidarity-based, democratic and equality-based perspectives on social developments and offer political demands. Those who feel politically powerless, unrepresented, and are worried about their social status are thus susceptible to what the right-wing political sphere is offering; at the same time, the workplace and the trade union offer these people the opportunity for self-determination (Brinkmann et al. 2020: 153). The “open door policy” thus is also embodied by increased socio-political work in the trade union (Detje / Sauer 2018: 207); an aggressive, confrontational orientation; the development of counter-measures against the de-securitisation, fragmentation, and precarisation of the world of work; and the communication of political power through industrial policy initiatives, policies on pay and wages, and advocacy for a higher “citizen’s income”, and a socially just climate policy, for example (IGM 2019a: 78).

Recent attempts to be a solidarity-oriented, social alternative can be seen in the broad alliances of trade unions, welfare organisations, as well as political organisations including BUND, Greenpeace, ATTAC, and Campact under the slogans “True justice – solidarity through the crisis!” and “Autumn of solidarity. Create social security – accelerate the energy transition”, pushing for a socially just energy and sustainable management of the current energy crisis. The concrete demands of which include rapid relief through an energy flat rate alongside economic aid for companies and public services (public utilities, seniors’ care facilities, child-care, and more). This aid should be linked to criteria such as job security and wage agreements, an eviction moratorium, a levy on corporations’ excess profits, a wealth tax for the super-rich, and a higher inheritance tax (DGB 2022). This cooperation is grounded in a “clear, uncompromisable commitment to democracy and diversity and solidarity with the people of Ukraine” (DGB 2022: 2) and thus excludes right-wing actors who are engaged on this topic from participating in the alliances.

## **“Open doors” (2): Education and outreach work**

An important strategy for the fight against right-wing populism is education and outreach work to raise awareness. Trade unions have expanded their work in this field since the recent right-wing populist successes, offering a variety of educational events and seminars at various levels.

For staff at IG Metall, seminars provide an opportunity for people to exchange experiences of dealing with right-wing members and rosters. For workplace representatives and committee members in Baden-Württemberg, awareness-raising about *Zentrum* is an integral part of their seminars. The education officers interviewed also report on ad hoc training and counselling for committees that have been weakened and undermined by a racist incident, for example. In one instance, officers received a “call for help” from a large company where a works council meeting had to end early after an anti-asylum remark and strong criticism from many participants that the meeting facilitator’s response was a “restriction of freedom of expression”. In the context of providing advice among colleagues, the ad hoc training developed specifically for the company aimed to provide opportunities for reflection on the incident, how the company handled it, and to look for ways for the committee to be functional again in the future.

Argumentation training should empower workplace representatives to be able to speak up against group-focused enmity and hate speech. This kind of training is based on, for example, the book *Demagogen entzaubern* [Demystifying Demagogues] by Willi Mernyi and Michael Niedermair (2010).

In addition to training in the argumentation against the anti-human positions and strategies of the right, importance is also attached to making the positions of IG Metall known and thus strengthening the bond between the activists and the organisation. IG Metall positions, and that which makes it a union of collaborative solidarity, are, according to an interview respondent who has worked in the union education for many years, no longer known to many functionaries. One outcome of this observation is the development of the new seminar programme “What we’re fighting for”, which focuses on the values and programme of IG Metall. An important trade union education task is to convey interpretations of social developments and the economy; this has the potential to counter conspiracy theories and the ethnicisation of social issues.

Socio-politically focused seminars are offered alongside “specialised seminars” for works councillors, which offer opportunities to address group-based enmity and

measures to employ against it by using case studies from company practice, such as the topic of social Darwinism as it relates to people with disabilities or reduced performance in the company, or racism when it comes to unequal treatment of immigrant applicants during a job interview.

## INTERNAL ORGANISATIONAL MEASURES

In addition to the creation of a working group consisting of IG Metall board members from all spheres of responsibility, the strategies for countering right-wing extremism and right-wing populism also include internal organisational development and further training, especially related to migration and diversity. For example, an anti-discrimination office was recently created at IG Metall.

## SUMMARY AND REFLECTION

Following Schroeder et al. (2020: 40–42), the trade union reaction to the rise in right-wing populism and right-wing extremism can be described as an exploratory movement between *confrontation*, *demarcation*, and *exclusion*. Within the framework of internal organisational working groups, informational presentations, seminars, and handout dissemination, trade unions confront right-wing populism and explore their possibilities for action. By expressing its own practices and values in seminars, presentations, and workplace and socio-political work, the union can clearly demarcate itself from the right and, when necessary, criticise it without continuously working against it. In practice, exclusion is the last resort.

Trade unions pursue a combination of workplace strategies, educational work, collective bargaining policy, and social policy. Their focus is not solely on raising awareness about the character and strategies of the right; it extends to encouraging and empowering its own representatives to stand up to right-wing actors, promoting core union values and principles, expanding workplace presence, promoting widespread participation and member involvement, and establishing a stronger socio-political orientation, for example, vis-à-vis the present energy crisis. Moreover, trade unions attempt to address the causes of susceptibility to right-wing ideologies, interest in the AfD, and to provide social security by making concrete socio-political demands and participating in political decisions within the social partnership framework. Their credibility stems from the success of their collective bargaining work and workplace actions. If the union is perceived as an

assertive, confrontational political actor that enables political agency, self-efficacy, and solidarity in collective identity in a social context, this can then also be a starting point for work against right-wing populism. Last but not least, recent representative studies show that workplace experiences of co-determination, solidarity, and participation promote pro-democratic attitudes (Kiess / Schmidt 2020; Hövermann et al. 2021).

The experiences and strategies outlined in this report come with a number of associated fields of conflict and difficulties, which are touched upon briefly in this conclusion.

### **Highly institutionalised trade union structure vs. responsive, company-specific response strategy**

The hesitation of higher-ups at IG Metall to make a clear statement on how to handle right-wing works council lists, beyond the “Clear boundaries, open doors” policy, and the uncertainty among both shop stewards and company functionaries about how to react given the lagging response, points to the difficulties inherent in an established and highly institutionalised trade union structure like that of IG Metall. In an organisation of this size, developing an overall strategy against the right that comes from and is implemented by all organisational units is a lengthy process. This stands in the way of a rapid, company-specific response strategy, which is necessary in the case of companies with a ZA presence. In this context, the Association for the Preservation of Democracy should act quickly, “detached from the committee rhythm and [union] apparatus logics”, so as to make an effective contribution (Kim et al. 2022: 82–83).

### **Closeness to social partnership vs. presentation of clearly opposing interests and a socio-political opposition**

The works councils’ social partnership involvement in company-related decisions and the participation of the DGB in corporatist political arrangements have an ambiguous effect. On the one hand, it enables co-determination and (political) influence, while on the other, it has the potential to promote the perception that works councils and trade unions are “in cahoots” with management or government rather than being a true representative of the workers. The latter makes it easier for right-wing actors to weaponise anti-establishment rhetoric against the unions. Works councils and trade unions perform a balancing act, using their influence at the company and political level while also being a recognisably con-

frontational, conflict-oriented oppositional force against management and capital interests. This is the only way that they can compete with the right-wing criticisms of the system.

### **Shortage of resources and staff**

Trade unions are faced with shortages of both resources and staff to varying degrees. In areas such as retail, mobile care for the elderly, and even smaller food service establishments, for example, where only a few workers are union members, it is not possible to provide high-quality support and trade union work in all contexts. This makes early detection and implementation of counter-measures for right-wing populism in the company difficult. DGB-wide monitoring, which tracks the activities of right-wing actors and proactively alerts the unions in the confederation, is a potential remedy.

Resources for responding to right-wing extremism are limited and sought-after due to the simultaneous presence of a multitude of challenges, including the need to recruit new members and coping with the transformation. Work fighting the right and promoting social policy, despite the widespread awareness of the importance of this work among union officials, still has to compete with other spheres of action for resources. In the field of education, for example, this is reflected in the fact that only a few seminar days are set aside for socio-political topics.

### **“No Compromises” vs. a focus on the members**

The internal debate about how to best offensively confront right-wing populism in the workplace and among union members revolves around a fundamental dilemma: As membership organisations, trade unions draw their influence from the sheer size of their membership. Thus, they risk losing their strength if members leave because of the union’s opposition to AfD, *Querdenken*, racism, and so on. In regions where membership levels are already low and right-wing ideologies dominate, this can be especially dangerous (Bose 2018: 234–235; Dörre et al. 2018; Bose / Schmidt 2023 (forthcoming)). Local contexts require tailored responses. Trade unions would not have access at all to some companies in eastern parts of Germany if right-wing-aligned workers were excluded from membership (Bose 2018: 234–235). Nevertheless, the trade union values of solidarity, self-determination, democracy, and equality cannot be negotiable.

*Translated from German by Tanager*

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# COUNTRY STUDY GREECE

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This study is part of an EU-wide cross-country research endeavour examining trade union options in dealing with right-wing populist forces. The focus here is on the political processes and trade union experiences in Greece, with special emphasis on the practices of the extreme-right party “Golden Dawn” and the responses of the Greek trade unions in the so-called crisis decade (2009–2019).

## **HISTORICAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND**

### HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONISM IN GREECE

The official history of trade unionism in Greece dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE; *Genikí Synomospondía Ergatón Elládos*), which is the only official confederation of unions in the private sector today, was established in 1918, just few days before the founding of the Socialist Labour Party of Greece (originally named SEKE, it became the KKE in 1924; *Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas*). The weak institutional basis of the Greek polity is reflected inter alia on the evolution of the state-labour relations, which for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century followed a highly distinct pattern in comparison with the west-European liberal democracies. Coercive state-led practices on the one hand (i. e., persecution of left-wing trade unionists, shut-down of militant unions), and extensive state interference in the internal union affairs on the other, resulted in a scheme that has reasonably been described as Sisyphean: Whereas in the West the dominant pattern was “prohibition → tolerance → recognition,” in Greece, the industrial relations path was rather “prohibition → tolerance → prohibition” (Liakos 1993). It was the restoration of democracy in 1974 and particularly the rise to power of the Socialist Party (PASOK; *Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima*) that laid the ground for the democratisation of the Greek trade unions and the integration of the hitherto oppressed progressive currents.

The 60-year-long right-wing hegemony within the Greek trade union movement was built on anti-communism and nationalism. These two core ideological elements were articulated through the “official” ideology of *ethnikofrosini* (national-mindedness), which designated both the internal and external threats, and the alleged continuity of the “Hellenic-Christian civilization” (Papadimitriou 2006). The combination of coercion, and clientelism (mostly directed from the political elite, but also from the big employers in industry) further consolidated the right-wing hegemony, which was highly consequential for the mobilisation of trade un-

ion resources, as far as it tolerated (if not provoked) the exclusion of working-class communities, militant activists, progressive political organisations, undermining the labour movement unity and solidarity (Koukoules 1994; Kouzis 2007). The era of the military junta (1967–1974) was arguably the heyday of the ideological union of nationalism and anti-communism within the official union movement. This later began to recede as democratisation progressed. In the new era of cultural transformation, far-reaching shifts of the electorate towards the left and centre-left at various levels of governance and heightened social expectations for more egalitarian standards of living, the available room for nationalism and authoritarian politics was fundamentally reduced. When it comes to union politics, the prevalence of the centre-left has never seriously been challenged either from the conservatives, the radical left, or the communists. GSEE has been led by members of PASOK – Movement for Change (PASOK-KINAL; PASOK – Kínima Allagís, henceforth PASOK) since 1983 (Bithymitris / Kotsonopoulos 2017; Bithymitris 2021a).

It was only during the decade of the Greek crisis that the nationalist ideology started once again casting its threatening shadow on organised labour. Before delving into details on the failed neo-fascist attempt to encroach on the labour movement, it is necessary to first introduce and describe the union structure and political representation in Greece.

## LANDSCAPE OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN PRE-CRISIS GREECE

The industrial relations system in Greece assumed its current form only after the collapse of the dictatorship and the establishment of the Third Republic in 1974. Even after the restoration of democracy, union activities continued to be subject to stringent controls by the state. The 1982 updated law on trade unions, among other things, paved the way for proportional representation and the inclusion of radical unionism. In the wake of European integration, legal initiatives (free collective bargaining, social dialogue, and the participation of union representatives in governmental bodies of social policy and economy), along with a shift from adversarial industrial relations to moderate union politics, started shaping a new institutional context which remained intact until the so-called Greek crisis.

The institutional arrangements of this period were sustained by a largely unitary union model, though bifurcated along the private-public division (Katsaroumbas / Koukiadaki 2019: 267). The two official trade union confederations are GSEE and the Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY; *Anótati Dioíkisi Dimosis*



*Ypallilon*).<sup>1</sup> GSEE primarily represents workers in the private sector, but also public sector workers on temporary contracts (such as employees of public companies), as well as workers in public companies under private law. ADEDY is the confederation for workers in the public sector, workers employed by legal entities under public law, and local government workers. In terms of the structure of trade unions, the Greek law makes provision for three different levels:

- a) First-level trade unions: These trade unions are legally autonomous. Their activities are mostly limited either to a particular region or business. They may be part of a national sectoral trade union or a regional trade union federation (second level).
- b) Second-level trade unions: These trade unions are either national, industrial, or occupational federations (sectoral trade unions) or regional organisations (Labour Centres).
- c) Third-level trade unions: These are national trade union confederations, such as GSEE and ADEDY, which are comprised of second-level trade unions.

The links between trade unions and political parties have traditionally been very strong in Greece. The parties have direct representation in the unions, namely in the form of political factions standing for election under a different name. The faction with the most seats or a coalition made up of several factions subsequently appoints the president of the trade union confederation. The socialist faction leads the GSEE (38.6 per cent of the vote in the 2020 elections for the union board), with the conservative and the communist faction following (23.1 per cent and 19.6 per cent, respectively). The conservative faction leads ADEDY (25.3 per cent in the 2019 elections), with the socialists (PASOK), the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), and the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA; *Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras*) following (19.1 per cent, 18.6 per cent, and 14.2 per cent, respectively).

The power configuration within the Greek trade unions does not correspond to the dynamics of the political system in Greece. This is not the right place to provide an overarching analysis of the Greek political landscape of the last fifty years,

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<sup>1</sup> There are also some small unions in the private sector that keep their distances from the official trade union structure (GSEE) and could fall into the category of social movement unionism, but their broader influence remains marginal.

nevertheless, some major aspects should be stressed. The function of democracy in terms of procedure, results, and content, has conventionally been associated with the stable alternation in power between the socialists (PASOK) and the conservative New Democracy party (ND; *Néa Dimokratía*) for almost four decades (1974–2012), which is also considered the heyday of Greek bipartisanship (scoring well above 70 per cent). In this period, the parliamentary left is represented primarily by the (KKE; *Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas*), a Marxist-Leninist party with strong anti-capitalist discourse (approximately 5–8 per cent of the vote), and, to a lesser extent, the Eurocommunist Left, which in 2004 took the form of a coalition of left-wing parties (approximately 3–5 per cent of the vote), until its transformation into a unified political party in 2012 (SYRIZA). Interestingly, while both the party system and the trade union organisations were shaken by the debt crisis of 2009 and the subsequent austerity measures, significant changes took place within the party system only. Some of the tectonic changes include the spectacular rise of the radical left led SYRIZA to power in 2015 (in collaboration with a small right-wing party, a by-product of the crisis itself), the disintegration of the PASOK party, who lost almost a 75 per cent of their electoral power within 3 years, and the electoral success of the neo-Nazi party “Golden Dawn” (GD; *Laïkós Síndesmos – Chrysí Avgí*), whose vote share increased by 6.97 per cent from about 20,000 in 2009 to 440,000 in 2012.

## EFFECTS OF THE RECENT ECONOMIC CRISIS ON ORGANISED LABOUR

Arguably, the economic crisis, the austerity politics, and the social unrest from 2009–2015 left their marks on organised labour; however, these factors’ impact did not include an internal re-configuration of power. The loss of unions’ institutional centrality in 2010–2011 was painful: With the onset of Greece’s bailout plans and implementation of austerity measures, unions found themselves confronting four major threats: (a) The deregulation of the labour market, and an unprecedented erosion of collective bargaining (see Table 1; see also Katsaroumbas / Koukiadaki 2019: 268); (b) skyrocketing unemployment rates, coupled with a precarisation of labour<sup>2</sup>; (c) the decline of union membership (Bithymitris / Kotsonopoulos, 2017; see also Table 1); and (d) the extreme-right assault against unionism.

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2 The total unemployment rate between 2008 and 2016 tripled from 7.8 per cent to 23.6 per cent. Statistics available here: <https://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SJO03/->. In the same period, job insecurity and involuntary part-time work increased significantly (Broughton et al. 2016).

Table 1  
Principal characteristics of collective bargaining in Greece

	2010 (per cent)	2020 (per cent)
<b>Collective bargaining coverage rate*</b>	100.0	14.3 (2017)
<b>Trade union density**</b>	25.5	15.3

Sources: \* <https://www.oecd.org/employment/ictwss-database.htm>,

\*\* Own calculations based on official figures provided by GSEE and the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT).

The resilience of the socialist faction vis-à-vis the impotence of the radical left to translate its impressive electoral performance into a hegemonic positioning within trade unions have already been commented on elsewhere (Bithymitris 2018). What is more interesting for the present study is a question that has remained ill-attended within the scholarship of the extreme right in Greece: Why has the neo-fascist tide, which proved particularly appealing for a large segment of the popular classes (arguably the most disenchanted and dispossessed), failed to penetrate organised labour? Why have the GD's assaults, both physical and ideological, against unionists warranted the failure of this party to capitalise on its growing political influence through a creation of a strong far-right faction in GSEE and ADEDY, or through the foundation of new nationalist unions? To make better sense of such inquiries, some more context is needed.

## THE EXTREME RIGHT AND THE WORKING CLASS IN CRISIS-RIDDEN GREECE

Today, the association of the rise of the radical right parties (RRPs) in Europe and elsewhere with the social implications of the Great Recession (2008) is rather common place in political science, though cultural explanations are also invoked to supplement the examination of such a worrying development. Changes in both political demand (how the popular classes vote), and supply (the proletarianisation of the far right) sustained arguments in different settings, starting with the election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016, Brexit, Le Pen's more recent near path to victory in France's presidential elections, the Italian far-right's win in October 2022, the rise of the far-right Sweden Democrats party, and so on. These are just some of the most striking cases of a structural political shift whose manifestation became apparent in the wake of the global crisis of 2008.

To put it in a nutshell, the mushrooming success stories of nationalists practically everywhere in the Global North can hardly be understood without recourse to two major and interrelated factors: (a) The post-2008 exacerbation of an already existing trend of material and symbolic devaluation of the post-industrial popular classes (Reckwitz 2020), and (b) the transformation of the RRP from culturally authoritarian but economically liberal parties (the radical right's winning pre-crisis formula as described by Kitschelt and McGann in 1995) to culturally authoritarian and economically centrist or even economically leftist. Notwithstanding the cross-country variation and the inherent blurriness of the far right regarding its "real intentions" in economics, out of all of the major families of political parties, the radical right most clearly prioritises consumptive social policies (Engist / Pingerra 2022) and social protectionism in general.

Though some commonalities between this discussion and the interpretation of the radical right upsurge in crisis-ridden Greece cannot be missed, it should be noted that parties with explicit fascist ideology, openly racist and anti-communist discourse, and para-military organisational characteristics have remained marginal in post-crisis Europe. GD occupies a distinct ideological area in the European family of far-right political parties for three main reasons. First, it is a neo-Nazi party with a racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-communist ideological profile, and whose built-in violent activism (Georgiadou 2013; Georgiadou / Kafe 2019) led to escalated criminal activity, and finally to prison (for a historical overview of the Greek extreme right see also Georgiadou 2019). Second, and less idiosyncratic, GD adopted anti-plutocratic rhetoric, opposing the neoliberal doctrines mostly assigned to the international financial capital (Bithymitris / Spyridakis 2020; Bithymitris / Kous-tenis 2022). Third, although the radical right's polemic against trade unionism does not normally take on the form of physical attacks, this is not the case for GD. The murderous and violent actions against immigrants and political opponents have fortified the party's identification with a specific sub-group of right-wing extremism that springs directly from the fascist currents of interwar Europe.

In congruence with the proletarianisation argument, recent research on the social composition of the Greek parliamentary elites (Bithymitris, forthcoming) has shown that GD's parliamentary group has a strong working-class segment that differentiates it both from previous radical right party elites, and from the one currently representing the far right in the parliament, Greek Solution (EL; *Elliniki Lysi*). Setting aside the party's identity, the proletarianisation of the radical right in Greece is also corroborated at the level of electoral analysis. In the aftermath of the elections of 2012, electoral analyses foregrounded GD's capacity to draw

Table 2  
Social Class (subjective)

<i>People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to the working class, the middle class, or the upper or lower class. Would you describe yourself as belonging to the...</i>	WVS – Greece (2017)		Piraeus – West Attica (2020)	
	Which party would you vote for if there were a national election tomorrow?		Which party did you vote for in national elections (July 2019)?	
	Golden Dawn N = 35	Total N = 781	Golden Dawn N = 10	Total N = 554
<b>Upper Class</b>	–	0.3 %	–	–
<b>Upper Middle Class</b>	5.7 %	9.9 %	–	24.9 %
<b>Lower Middle Class</b>	14.3 %	34.8 %	20.0 %	42.8 %
<b>Working Class</b>	51.4 %	42.1 %	60.0 %	27.3 %
<b>Lower Class</b>	28.6 %	12.9 %	10.0 %	2.9 %
<b>DK / DA</b>	–	–	10.0 %	2.2 %
<b>Total</b>	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

WVS: p-value= 0,000; Piraeus-West Attica: p-value= 0,049

over-proportionate support from the unemployed, voters who experience precarious employment situations while being exposed to market conditions, such as the self-employed (Georgiadou 2013; Ellinas 2015; Ellinas 2013) and those who have witnessed a degradation of class status (Ellinas 2015). In support of these studies, we also offer evidence drawing from two different datasets, one national and one local. The former is drawn from the national survey conducted in 2017 in the framework of the World Values Survey – 7<sup>th</sup> Round.<sup>3</sup> The second dataset is drawn from a recent survey conducted in Piraeus and West Attica (Christodoulou et al. 2021).<sup>4</sup>

**3** The Greek section of the World Values Survey was conducted from September to October 2017. The total sample consisted of 1,200 respondents, and the interviews were conducted via telephone.

**4** The survey was carried out in November 2020 in two regional units of Attica: Piraeus and West Attica. The total sample consisted of 554 respondents, and the interviews were conducted via telephone.

The evidence from these two surveys (Table 2) point to an appeal of the extreme right for people who identify themselves with popular classes (working class and lower class). It should be noted that in comparison with other criteria of class belonging (i. e., income), class self-placement has stronger (and negative) effects on complex affective experiences. For instance, research in contemporary Greece has shown that the probability of feeling *ressentiment*, the emotional response to an individual's inability to acquire an object that is desired but unattainable or denied, is raised among those who identify themselves with the working class (Capelos / Demertzis 2022). This is highly consequential from a value-formation perspective, inasmuch as *ressentiment* is a significant affective driver of far-right politics.

The fact that GD draws overproportionate support from the popular classes should not be seen deterministically. Though a more detailed analysis on the conditions under which working classes vote for the radical right lies beyond the scope of this research, there are indications that this type of voting behaviour is not homogenous. Table 3 shows that union members are less likely to vote for GD than non-members.

Table 3  
Vote and union participation

	WVS – Greece (2017)		Piraeus – West Attica (2020)	
<i>Labour Unions – could you tell me whether you are a member of that type of organisation?</i>	<i>Which party would you vote for if there were a national election tomorrow?</i>		<i>Which party did you vote for in national elections (July 2019)?</i>	
	Golden Dawn N = 34	Total N = 803	Golden Dawn N = 10	Total N = 554
<b>No</b>	97.1 %	94.6 %	100.0 %	85.7 %
<b>Yes (Active/Inactive)</b>	2.9 %	5.4 %	–	13.0 %
<b>DK / DA</b>	–	–	–	1.3 %
<b>Total</b>	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

WVS: p-value= 0,000, Piraeus-West Attica: p-value= 0,000

Ethnographic research has foregrounded how GD has systematically attempted to gain traction among the most insecure, and dispossessed segments of the popular classes. For instance, Koronaiou and Sakellariou (2013) describe nationalist community organising methods in two cases: (a) The case of the “Group for the Unemployed Hard-Hit Greeks”, whose goal was to supply cheap labour through a nationalist job-finding network, and (b) the case of the free distribution of food in many areas of the country (Piraeus Suburbs included). Additionally, the neo-fascist squads effectively communicated their “protective” mission against the “foreign-led” criminality, particularly in metropolitan areas with large immigrant populations (Georgiadou / Rori 2014).

The electoral geography of GD in Attica tells the same story: The party’s stronghold in each of the five national elections of the period 2012–2019 was West Attica (Table 4). This is also the regional unit with the most distinct socio-economic profile (Table 5). GD’s performance was also remarkably good (at least before Fyssas’s murder) in Piraeus Suburbs, an area with similar socio-economic characteristics (high unemployment rates, lower incomes, and a lower share in high-qualified jobs).

Table 4  
GD’s electoral geography in Attica Region (in %)

	2012 May	2012 June	2015 Jan	2015 Sep	2019 July
<b>Municipality of Athens</b>	8.8	7.8	7.1	6.9	3.1
<b>Municipality of Piraeus</b>	8.8	8.3	7.6	7.8	3.2
<b>Northern Suburbs</b>	5.3	4.9	4.9	4.3	1.8
<b>Southern Suburbs</b>	6.3	5.8	5.4	5.1	2.2
<b>South-Eastern Suburbs</b>	6.6	6.4	5.8	5.7	2.5
<b>Western Athens</b>	7.8	7.4	6.3	6.6	2.9
<b>Piraeus Suburbs</b>	9.1	8.8	7.3	7.9	3.5
<b>East Attica</b>	8.7	8.7	7.9	7.8	3.2
<b>West Attica</b>	12.5	13.4	10.1	11.3	4.6
<b>Salamis Island</b>	12.4	12.6	11.1	11.7	4.9
<b>Other Islands</b>	9.0	8.1	6.8	8.1	3.0
<b>Attica Region</b>	7.9	7.6	6.7	6.7	2.9

Source: Bithymitris and Koustenis (2022)

Table 5  
Social differentiation of Piraeus, Piraeus Suburbs, and West Attica

		Attica Region	Piraeus	Piraeus Suburbs	West Attica
Unemployment Rate 2011 (per cent)		18.0	19.6	21.6	23.2
Avg. Annual Income 2011 (in Euros)		24,082	22,071	19,125	18,746
Real estate values 2007 (in Euros/m <sup>2</sup> )		1,400	1,450	950	750
Education Level	Up to Primary (%)	32.3	31.4	38.4	46.9
	Secondary/ post-secondary (%)	45.6	49.7	49.1	43.4
	University or higher (%)	22.2	18.9	12.5	9.7
Occupational Skill Level	High-skilled occupations (%)	27.8	23.3	17.4	14.1
	Middle-skilled occupations (%)	44.6	49.9	49.1	39.3
	Low-skilled occupations (%)	27.6	26.8	33.4	46.6

Source: Christodoulou et al. (2022)



## THE SITUATION AT THE ENTERPRISE LEVEL

Given the prominence of the neo-fascist tide within the working-class neighbourhoods, trade unions have many reasons to worry. Apart from the overt anti-communist, racist, and nationalist ideology, GD directly draws from the interwar national socialist legacies of anti-unionism, while its paramilitary structure foretells the violent activism against migrants and other perceived opponents. Despite some opportunistic references to labour struggles, such as the one concerning the 9-month strike (November 2011 – July 2012) in the Greek steel company “Hellenic Halyvourgia” (Bithymitris 2016), the dismissive attitude towards the official union organisation (“ergatopateres” as pejoratively called by GD’s leadership to denote uncompromising paternalism), and the aggressive practices against militant unionism cannot be missed.<sup>5</sup> Within the 7 years of the party’s presence at the parliament, GD frequently attacked unions and unionists with both hate speech and legal action: For instance, in 2017 the party initiated a lawsuit against the unions representing the public broadcasting sector. Equally explicit is the systematic support that the GD parliamentary group offered to the industrialists and the ship owners in the period from 2012–2019. The following words of a GD Member of Parliament (MP) in August 2015 are indicative:

*We as Golden Dawn, as a popular movement, don’t believe in class struggle. We believe that all levels of the economy are the people. Employees and employers. Incentives need to be given to enterprises, to invest their earnings, to hire employees.*

Rizospastis, 2015

It is not by chance that GD was self-proclaimed as guarantor of the social peace in Perama shipyards, a workplace that has been strategically selected as a bastion for the nationalist interference with organised labour. Despite their anti-capitalist rhetoric, the extreme right historically operates as a reminder of the class hierarchies that workers should abide, and this was made evident a few days before the assault on the communist leadership of the local union in September 2013, when a GD’s activist (and foreman in a local shipyard) stated in a very characteristic fashion:

<sup>5</sup> The statute of the party explicitly draws from the Third Reich’s ideological attack on both the bourgeoisie and organised labour: “Those few that have abandoned their organic relationship with the people are the members of the ‘plutocratic oligarchy’, with their cosmopolitanism and the members of the guiding groups of the ‘bolshevist party syndicalist oligarchy’, with their internationalism. The oligarchies of money and the party tyranny are the same. Enemies of the Nation and the People” (Golden Dawn 2018). In other official party documents, this dual polemic is embellished with anti-semitism (Bithymitris / Koustenis 2022).

*The wages that we were taking 2 or 3 years before were just too high, if you consider the crisis. We could reduce them by ourselves and assure Greek ship owners that if they bring their ships here, we will stop the strikes that happen all the time for all those years.*

Jail Golden Dawn, 2015

This statement has been amplified at the local level in order to prove how rational would be for a worker to join the far-right's professional network. Even though their attempt to build a new union failed, and while the party's operations ceased after GD was convicted of being a criminal organisation in October 2020, ex-members and activists carry on their anti-union tasks individually, as collaborators (foremen, bodyguards, or bullies) of the big business. The recent threats against the life of the President of the Association of Dockworkers, Markos Bekris, and the creation of a "yellow" union under the auspices of Cosco's contractors clearly shows that the extreme-right danger to the labour movement remains relevant (Newmoney 2022). Moreover, academic scholars and Greek unionists alike are concerned that nationalist politics have not been effectively kept at bay, as can be seen in the law and order sector as well as with ongoing exclusion of migrants and refugees. Moreover, there is concern that nationalist politics have become embedded in the features of big trade union organisations, particularly those whose leadership is associated with the ND's current conservative government. After all, the inclusiveness of a trade union movement, whose typical union member and union leader is a tenured public sector worker who is a member of a special social insurance scheme, predominantly male, middle-aged, and exclusively Greek (Matsaganis 2013: 29) is at least debatable (see also, Karakioulafi et al. 2020; Papanikolopoulos et al. 2018).

Table 6 gives an overview of the most important attacks of the extreme right against the working class and the organised labour within the last ten years. Although the list should not be considered exhaustive, it includes all those anti-labour activities of GD that have been documented during the trial. We have also added some occasions of nationalist anti-union or anti-labour practices that supplement the detailed accounts of the criminal activities as presented during the GD's trial. Apart from a short description and the timeframe, we categorised the cases by activity type, and we also stressed the most important consequences of the recorded actions. The large unions relevant here are GSEE, ADEDY, and the All-Workers Militant Front (PAME; *Panergatiko Agonistiko Metopo*). For the sake of brevity, we refer to left-aligned parties when there is engagement of both KKE and SYRIZA.

Table 6

**Overview of the fascist actions targeting labour unions and the working class (2011–2022)**

Short Description	Year	Type of Action	Result
Strike-breaking activity at the Volos plant of Hellenic Halyvourgia (Bithymitris 2016).	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Strike-breaking campaign</li> <li>– Drawing of boundary lines between employees of two different plants</li> </ul>	Among other reasons, the failure of the 9-month strike has been attributed to GD's sowing division in the factory. At the end of the day, GD proclaimed itself to be part of the wider anti-austerity movement that supported the strikers.
Fascist unionists from the Bus Drivers' Union provoked the police forces at the parliament during a 48-hour strike in June 2011 (Hekimoglou 2013).	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Anti-strike provocative action</li> </ul>	The large-scale coercion in the advent of the fascist provocation resulted in the death of the unionist Dimitris Kotzaridis, 53, member of the communist-led Union of Construction Workers.
Murder of Alim Abdul Manan, worker from Bangladesh, 21, in Kato Patisia, Athens (Politi 2021).	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Racist murder</li> </ul>	Anti-fascist campaign by small left-wing unions, such as the Panhellenic Association of Scientists and Technicians.
OAED for Greeks: Employment agency for Greeks in difficulty. According to Golden Dawn's announcement, any unemployed Greek or employers who wish to recruit Greeks, may contact a local office of the party so as to register in the relevant job search lists (Proto Thema 2012).	2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Discriminatory practice</li> <li>– Wage dumping</li> </ul>	Inspections from state agencies in two cases showed that the operation was an empty shell, mostly serving as propaganda for the party and offering a limited number of low paid jobs through informal networks.
Assault and torture of an Egyptian worker by a fascist employer at Salamis. The worker had previously claimed that he had not been paid his due wages (CNN 2016).	2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Racist assault</li> <li>– Employer violence</li> <li>– Attack on union activists and anti-racists at Salamis Labour Centre five years later</li> </ul>	Four fascists were sentenced in 2016. The Labour Centre of Salamis and anti-racist organisations publicly demonstrated against the extreme-right terror.

Physical attack against three Pakistani construction workers in Ierapetra, Crete (Dionelis 2020).	2013	– Racist assault	Five fascists were sentenced in 2014.
Guns fired at migrant farm workers at Manolada strawberry fields by foremen. The workers had previously claimed that they had not been paid their due wages (Vithoulkas 2013).	2013	– Racist assault – Severe forms of exploitation – Human trafficking	28 wounded workers were taken to the hospital. Leftist political parties, KEERFA, and three big unions publicised the case. According to a study by an EU agency, Manolada has been documented as an exceptional case of severe forms of labour exploitation (Chrysochoou 2014).
Nationalist campaign by an extreme-right faction of the Bus Drivers' Union and ideological attack against the Union (Hekimoglou 2013).	2013	– Anti-unionism	The union blocked the visit of GD's MPs to the workplaces. Bus transportation and taxi services are the only occupational domains that GD achieved some sort of organised union activity.
Near-fatal attack against Egyptian fishermen in Neo Ikonio, Perama (Pliakos 2017).	2013	– Anti-migrant violence	It was the first big shock in the area. An escalation of fascist violence followed.
Murder of the worker from Pakistan Shehzad Luqman, 27, in Petralona, Athens (Demetis 2020).	2013	– Racist murder	Anti-fascist commemorations organised by the Pakistani community, KEERFA, and small left-wing unions.
Near-fatal attack against the President of the Union of Metalworkers of Piraeus as well as unionists and members of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) at Perama Zone (Rizospastis 2013).	2013	– Anti-communism assault – Anti-unionism	In the wake of the attack, and particularly after the murder of P. Fyssas, a broad anti-fascist coalition (led by the Union of Metalworkers) blocked any fascist initiative at the grassroots level. The penetration of organised labour in the Piraeus Suburbs failed.
Murder of Pavlos Fyssas, 34, left-wing rapper and member of the Union of Metalworkers of Piraeus (Mandora 2022).	2013	– Murder with political motives	Anti-fascist campaigns, mobilisations and commemorations by anti-racist organisations and a vast array of both large and local unions.

Creation of a nationalist union at Perama Ship Repair Zone (Tsimitakis 2015).	2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Dividing practices against existing trade unions</li> <li>– Wage dumping</li> </ul>	The nationalist union was never fully operational and soon withered away. It mostly served as propaganda for the party. Only a small part of the employers recognised it and it did not have any institutional implications.
GD organises a congress for nationalist trade unions in a number of occupations (ship repair workers, farmers, taxi drivers, lawyers, doctors, merchants, electricians, and pensioners) (JailGoldenDawn 2017).	2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Dividing practices against existing trade unions</li> </ul>	Like so many other fascist-led labour actions, the congress basically served propaganda objectives. ADEDY and other smaller unions protested against this initiative in a proactive fashion.
GD initiates a lawsuit against the unions in the public broadcasting sector (The Press Project 2017).	2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Anti-unionism</li> </ul>	The union openly challenged the “right to deliver hate speech” by blocking the broadcasting of the GD leaders’ speeches and public interventions.
Physical attack and threats against the President of the Union of Dockworkers at Piraeus Port (Newmoney 2022).	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Anti-unionism</li> </ul>	In the wake of the union’s victorious industrial action, the leadership became the target of threats and attacks from foremen, bodyguards, and armed gangs. KKE and PAME demonstrated their solidarity.
Fire destroys 15 huts in a migrant worker settlement in Manolada, without clear evidence on the cause, though the living conditions in self-made sheds contributed to the expansion of the fire (eKathimerini 2018).	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Severe forms of exploitation</li> </ul>	PAME and KKE have devoted resources to get in touch with the migrants. In 2022, a joint festivity was organised locally.
Physical attack against the Bangladeshi farm worker Odin Bilal from his employer at Vartholomio, Peloponnese. The worker had previously claimed that he had not been paid his due wages (Kalafatis 2020).	2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Employer violence</li> <li>– Racist assault</li> </ul>	Raising awareness campaign from KEERFA, leftist political parties, and other left-wing organisations.

## TRADE UNIONS' PROBLEM PERCEPTION

Though union internal affairs, political processes, and socio-economic changes should not be considered isolated, each level of analysis has a certain degree of relative autonomy. Moving our analysis to the level of union response, it is useful to bear in mind that despite the conflictual character of union politics in Greece (which culminated in the years 2019–2021, whereby GSEE practically ceased its industrial activity), all the competing factions demonstrated a solid stance against neo-fascism, albeit with varying degrees of efficiency and proactive behaviour.

It would be fair to note though that up until the escalation of the extreme-right violence in 2013 (see Table 6), the official unions, and especially GSEE, paid little attention to the first worrying signs of the neo-fascist tide. Even militant unions, such as the Steelworkers' Union of Hellenic Halymvourgia (Bithymitris 2016), responded with some delay to the divisive tactics of GD on the occasion of the emblematic 9-month strike of the steelworkers. The first racist lethal assaults against migrant workers between 2011 and 2013 led to increased awareness among trade unionists, but the response was mostly limited to leftist and small labour collectives and unions with limited mobilisation resources. The top-level unions entered the fight wholeheartedly only after the nearly fatal attack against the unionists of Perama Ship Repair Zone in September 2013. It should be noted that the vast majority of GD's violent actions were carried out between 2011 and 2013 (Kafe et al. 2018).

It was the murder of the left-wing young rapper and member of the Union of Metalworkers of Piraeus, Pavlos Fyssas, 34, that set the stage for a coalition building strategy between anti-racist organisations, lawyers, journalists, academics, political parties, militant unions, labour collectives, and the big unions of the private and public sector. Without the numerous anti-fascist events organised locally and nationally from this ad hoc coalition, the readiness of many unionists, and the legal services of their organisations, the terror of the GD's death squads could have even more devastating results within the working-class districts, and the workplaces of Piraeus, and beyond. Most importantly, the belated response of the state to the escalation of the extreme-right violence would probably have been even more delayed given the notorious relationships with some of the party's members with the police forces.

There is no question that the crisis decade threatened the very existence of the Greek trade union ecosystem. What most unionists failed to see from the outset of the crisis was that the extreme right was not only a plebiscitarian, archaic, and

spontaneous response of the most dispossessed segments of the Greek society, but also and most importantly a golden opportunity for anti-labour coercion and a mechanism of employer domination. The obsession of the GD's leadership with the "protection" of the heavy industry of Piraeus (be it the port economy or the ship building industry), which also reflected fantasies of occupying the "red fortresses" where the Nazis suffered major losses in WWII (i. e., Kokkinia), is one side of the strategy for a revival of authoritarian corporatism in the ruins of democratic unionism. This is in line with the historical experience of interwar fascism; the first targets are the militant unions, and the rest follow. The readiness of some employers at Perama shipyards and beyond (connections of Cosco's contractors with right-wing activists included) to accommodate extreme right in the pursuit of minimizing union bargaining, is the other side of a much-desired authoritarian corporatism that has not prevailed but is still on the table.

Apart from the extreme right's attempt to hegemonise the ship repair industry, introducing itself as the intermediary between the thousands underemployed workers of Perama and the ship owners, we should not ignore that there is an even more dislocated workforce in the countryside (the undocumented migrants) that employers are not exactly eager to see unionise. It is not by chance that severe labour exploitation thrives among migrant workers in rural areas who are cut off from any union representation (Chrysochoou et al. 2014).

## TRADE UNION EXPERIENCE AND AREAS OF ACTION

It would be unfair to suggest that the problems faced by the migrant communities stemming either from employers' overexploitation or extreme-right practices pass totally unnoticed from the big trade unions. Migration is a core thematic area of the biggest second-level organisation, the Labour Centre of Athens (EKA; *Ergatikó Kénτρο Athínas*). Specifically, the Migrant Point EKA was set up in May 2006 in collaboration with the GSEE Institute of Labour (INE GSEE). The Migrant Point EKA aims to support migrants and refugees to have equal access to labour and social rights. Beneficiaries can be individuals (migrants and refugees) or groups of individuals that need labour market information, guidance, empowerment, or legal advice against discrimination and other issues occurring at the workplace. In some cases, the migrant communities contact the structure and ask for consultancy. Apart from the support of INE GSEE, the structure has also been supported by the Union Migrant Net, an initiative launched by ETUC and ECTUN (Bithymitris 2021a).

PAME established a special secretary working with refugees and migrants, with the aim to facilitate the organisation of migrants and refugees in unions (e. g., most of the union's announcements are published in several languages). The big unions are aware of the problem of recurrent violence against the less organised workforce, especially in rural areas. GSEE has devoted resources (i. e., legal advice from KEPEA, Information Center for Employees & Unemployed) to support the migrant farm workers, whilst PAME has contributed to the awareness raising on employer and racist violence in Manolada, the most notorious case. In July 2022, the secretariat of PAME coordinated the action of three local unions and the Coordinating Committee of Manolada farm workers, which jointly organised a successful festival with the participation of hundreds of migrant workers

However useful such actions are, the alliance of the exploitative bosses with the local police outweighs their impact. More community-based initiatives are needed (GSEE falls short of such tasks), along with awareness raising actions at the EU level (for instance, the utilisation of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and other international bodies in the human rights domain). International union bodies should also be more actively engaged under the guidance of the national and local unions (the case of PAME and WFTU joint intervention in Manolada is a good example of global / local action). The internationalisation of the problem, coupled with localised joint interventions could raise substantially the costs borne from attacks against labour, be it physical assaults, wage dumping practices, or severe exploitation forms. Although organised racist, xenophobic, or overtly anti-union practices have been diminished after the imprisonment of GD's leadership, the diffusion of such practices through informal networks, and more importantly, the activation of "yellow" unionism cast their threatening shadow over the working class (we already stressed the Dockworkers' case; there is at least one more major case of "yellow" unionism in the making among employees of the private security services that for the moment GSEE and PAME have kept at bay; see Kathimerini 2013).

Overall, the failure of GD to establish its own viable organisational networks within existing trade unions or to create new nationalist unions that would resemble the official *ethnikofron* post-civil war unionism should be widely discussed among the opposing factions of GSEE and ADEDY. It is a positive experience that should not be taken for granted. Fascists had all the boxes ticked for a hegemonic encroachment on the Greek working class: The indignation of the popular strata against the inefficiency of the political system to respond to the worst economic crisis in a non-war period (the collapse of the levels of confidence towards parties



and unions in Greece has been documented by numerous surveys); the indignation against the global and European neoliberal forces that made things more complicated from the onset of the Greek crisis; the precarisation of workers' lives; the aggravation of feelings of insecurity particularly within the most disadvantaged areas of the country, which are also the most populated by migrant labourers; the institutional erosion of collective regulation, coupled with an unprecedented encroachment on union resources; a further retrenchment of the welfare state; solid connections between GD and the police forces; and a potential for further collaboration between big business in metropolitan areas and smaller employers in the countryside. Despite all of these factors, they failed.

If the socialist, conservative, communist, and radical left factions were more tolerant towards extreme-right practices within organised labour, GD would probably have found room for manoeuvring within existing unions and likely would have reaped more fruits from their impressive electoral performance in the period from 2012–2015. The party's resorting to escalating violence in 2013, particularly in the sensitive areas of Piraeus Suburbs, cannot be disconnected from its inability to foster and secure bonds with traditional working-class audiences in an anti-union, anti-communist, and exclusivist direction. This, in turn, would not happen without the systematic intervention of unions at the local working-class communities. Both the union interventions and the consistent anti-racism of KEERFA, along with other anti-racist organisations, played pivotal role in exposing the criminal activities of the extreme right. The subsequent section makes some recommendations for community-based unionism.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Greek trade unions encountered multiple existential threats during the last decade, including an economic crisis with a far-reaching social impact, austerity-driven policy measures, the deregulation of the labour market, and the erosion of collective bargaining structure. All of these have been discussed in detail by a number of academic and non-academic scholars. What has been less attended is the response of the trade unions to the worrying rise of the extreme right in crisis-ridden Greece. GD has been declared a criminal organisation and its leaders are imprisoned, however, the xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-union practices and the agents enacting these hateful practices have not vanished. Anti-immigrant sentiment is still present (though weakened) among the Greek society, severe forms of labour exploitation are still documented (GSEE did a good job in exposing employ-

ers' foul play after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; see Bithymitris 2021a: 5), and "yellow" unionism promises to supersede existing union apparatuses. Moreover, top-level unions continue to see immense gaps in representation.

Though the Greek trade unions have been solidly anti-fascist in their alignment, keeping at bay the divisive attempts of nationalism, the positive experience of fighting GD at the grassroots level has yet to be transmitted. Almost ten years after the near fatal assault on unionists and the murder of Pavlos Fyssas by a GD death squad, big confederations are still hesitant to reflect on why the fascists targeted the Piraeus Suburbs and what conditions contribute to their potential defeat. The communication channels between the unions and the anti-racist agents, communities of Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) people, and youth progressive collectives that exposed the criminal objectives of the GD in a timely manner need to be restored and improved. On the ten year anniversary of Fyssas's murder, a conference co-organised by the large unions in the GSEE, such as the Labour Centre of Athens and the Labour Centre of Piraeus, along with PAME unions, anti-racist organisations, ethnic communities, academic scholars of the extreme right, and journalists, could signal what is implicitly asserted: The ideological disputes, however necessary from a revitalisation perspective, should not impinge on organised labour's readiness to confront extreme right both in its typical form (party and union organisational presence) and its unofficial, non-typical manifestations.

The working classes, and the dispossessed and precarious segments of the working class in particular, will continue to attract the attention of nationalist actors. Community-based union practices can be fruitful at promoting solidarity and labour internationalism, but may also provide some sort of protection for the most vulnerable members of the working class. Cultures of solidarity should be revived with the active participation of employees whose class status is relatively secure, but they have reasons to feel as though they exist between the precariat and the affluent, educated middle classes. In this vein, the feeling of being insecure, even among the less dispossessed segments of the working classes, should be counteracted through joint initiatives for restoring the country's welfare system.

The extreme right took advantage of the collapse of social welfare in crisis-ridden Greece, offering some superficial, propaganda-driven, exclusivist, and tangible services to the impoverished popular neighbourhoods. Unions should put the substantial improvement of the welfare state (the public health system is under siege again), the narrowing of income inequalities that are once more on the rise, and most importantly the support of vocational education high on their agenda.

The recurring discussions on the chronic weakness of the vocational education and training (VET) system to respond to the needs of those who cannot afford for higher education (Nektarios et al. 2022) depict the abandonment of working-class youth in the most acute way. These youth have many reasons to feel resentment and the unions should do more to support them, or else right-wing populism will attract an even larger sympathetic audience.

The experience of the Union of Metalworkers of Piraeus provides important insight on this matter. Successful vocational training initiatives and a commitment to collective bargaining, on the one hand, and support of the unemployed workers and grass-roots anti-fascist interventions, on the other, minimised the capacity for activists to undertake and perform regular union tasks. Under the auspices of the union confederations, local unions should draw from this experience and organise campaigns in the neighbourhoods where their actual and potential membership lives, starting with a needs analysis. Given the context of rising energy poverty, it is possible that nationalists will try to take advantage of poor people's despair, especially in Northern Greece.

It should be noted that not all the employers hold anti-migrant attitudes. Unions located in rural areas should jointly open communication channels with employer and farmer associations to promote the integration of migrants, the stigmatisation of exclusionary politics, and to prevent severe forms of exploitation. Nevertheless, unions should not lose sight of the fact that employer-driven xenophobic attacks against migrants have been recorded since the 1990s (Kafe et al. 2018). This means that wider and sustainable synergies are needed if unions are to promote the protection of the most vulnerable members of the working-class. Universities and research institutes could offer useful documentation regarding the state-of-the-art.

Related to the previous point, unions should open a dialogue with the government and the political parties over the notorious cases of police collaboration with agents of anti-labour practices (ranging from discrimination to overt violence). Again, not all the police officers are anti-democratic or condone anti-migrant practices. But the indications of police tolerance of racist and discriminatory actions are too many to be neglected by the unions. The engagement of the police unions is of utmost importance here.

Finally, no anti-nationalist, democratic coalition will be victorious without a deep commitment to democratic participation at the grassroots level. Previous research

has shown the huge difficulties in mobilisation and collective representation due to serious institutional weaknesses in third-level organisations (Bithymitris 2021a) as well as the far-reaching effects of the fragmentation within the Greek union movement. As shown in previous sections, the union density is still on the decline, though some level of restoration of collective bargaining has been achieved. Industrial action has showed some signs of revival as well, with GSEE, ADEDY, and PAME joining forces to prepare for a strike on November 9, 2022. The victorious struggles of the Dockworkers of Piraeus, and the e-Food workers, both precarious and organised, are unmistakable signs of the great potential of union revitalisation. The latter is also a precondition for a lasting defeat of nationalism within the trade union movement in Greece and beyond.

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# COUNTRY STUDY ITALY

Emanuele Toscano



## THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

### ITALIAN TRADE UNION ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SYSTEM IN ITALY

In Italy, worker representation in unions is almost entirely covered by three major confederations, which together have a total membership of over 11 million: In 2021, the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL; Italian General Confederation of Labour) had five million members, the *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* (CISL; Italian Confederation of Trade Unions) had four million members, and the *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL; Italian Labour Union) had over 2.3 million members.<sup>1</sup> Alongside these major organisations, there are also several less representative sectoral and grassroots unions, including the traditionally left-wing radical *Confederazione dei Comitanti di Base* (COBAS; Confederation of the Council of the Base) and *Unione Sindacale di Base* (USB; Syndicate Union of the Base) and the right-wing aligned *Unione Generale del Lavoro* (UGL; General Labour Union). At the beginning of the 1990s, a profound transformation radically changed the Italian political system, leading to the disappearance of numerous political parties to which the three major trade union confederations (CGIL, CISL, and UIL) were ideologically linked.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the cleft between the political parties and the trade unions widened.

The Italian system of industrial relations was long characterised by low institutionalisation accompanied by a lot of grey area and peculiarities (Primo Cella / Treu 2009). Therefore, it corresponded more to a pluralistic-competitive model characterised by a diverse range of collective bargaining demands than to a participatory-cooperative model, which is characterised by an intent to build and strengthen institutions while promoting the cooperation of social partners.

The *Protocollo sulla politica dei redditi e dell'inflazione programmata* (Protocol on Income Policy and Planned Inflation) was the central guiding pillar of Italy's indus-

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<sup>1</sup> For CGIL membership statistics, see [www.cgil.it](http://www.cgil.it); for CISL membership statistics, see: <http://www.cisl.it/notizie/in-evidenza/sindacato-cisl-nel-2021-crescono-gli-iscritti-con-un-incremento-di-quasi-11-tra-i-lavoratori-attivi/#:~:text=Sono%204.076.033%20i%20tesserati,%20rispetto%20all'anno%20precedente>; for UIL membership statistics, see [https://www.uil.it/tesseramento\\_reg.asp](https://www.uil.it/tesseramento_reg.asp).

<sup>2</sup> The CGIL was first connected to the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI; Italian Communist Party) and later to the PCI's successor parties *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS; Democratic Party of the Left) and *Democratici di Sinistri* (DS; Democratic Party of the Left). Meanwhile, the CISL was tied to the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC; Christian Democratic Party) and the UIL had links to the *Partito Repubblicano Italiano* (PRI; Italian Republican Party).

trial relations system from 1993 until 2009. This protocol was signed by the three trade union confederations (CGIL, CISL, and UIL) as well as by *Confindustria*, the largest confederation of employers, and introduced the tripartite model (Carrieri / Pirro 2019). The tripartite model is an agreement between social partners and the government on collective bargaining and industrial relations for making joint decisions on income policy measures to control inflation (Carrieri / Pirro 2019). Among other items, the protocol introduced unified trade union representation, officially termed *rappresentanze sindacali unitarie* (RSU), in companies with more than 15 employees. This replaced factory councils or works councils that had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. A recent international comparative study on right-wing extremism in the workplace (Kim et al. 2022) highlighted some of the grey areas in Italy's representation structures that have allowed the right to gain a foothold within the industrial relations system. One example can be found in the fact that labour lawyers close to the right-wing populist party *Lega per Salvini Premier* (Lega; League for Salvini Premier) and employers offer their services to companies with fewer than 15 employees (i. e., companies who do not have RSUs) to implement labour policies that favour employers and are not influenced by trade unions or employers' organisations.

The rules for collective bargaining prescribed in the 1993 protocol were redefined in 2009 by the Berlusconi IV cabinet in a highly controversial framework agreement (*Accordo Quadro*). As Carrieri and Pirro (2019) point out, it breaks with the 1993 protocol in two ways: First, the agreement was not signed by the CGIL, and second, it is essentially a bipartite agreement (between trade unions and workers' associations), with the government only playing an indirect role, a break from the previous trifold model. This framework agreement, which emerged during a major economic crisis and its accompanying social conflicts, was controversial primarily because it opened up the vaguely defined possibility that decentralised and company agreements could deviate from national agreements. The goal was to develop and promote the former in order to support the potential dynamics of the production factors or the tendency for change at the organisational level.

The latest measure in the reshaping of Italian industrial relations was made in 2018, when a bi-fold agreement (*Accordo interconfederale*; National Intersectoral Agreement), commonly known as the Pact for the Factory, was introduced.

This is a perfect bipartite agreement, with all involved parties as signatories (including the CGIL) and the government playing no active role, participating only as an indirect interlocutor in agreement development. Moreover, the agreement ad-

dresses three core elements of industrial relations: Representativeness, participation, and principles and processes for regulating collective agreements at the national and the decentralised level (Carrieri / Pirro 2019).

## THE ITALIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The June 6, 1946, referendum – for which universal suffrage in Italy was applied for the first time – led to the proclamation of a parliamentary republic and, subsequently, in 1948, the implementation of the constitutional framework that introduced a separation of powers between the legislative branch (parliament), an executive branch (government), and a judiciary (judges). The parliament is comprised of two chambers, the *Camera dei deputati* (Chamber; Chamber of Deputies) and the *Senato della Repubblica* (Senate; Senate of the Republic); the members of both are re-elected every five years. A referendum in September 2020 reaffirmed an October 2019 constitutional amendment reducing the size of both chambers by 35.6 per cent, from 630 to 400 seats in the Chamber and from 315 to 200 in the Senate).

The Italian political party system has gone through many changes during the republic's more than 75-year history, which cannot be discussed here.<sup>3</sup> Underscoring the implications of these transformations, it should be noted that none of the major parties represented in the Italian Parliament in 2023 existed prior to 2007, when the *Partito Democratico* (PD; Democratic Party) was founded.<sup>4</sup>

Two parties represent the radical right<sup>5</sup> in parliament: *Lega per Salvini Premier* and *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI; Brothers of Italy). *Lega per Salvini Premier*, which is a sister party to *Lega Nord* (LN; Northern League), was founded in December 2017 with

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<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the Italian political party system, see Farneti (1983) and Ignazi (2018).

<sup>4</sup> The party that has been in parliament the longest is the *Partito dei Radicali Italiani* (RI; Party of the Italian Radicals), which was founded in 2001 from the ashes of the *Partido Radicale*. It has a single Member of Parliament. Silvio Berlusconi's one-man party *Forza Italia* (FI) was re-founded in 2013 after the demise of *Popolo della Libertà*, taking over another party name and symbol, which had been founded and led by Berlusconi from 1994 until 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Following political scientist Cas Mudde (2019), this study employs specific definitions when referring to sovereignist right-identified parties and organisations. When speaking of the 'radical right', we refer to parties and organisations that, generally speaking, accept democracy, though they may oppose some core elements of liberal democracy, such as civil rights or the rule of law. In contrast, all organisations (and usually, though not always, movements) that reject democracy outright, such as the principles of popular sovereignty and majority rule, are described as 'extreme right-wing'. The adjective 'populist' can be attributed to all organisations, not only on the right, that divide social reality into two opposing, hostile, and homogenous groups, with the corrupt elites on one side and the "pure" people for whom the party wants to speak, on the other.

the aim of uniting party members from central and southern Italy. The two parties, *Lega Nord* and *Lega per Salvini Premier*, ran in the 2018 parliamentary elections together as *Lega*, with *Nord* disappearing from the party's name. In so doing, the party definitively abandoned a feature that had characterised it since its founding – the demand for northern Italy's succession.<sup>6</sup> Since Salvini was elected to be the federal party secretary in 2013, the party has seen a fundamental change in its politics toward the far-right and has become increasingly right-wing populist (Passarelli / Tuorlo 2018): The party opposes illegal immigration, is nationalist (since 2018, *Lega's* slogan has been "Italians first"), and anti-European (Toscano 2020). Moreover, the party favours a single-rate income tax, i. e., a flat tax, opposes the extension of civil rights to same-sex couples, and is overall against the recognition of gender diversity.<sup>7</sup> *Lega's* share of the vote grew tremendously under Matteo Salvini's leadership from just over four per cent in the 2013 general election and 6.1 per cent in the EU Parliament election to over 17 per cent in the 2018 general election and, importantly, 34.2 per cent in the 2019 European election. This made *Lega* the third strongest party in the Italian government. However, as described in the subsequent section, *Lega* suffered a significant drop in votes in the 2022 general election.

Salvini participated in the Conte I Cabinet (2018–2019) as Minister of Interior before switching over to the opposition during the Conte II Cabinet (2019–2021). *Lega* then supported the Draghi Cabinet in office from February 2021 to September 2022. Despite experiencing a dramatic decrease in voter support in the 2022 elections, the party is well-positioned in the current government alongside *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Forza Italia* with five ministers, including Salvini himself, who holds the post of Minister of Infrastructure and Transport and the post of Deputy Prime Minister.

*Fratelli d'Italia* was founded on December 21, 2012, as a spin-off of Silvio Berlusconi's *Popolo della Libertà*, which was supported in 2009 by the *Alleanza Nazionale*, a post-fascist party on the right. The party's symbolism of a three-coloured flame

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6 The full name of the party is *Lega Nord per L'Indipendenza della Padania* (LN; Northern League for the Independence of Padania). The party was originally founded in 1991 by Umberto Bossi, who was the party leader for over 20 years. *Lega Nord* was born out of the alliance of several regional autonomy movements in different parts of northern Italy.

7 In 2016, *Lega* voted against the bill introduced by Monica Cirinnà which introduced civil unions into Italian law, including for same-sex couples. In 2021, *Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia* opposed the EU Parliament's resolution declaring the EU an "LGBTIQ Freedom Zone". That same year, the two parties voted against the ddl Zan bill, which subsequently failed. This bill would have introduced to Italian law tougher penalties for crimes against and discrimination of homosexual and transgender people, women, and people with disabilities.

emphasises ideological continuity with the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI; Italian Social Movement). The MSI abbreviation was included in the *Fratelli d'Italia* logo until 2017. Since 2014, *Fratelli d'Italia* has been led by Giorgia Meloni, who is Italy's only female party leader, and has explicitly placed itself in the radical right, representing nationalist, traditionalist, post-fascist, reactionary, and sovereigntist positions. The party opposes registered civil unions for same-sex couples as well as all suggestions of multiculturalism or welcome culture. It promotes, instead, a traditionalist-conservative model of society (its oft-repeated slogan is “God, Fatherland, and Family”) as well as a “Made in Italy” policy to protect national economic interests.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, the party has made significant gains: Its vote share in the general election increased from 1.9 to 4.3 from 2013 to 2018. In the 2019 European parliamentary elections, its voter share was 6.5 per cent. In the September 2022 general elections, the FdI was the strongest party and won with 26 per cent of the vote. The *Fratelli d'Italia* electorate has many commonalities with *Lega* voters (IPSOS 2018). Most are male and middle-aged. They tend to be located in central and southern Italy and are socio-culturally diverse, including many entrepreneurs, executives, and freelancers with a high level of education as well as pensioners, civil servants, and blue-collar workers. Prior to its overwhelming victory in 2022, the party had only ever been in the opposition, first during the centre-left governments (2013–2018), during the two Conte governments, and again under the Draghi government.

In addition to these two radical right parties (*Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia*), at least two additional extreme right parties should be mentioned: *CasaPound Italia* and *Forza Nova*. While they do not uphold democratic principles or the constitution, their publicity has grown in recent years for a range of reasons, and they have played a significant role in the revival of the extreme right in Italy. Since the turn of the millennium, *CasaPound Italia* has recalibrated Italian neofascism, updating its symbols, language, and cultural references, as well as attracting younger generations, including through its activism (Di Nunzio / Toscano 2011).

The neo-fascist and extreme right party *Forza Italia* was founded in 1997 by Roberto Fiore and Massimo Morsello; its public image grew during the pandemic as it tried to capitalise on and stoke the momentum of the opposition to the pandemic mitigation measures (most notably the proof of vaccination policies, known in Italy as the ‘green pass’) and virus deniers.

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<sup>8</sup> Giorgia Meloni's ruling party introduced a new ministry, the Ministry of Businesses and Made in Italy.

## THE RADICAL RIGHT IN THE ITALIAN GOVERNMENT

The most recent general election was a victory for the Italian right, whose strong coalition consisting of *Fratelli d'Italia*, *Lega*, and *Forza Italia* won 44 per cent<sup>9</sup> of the vote and a broad majority in Parliament. This sweeping success was made possible in part by the centre-left parties, who, unlike the centre-right, joined the election separately. The voter share for the centre-left coalition, which is comprised of the PD, the *Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra* (AVS; Greens and Left Alliance), +*Europa* (+Eu; More Europe) was just over 26 per cent; moreover, they did not manage to form an electoral alliance with either the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S; Five Star Movement) who received 15.4 per cent of the vote or the moderate centrist coalition comprised of *Azione* (Az; Action) and *Italia Viva* (IV; Italy Alive), which received 7.8 per cent of the vote.

Within the course of a single legislative term, Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* went from four to 26 per cent and thus became the strongest party in the country. The impressive election result in the September 2022 elections is due to several reasons, including voter drift from *Lega* and M5S: Many voters who supported these two parties in the 2018 general election and the 2019 European election voted for the current prime minister's party. Studies conducted by the Cattaneo Institute<sup>10</sup> after the election showed that almost four out of 10 voters who voted for *Lega* in the 2019 European election went on to vote for *Fratelli d'Italia* in the snap election; the same is true for one out of six M5S voters. Table 1 depicts the votes for the five largest Italian parties in absolute figures and shows the astonishing result for *Fratelli d'Italia* (+ 406 per cent) in the 2022 election.

Geographically speaking – and, in a country like Italy, geography has always been an important component of voting behaviour – *Fratelli d'Italia* experienced a surge in voters in central Italy. This surge can be observed not only in Lazio, the region where the extreme right, first through the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* and then the

*Alleanza Nazionale*, has always had a solid voter base, but also in the regions of Marche and Umbria. Unlike the *Alleanza Nazionale*, whose votes mostly came from the south, *Fratelli d'Italia* won over voters in areas traditionally close to *Lega*, such as in the northeast and northwest. *Lega*, in contrast, suffered significant vote loss

<sup>9</sup> A record low of 63.9 per cent of eligible voters cast ballots in the September 25, 2022, general election.

<sup>10</sup> See Cattaneo (2022).



Table 1  
**Votes in absolute figures for the top 5 parties in Italy (2018–2022)**

	2018	2022	Change
<b>Fratelli d'Italia</b>	1 429 550	7 233 735	+406 %
<b>Lega</b>	5 698 687	2 442 679	–57.2 %
<b>Forza Italia</b>	4 596 956	2 248 851	–51.1 %
<b>PD</b>	6 161 896	5 305 566	–13.9 %
<b>M5S</b>	10 732 066	4 282 920	–60.1 %

Source: Own interpretation of data from the Ministry of the Interior.

after the positive results in the 2018 General Election and the 2019 European Election: It received 8.9 per cent of the vote. The loss of votes had an impact beyond central and southern Italy, with *Lega*'s traditional voter base in the northeast and northwest of the country shifting in favour of *Fratelli d'Italia*.

With regard to socio-demographic characteristics, *Fratelli d'Italia* increased its voter share among women in the 2022 election compared to previous elections, possibly also because it had a female party leader. The party was not particularly successful among 18–34 year-olds, who instead preferred the centre-left coalition and the *Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra* in particular, or with pensioners. However, the *Fratelli d'Italia* was quite successful with 35–64 year-olds, and especially among the self-employed in this age group.

According to the post-election analysis by IPSOS (2022), a large portion of blue-collar workers (over a third) voted for *Fratelli d'Italia* while just over 13 per cent voted for *Lega*. Among this group, the centre-left coalition was severely punished: Over-

all, the PD, *Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra*, and *Azione/Italia Viva* received under 18 per cent.<sup>11</sup> Figure 1 shows vote distribution for the working class. *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Lega* continued to demonstrate their ability to attract voters from the social strata most impacted by the consequences of the economic and socio-cultural crises that have prevailed in Italy for years. Both parties were able to distinguish themselves as the political voice for these groups and were able to gain social capital and win votes from the social milieu made up of “losers of modernization” (Betz 1994), i. e., those impacted by growing inequalities, economic difficulties, and precarious working conditions. After having won over blue-collar workers in northern Italy over the years with their anti-central state and anti-immigrant political position, *Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia* are now enjoying increased popularity among blue-collar workers, along with the self-employed and low-skilled, in the rest of the country (Biorcio 2010, Marafii 2018, Leonardi / Carrieri 2020).

A post-election analysis by IPSOS (2022) shows that the centre-left does better among white-collar workers and the middle class more generally, winning about 30 per cent of the total vote. This brings the centre-left camp very close to the centre-right, without surpassing it.

As a SWG study also shows, a significant portion of lower-income voters voted for the M5S. This can be explained by the fact that this party has a voter base mainly located in southern Italy, and by the credit given to former Prime Minister Conte and Minister of Labour and Social Policies, Luigi Di Maio, for introducing the Citizen’s Income in 2019. This is a financial support measure designed to supplement family income, foster labour market integration, and to promote social inclusion.

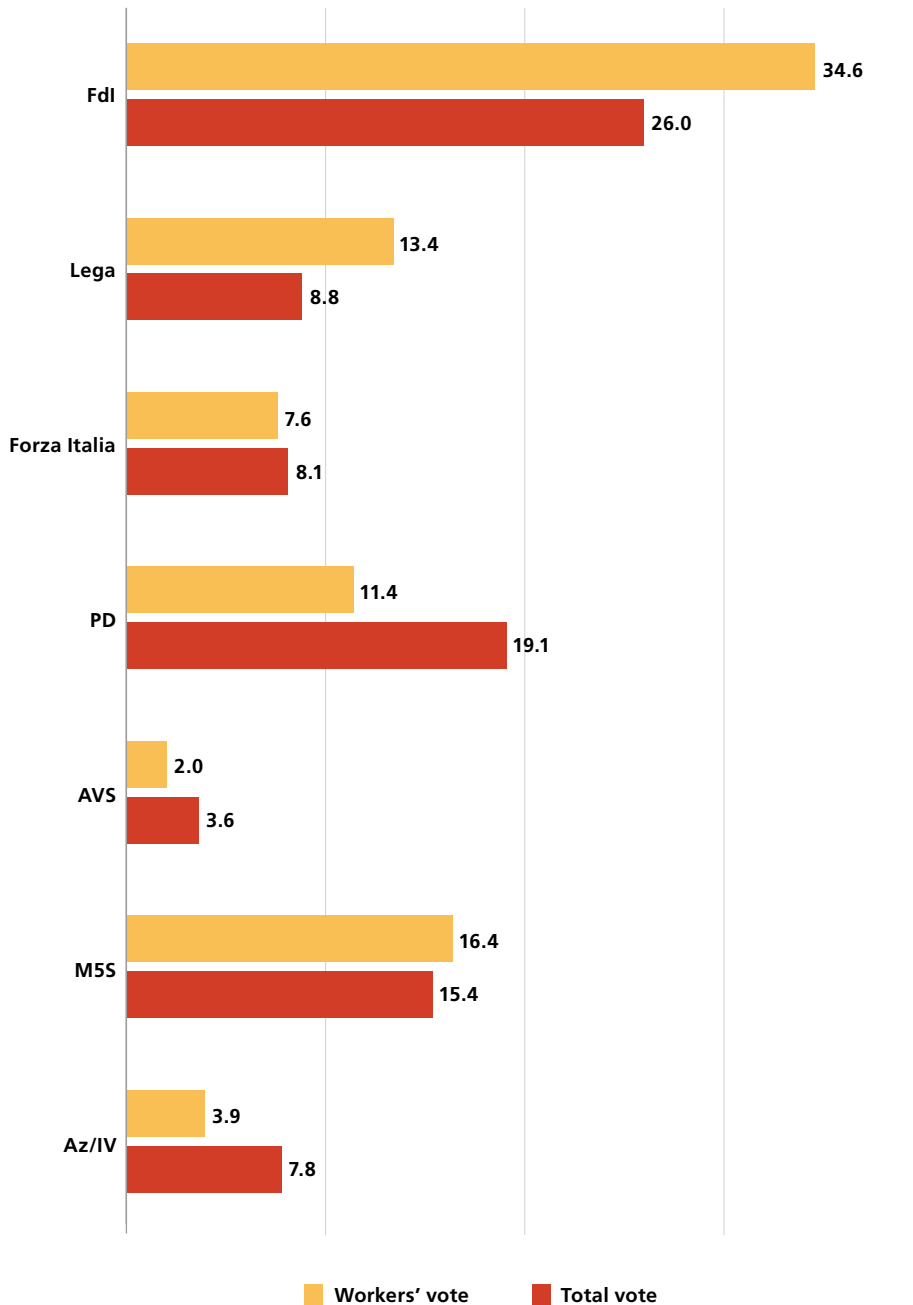
## THE NON-EXISTENCE OF RIGHT-WING TRADE UNIONS IN ITALY

Italy’s most important right-wing trade union is the *Unione Generale del Lavoro* (UGL; General Trade Union), which was founded in 1996 and succeeded the previously most important right-wing trade union, *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati*

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<sup>11</sup> As Carrieri and Leonardi (2020) point out, the fact that blue-collar voters are voting for right-wing populist parties is by no means unusual behaviour for this social class. With the exception of the 1970s, Italian workers have never voted in a majority for the left.

Figure 1  
Distribution of the Workers' Vote (Proportion of Total Votes)



Source: Own interpretation of data from IPSOS (2022).

*Nazionali del Lavoro* (CISNAL; Italian Confederation of Trade Unions)<sup>12</sup> and other independent, politically right-wing organisations. The UGL's proximity to the centre-right governments led by Silvio Berlusconi during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was beneficial, as seen in an increase in its visibility, standing, and membership.<sup>13</sup> In more recent years, the union leadership that had maintained a close connection to centre-right political parties (first *Forza Italia*, then *Fratelli d'Italia*) moved closer to Salvini's *Lega* via deputy leader Claudio Durigon. Durigon himself, who joined parliament as an MP for *Lega* in 2018, played a key role in anchoring the party in central and southern Italy and facilitated close organisational and political cooperation between the UGL and *Lega*.

However, it should be noted that the political success of a more or less radical right has not yet been accompanied by an equivalent rise in right-wing trade unions or the UGL in particular. Indeed, UGL's presence in the workplace is generally very low, both in the metal sector and in the internal trade union representations. While radical right-wing parties, first *Lega* followed by *Fratelli d'Italia*, have grown in recent years, culminating in an electoral victory in September 2022, support for the three major unions CGIL, CISL and UIL has remained unchanged (Leonardi / Carrieri 2020).

## TRADE UNIONS AND THE RISE OF THE EXTREME RIGHT: PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES FOR COUNTERACTION

As already mentioned, right-wing trade unions have very little presence in the Italian workplace. Nevertheless, the increase in political power for the extreme right, which now governs the country, does pose a threat to trade unions. This threat comes from *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Lega*'s socio-political background as neo-populist entities, which are far removed from the traditional positions of the liberal right, and the growing importance of disintermediation<sup>14</sup> in the narratives, policies, and communication of the populist right (Leonardi / Carrieri 2020).

<sup>12</sup> CISNAL was founded in 1950 and was politically close to the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano*.

<sup>13</sup> The highpoint for visibility and political importance for the UGL was likely in 2010, when it participated in negotiations on Colaninno's Alitalia rescue plan.

<sup>14</sup> It should be clear that disintermediation as a policy determination is not only relevant for the populist right. Matteo Renzi, PD leader from 2013 onward and prime minister from 2014–2016, took a political approach based on charisma: Renzi presented himself as a popular reformer, pursuing a strategy of disintermediation and personalisation to bypass trade unions and the media in their traditional roles as mediators (Kim et al. 2020).

The greatest danger for unions at the moment, however, comes from the far-right movements that have infiltrated protests occurring after the first wave of the 2020 pandemic. In Italy, as elsewhere in the world, these protests were first against curfews and later against vaccination campaigns and compulsory vaccination for work and public places (*Certificazione verde*; Green Pass).

On October 9, 2021, following a demonstration in Rome against the Green Pass system, some groups from the extreme right stormed and looted the headquarters of Italy's largest trade union, causing considerable damage. The CGIL was the victim of numerous subsequent attacks on offices and workers' councils across Italy. The di Vittorio Foundation mapped the assaults in an interactive online document, the *Mappa del vandalismo antisindacale*<sup>15</sup> (Map of Anti-union Vandalism), which paints an unsettling picture. As of October 2021, the di Vittorio Foundation had counted 46 attacks of varying degrees of severity in 40 cities across 13 regions, classified by the group taking credit for the assault. The extreme ire towards the unions in general, and the CGIL in particular, is due to the decision made at the beginning of the pandemic to regulate job security. Trade unions joined meetings with the government to draft a joint protocol for pandemic mitigation and containment measures in the workplace (*Protocollo condiviso di aggiornamento delle misure per il contrasto e il contenimento della diffusione del Covid nei luoghi di lavoro*).

The anti-vaccination movement, infiltrated by the extreme right, heavily criticised the participation of trade unions in these meetings and accused the CGIL of being in part responsible for a "health dictatorship", expressing the belief that Draghi's government's pandemic mitigation measures were at the expense of workers and individual freedoms. The extreme right was able to exploit the pandemic to gain public legitimacy and ground in the political sphere, fuelled by the general resentment that spread across society in response to restrictions and requirements (including compulsory vaccination to vaccine passports) necessary to curb the spread of the virus (Toscano 2022). In particular, the extra-parliamentary right gained from this situation, increasing its public profile; meanwhile, the right-wing parties represented in parliament remained rather ambivalent and inconsistent on the topic. Some *Lega*-affiliated regional presidents, such as Luca Zaia, president of the early-impacted Veneto region, and Atillio Fontana, president of the Lombardy region, followed restriction measures advocated by then-

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15 The map made by Anna Chiara Manzo can be found here: [https://www.cgil.it/la-cgil/aree-politiche/internazionale/2022/11/03/news/una\\_mappa\\_del\\_vandalismo\\_antisindacale-2468375/](https://www.cgil.it/la-cgil/aree-politiche/internazionale/2022/11/03/news/una_mappa_del_vandalismo_antisindacale-2468375/)

health minister Roberto Speranza and even openly opposed their party leader Matteo Salvini, who tended to downplay the dangers of the pandemic. *Fratelli d'Italia* has had a rather ambiguous position when it comes to the pandemic: On the one hand, the party supported the vaccination campaign, while on the other, they condemned the restriction of individual freedoms, invoking a vague notion of individual responsibility. This ambiguity was a political tool that allowed the party to wink at the anti-vax minority in the name of a broader condemnation of the government-imposed 'health dictatorship'.

Points of contact between extreme right populists and anti-vaxxers can be traced back to mutual distrust of political institutions responsible for pandemic mitigation measures, a widespread distrust in science, and the classic populist narrative that political-economic elites have deceived the honest people in a singular black-and-white painting of the world (Eberl et al. 2021).

## TRADE UNION RESPONSE TO THE RISE OF THE RIGHT IN THE WORLD OF WORK

The rise of the extreme right in the workplace<sup>16</sup> did not go unnoticed by Italian trade unions nor by the CGIL: Unions are undertaking a number of initiatives in confederations, at the national level, and in sectors where members are increasingly voting for radical right parties, such as in the metalworking industry, so as to be able to understand this shift and be able to counter it accordingly. In addition to the map of attacks on its offices, CGIL has also promoted initiatives to define a common strategy and exchange with other organisations in the trade union's struggle against the extreme right and neo-fascism. These include seminars organised by Redes, a network of European and Latin American trade unions, which includes CGIL, CUT/Chile, CTA-T Argentina, CUT/Brazil, CCOO/Spain, and TUC/UK.<sup>17</sup> The goal of these initiatives is two-fold: To better understand the rise of the extreme right and to develop appropriate counteraction. On the one hand, it is necessary to understand how the extreme right is able to develop relationships at

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<sup>16</sup> FIOM-CGIL Bologna General Secretary, interviewed for this report, believes the spread of right-wing extremism among FIOM affiliates to be marginal; however, *Movimento 5 Stelle* enjoys wide support.

<sup>17</sup> The most recent seminar, "Building an International Trade Union Strategy to Face Up to the New Forms of Fascism in Workplaces and Society", included speakers from all participating countries and was held in October 2022 at the very same CGIL headquarters that were stormed and destroyed by fascists and anti-vaxxers in 2021.

the European and international levels and, on the other hand, it is important to learn about the effectiveness of training initiatives that have already been implemented in other countries in the Redes network. Moreover, it is necessary to create an international training programme that prepares trade union functionaries to handle the spread of neo-fascist concepts (such as racism, violence, populism, denialism, xenophobia, and homophobia) and to participate in communication, especially through digital media, in order to win over younger generations and new labour market participants.

The *Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici* (FIOM; Federation of Metal Workers Employees), the CGIL-affiliated metalworkers' union, has been active in several production plants in recent years, such as in the Lamborghini factory near Sant'Agata Bolognese, where, thanks to its historical presence and the fact that it provides a majority of union representatives, it has been able to organise a number of initiatives of note (Kim et al. 2022). For example, the Sant'Agata Bolognese plant has a compulsory course on the constitution (as part of the three-year 24-hour training required by law). Additionally, for a number of years now, the FIOM has organised an annual general meeting between April 25 and June 2<sup>18</sup> at the Lamborghini factory; this meeting focuses not on collective agreements or working conditions but on current issues (such as, for example, gender equality, immigration and racism, and impact of war on immigration), which are discussed in the presence of experts and allow for people to share their own experiences. FOIM also advocates for (and in some cases has already negotiated for) anti-discrimination rules to be included in the company's code of conduct and in company agreements so that they are binding and workers can be punished for discriminatory, racist, sexist, or homophobic behaviour.

*Translated from German by Tanager*

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**18** These two dates have strong symbolic significance in Italy: April 25 marks the liberation from Nazi fascism and June 2 commemorates the birth of the Republic of Italy.

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# COUNTRY STUDY NORWAY

Jonas Bals



## HISTORY OF MODERN RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN NORWAY

In Norway, the history of modern right-wing populism goes back to the founding of the “Anders Lange’s Party for a Strong Reduction in Taxes, Duties and Public Interventions”, or ALP for short, in 1973. The party’s founder, Anders Lange, had roots in circles of right-wing and semi-fascist activists even before the Second World War. He had been a leading figure in the Fatherland League (*Fedrelandslaget*, 1925–1940), which was extremely hostile to the labour movement, and actively opposed strikes and collective bargaining. In 1977, the party changed its name to the Progressive Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*, FrP). It has retained its founder’s scepticism and hostility to the ‘socialist’ labour movement, based on a pro-market, neo-liberal critique of collective bargaining institutions in the line of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

In the 1970s and 80s, the right-wing nationalist, liberalist, and populist forces can be described more as a stone in the shoe for the Norwegian trade union movement, than a serious challenger. They had little influence on politics and society, but during the 1980s and 1990s, they gradually managed to shift the public debate. Even though electoral success came late, the party quickly succeeded in re-framing the “metapolitical” space. Public debate shifted from topics such as social inequality, redistribution of wealth, and the inclusion of newly arrived immigrants, to lower taxes and a reduction of the welfare state, and contributed actively in creating fear and suspicion towards citizens with a different skin colour, ethnicity, or religion.

As the Norwegian tax protest and anti-immigration party gained traction, and learned how to play the racism card in election times, they grew to become a more real problem for those who shared the trade union movement’s ideas and values. By mobilizing working-class voters, to whom the traditional conservative parties never had particularly good access, they made it easier for established right-wing parties to win a majority, and correspondingly more difficult for the left.

## TRENDS IN THE ELECTORATE

From a support of five percentage points in the 1973 general election, they reached a peak in 2009, when almost 23 per cent of the electorate voted for them. At the last general election in 2021, they achieved a support of 11.6 per cent. Even though a large part of their following can be found in groups “above” or at least outside

the labour movement, these numbers are roughly reflected among the members of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (*Landsorganisasjonen i Norge*, LO). After more than a decade with results ranging between 0.7 and 3.8 per cent, their breakthrough election in 1989 gave them almost 10 per cent among unionized workers. As the party gained a foothold in the working class, the party gradually made a partial transition to become a broader “welfare populist”, or more correctly, a “petrol populist” party. With huge revenues from the state-run oil industry (which the party wanted to privatize) and the sovereign wealth fund, the party could combine ambitions for better care for the elderly with their liberalist critique of taxes and the welfare state. By insisting that Norwegians could be a better welfare state if it were to have fewer migrants, the party found a powerful cocktail. In 2009, the party’s best general election ever, almost 1 in 4 LO members voted for the party. Internal polling has shown a quite stable trend for the last 7–8 years, with roughly 10 per cent of the members voting the Progress Party (Internal polls).

The party has a few contenders even further to the right, but apart from a few municipalities in the “Bible Belt” (southern and western regions of Norway, an area that has long since grown into a stronghold for the party, partly based on the same evangelical foundations as American, Brazilian, and other far right movements), these contenders have never gained an electoral foothold.

In 2014, the Progress Party entered into a coalition government with the traditional conservative party (*Høyre*). Eventually, this collaboration also included the extreme liberalist (traditionally more social liberal) Liberal Party (*Venstre*), and, after much internal rife, the Christian-Democratic Christian People’s Party (KrF). All four parties lost heavily in the 2021 election, and since then, Norway has been governed by a two-party minority government, based on the Labour Party (social democrats) and the Centre Party (farmer’s party). The latter gained many former voters from the Progress Party in the election, which it has since lost again, mostly based on a “populist/periphery” agenda, bolstered by what many voters saw as a betrayal of the Progress Party’s longstanding claim to be fighting for ‘ordinary people’.

The bourgeois governments of 2014–2021 followed the same pattern that most other right-wing governments have followed in other countries: They prioritized large tax cuts for the richest, a gradual reduction of the welfare state, and pursued a restrictive immigration policy. Their immigration and integration minister, current party leader Sylvi Listhaug, introduced few initiatives when it came to in-

tegration, but very many when it came to restrictions on migration and on migrants' rights. On the metapolitical level, the Progress Party continued its aggressive take on all matters concerning immigration in general and Islam in particular. The party leader at the time, Siv Jensen, insisted that her rhetoric about the "stealth Islamization" of Norway was appropriate, and her heir, Sylvi Listhaug, has pulled the party in an even more "national conservative" direction, so far without much success.

This lack of success can be explained in many ways, one of them being that Norway has in fact become the multicultural society the Progress Party warned against – and people, in general, seem to be used to it and even enjoy it. This presupposes, however, a successful policy for integration and against social dumping. Even if many Norwegians still consider integration policies to be imperfect and with room for improvement, there has been a significant shift in the population's view on migration. Polls show that while 40 per cent of adult Norwegians thought that the immigrants' way of life did not fit in Norway, and that foreign customs were a threat to Norwegian culture back in 1993, the number in 2021 is 15 per cent. While 25 percent could not / would not take a position on the question in 1993, this group is now reduced to 11 per cent. Even more dramatically: The proportion of Norwegians who believe that immigrants contribute to greater cultural diversity has increased from 35 per cent to 73 per cent; from just over a third to almost three quarters. Moreover, in 1993, about half of adult Norwegians believed that it was an important social task to limit immigration. In 2021, less than 20 per cent thought the same. The proportion who believe we must stretch ourselves as far as possible to accept more refugees in Norway has increased from 16 to 45 per cent, meanwhile the proportion who believe we cannot afford to help refugees has decreased from 25 to 7 per cent (Norsk Monitor 2022, Hellevik / Hellevik 2017).

## ATTACK ON THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT?

For the trade union movement, the most direct expression of the political shift in 2014 came with an early attack on the country's workers' protection law. Contrary to all the promises that had been made to the voters from the conservative party, and despite a historically large mobilization from all the main union federations in Norway, the law was liberalized by the labour secretary from the Progress Party, Robert Eriksson. Employers were given a general access to hire people temporarily, and curbs on temporary work agencies were removed.

When the bill was proposed, it was met with a national, half-day general strike, involving approximately 1.5 million workers from all the main union confederations. Coordinated action like this is quite rare in Norway, where all other confederations insist on being apolitical and do not have formal ties to political parties or an explicit political platform. LO and the Labour Party still have a formal relationship, and the LO has an explicit democratic socialist platform. Some confederations are apolitical due to their narrow focus on their professions, while others are averse because they historically organized workers who are sceptical of the “red” LO. The coordinated action was made possible due to the severity of the attack. Although their protest did not have a direct impact on the legislative process, the Norwegian trade union movement concluded that the mobilization was important for the years that followed: The demonstration of strength helped to prevent new attacks, at least of the same severity.

In sheer membership numbers, LO the country’s largest union confederation. It has managed to hold its own through the eight years of conservative-liberal governments. In absolute numbers, the organization has even gained increased support, and is now approaching one million members. In relative terms, however, the tendency has long been one of slight decline, both in relation to other trade union federations, which mainly have highly educated and publicly employed members, and in relation to the country’s strong population growth, fuelled by labour immigration from the EU.

In 2008–2009, the degree of organization fell below 50 per cent for the first time in many decades. From a total figure of 57 per cent at the beginning of the 1990s, Norway has hovered around 50 percent since the turn of the millennium. There are, however, huge industry-specific differences. In the public sector, around 80 per cent of employees are organized, while the proportion in the private sector is 38 per cent (2017 figures). The level is lowest within accommodation and catering and sales and operation of real estate (18 per cent). A large part of this decline is linked to labour immigration to Norway.

## TIME FOR A NEW PEOPLE’S FRONT?

In a time of rising living costs, war in Europe, and a growing mistrust about whether politicians are able to do something about the issues that voters are most worried about, it is an open question how the balance of power between the political blocs will develop in the future. As Norway has largely been spared from the seri-

ous late effects of the debt crisis in 2008–2009, and has had a right-wing populist party that has been clearly committed to democratic and parliamentary rules and customs, the country has so far been spared from the worrying developments we see in many other countries. There, the battle is no longer just a battle against right-wing populism, but against a radicalized right-wing which is increasingly willing to curb democracy, or abandon it altogether.

In many of the increasingly fewer and weaker democracies, we should understand that the fight is no longer a fight against mere “populism”, but a fight to push back fascist forces on a right-wing populist track. Such a push back must take place through a combination of political confrontation, development of crisis programmes against unemployment and poverty, and a strong commitment to defending the rights of sexual, religious, ethnic, and other minorities. The challenge is beginning to resemble the one faced by the labour movement 100 years ago, when Benito Mussolini’s “managed democracy” in Italy developed into a fascist dictatorship after the defeat of the organized working class, and where the trade union movement, leftist parties, and democratically minded bourgeois parties spent many years — too many years, as it turned out — establishing an anti-fascist popular front in response.

I believe that establishing such democratic defence mechanisms was, and will continue to be, a process that must take place both from the bottom up and from the top down. The prerequisites for making it happen will vary from country to country, and much of it will naturally revolve around the ability of political parties to build coalitions and design a crisis policy that gains support from the voters. In this text, which takes as its starting point the role of the trade union movement, I will, however, primarily concentrate on what I believe is the main task for all trade unionists, at a time when identity politics from the right threatens to weaken the possibilities of creating a unity between workers from different countries and backgrounds.

This means I will focus on strict unionizing strategies, leaving out much of the labour movement’s broader struggle against antidemocratic right-wing forces. Before I do that, let me mention that many local unions and union federations are involved in antiracist and antifascist activities, ranging from courses and classes on Utøya (where 69 people, many of them kids, were murdered by a fascist terrorist in 2011), to blockades and demonstrations against far-right organizations such as “Stop the Islamization of Norway” (SIAN). While finishing this article, I participated in a successful blockade in the city of Bergen, where a public meeting set up by “anti-Islamists” in 2020 ended in a violent confrontation. Leaning on that ex-

perience, local unions managed to start a dialogue with the police, and in 2021 and 2022, were allowed to book the surrounding public space for a counter demonstration. Blocking the sight of the Quran burning and hate mongering speakers with union banners, maintaining public order with shop stewards dressed in yellow vests, and drowning the speeches with noise and slogans, the local city authorities and unions provided other trade unionists and antifascists with a model that could combine confrontational and peaceful tactics against provocateurs and preachers of hatred. Two days later, the success was followed up with a somewhat different strategy in the city of Haugesund, where a big outdoor concert was set up in a different part of the city, leaving the anti-Islamists to speak to a completely deserted town square.

Returning to the question of trade union strategies to create unity between workers from different countries and backgrounds, I will focus on a dimension of right-wing mobilization that is rarely mentioned when speaking about right-wing populism and extremism. Although the brunt of these forms for traditionalist and authoritarian identity politics is primarily aimed at sexual minorities, the women's movement, and immigrants from non-European countries, it has also drawn a great deal of strength from the competitive situation that has arisen in "borderless" labour markets. It has been formulated in the form of hatred and suspicion towards "the Polish plumber" (France), "Eastern Europeans" in general (Great Britain), or "Latinos" in the USA, to name just a few examples. Both "legal" and irregular migration has served as a basis for mobilization for many far-right parties, and made it possible for them to reach out to groups that are not primarily motivated by xenophobia or racism, but that have suffered economic incapacitation, and ended up in a working life they no longer experience as safe and good.

In the wake of Brexit and the election of Trump in 2016, even liberal and conservative commentators noted how close the connections were between skewed power relations and large economic differences in the labour market on the one hand, and the growth in right-wing political extremism on the other. In the US, the leading country in terms of the phenomenon of "working poor", and probably the western country where the danger of fascist mobilization is greatest today, wages' share of the GNP is at its lowest level since the Second World War. The American "median man" has not had a real wage increase for almost 50 years. Professor Ragnar Nymoen at the University of Oslo has pointed out that this development in purchasing power is not due to liberalized product markets or international trade, which much of the debate about globalization and its "losers" has been about, but is primarily due to the Americans' (lack of) system for labour market regulation.



As I see it, this raises at least two questions which we should try to find answers to. Partly because they are important to answer in themselves, but also because they can contain a partial answer to a much larger question; namely what is needed for us to be able to restore faith in democracy, push back fascism, and thereby also secure the future of a system based on democracy in the widest sense, both in society and at work.

- 1) What political regulations should trade unions demand and fight for, which can create greater unity between workers across national backgrounds, languages, and other differences?
- 2) What should the trade union movement itself do to create this unity?

## **“WORKERS IN ALL COUNTRIES, COMPETE WITH EACH OTHER!”?**

### A DANISH STORY (AND A SWEDISH PROVERB)

When I lived in Denmark in the early 2000s, I got to know the union activist and concrete worker Jakob Mathiassen. He has since written several reports for the Danish union federation 3F about the effort to organize foreign colleagues on the Metro City project in Copenhagen, where he worked construction work. A couple of years ago, he published the book *Dreams and dust. Why the labour movement must be global like globalization* (Mathiassen 2019). It opens with a story from a work place blockade he participated in in 2008, aimed at a Polish company on a construction site in central Copenhagen. It is a story that contains many of the trade union movement's strategic dilemmas in a nutshell, and that tells us a great deal about what is at stake.

The story started with the Polish main contractor Gitek refusing to sign a collective agreement with the Danish trade unions. Like many times before and since, the local unions responded by setting up a blockade against the building project, refusing to let labour power and materials enter the site. The company managed to carry on, however, as they had all the non-organized labour they needed and were able to smuggle in materials. In his book, Mathiassen describes the weeks that followed as “a siege, like a medieval army around a castle”. The financial crisis had hit the construction industry hard just weeks before, and there was high unemployment in the construction trades. The conflict was therefore no longer about abstract dimensions such as free movement or globalisation, but about who should be able to support their family by working in the country.

Mathiassen himself had a job as a concrete worker on another project, but he knew that it could have been him who was unemployed outside the gate. That is why he spent several days of his summer vacation on blockade duty together with his unemployed fellow workers. One day, as he was standing guard at one of the back entrances to the construction site, things were about to go wrong. Four Polish workers came out and prepared to bring in materials. The blockade guards had orders from the union to avoid physical confrontations, but they tried to put as much psychological pressure on the workers as possible. “We didn’t physically touch them, but we breathed in and slowly got closer and closer to them,” he writes. “It was clear that the Poles felt pressured, so at least that part of the plan worked out well”.

“I went closer to one of them, a middle-aged man. He looked like a family man, but the look in his eyes convinced me that he was a family man with his back against the wall. Just as I got very close to him, he pulled a hammer out of his jacket and showed it to me rather discreetly. We couldn’t talk about what that hammer was intended to be used for, but for me, the message was clear. He said, “I’m ready to use this!” and the adrenaline started flowing into the blood.”

Mathiassen got scared, and went to a box with empty bottles and filled up his pockets. He was joined by a couple of younger colleagues, and the older mason they were together with, struggled to calm the situation. The delivery of the materials never arrived, and the situation cooled down. But it was close.

“I have since thought about this situation many times”, writes Mathiassen in the book. “I was and am a socialist, and I did not perceive the Polish family man with the hammer as my enemy. I saw him as a colleague who had been forced to leave his family to find work. Yet on that day, we faced each other with weapons in our hands! How many times in the history of the world has this story played out? How many times have we faced each other with weapons, unable to talk together about the causes of our conflicts, our common enemies, our hopes for the future?”

## WHEN RIGHT-WING NATIONALISM HAS THE ANSWERS THAT WE LACK

In his book, Mathiassen points out how dangerous it is that right-wing nationalism increasingly responds to real challenges for many working people. This is something new, which the labour movement must take seriously. Right-wing na-

tionalism's programme of defending "one people, one culture, one nation" against threats from the outside, was for many decades aimed at the labour movement itself, which was portrayed as "internationalist", "Jewish", "cultural Marxist" or attacked with other racist conspiracy theories. The labour movement, with its traveling agitators, striking trade unions, its socialism, social democracy or Bolshevism; that was the right-wing nationalist's primary enemy. And they stood adamantly opposed to the working class' demands for higher wages and political rights.

The working class' support for these forces, with some local exceptions in countries such as Hungary, was correspondingly low. But since several globalization processes accelerated after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this has changed. More and more, what the right-wing nationalists perceive as a threat to "ordinary people", and what actually threatens the working class, actually corresponds. Mathiassen mentions three examples:

- Immigration: Although most working people are not very concerned with monoculturalism, they may experience pressure towards pay and working conditions, changed living environments, overall insecurity, and, in many places, they can link this, not without reason, to immigration.
- Supranational agreements: The labour movement has always seen it as an essential task to create peace, predictability, and stability, but many free trade agreements in recent decades have been more concerned with ensuring free flow of capital than establishing labour standards and free trade unions, even restricting the nation states' manoeuvring space to protect itself from the most destructive consequences.
- The right-wing nationalists have no qualms about putting national considerations before all other considerations, and can express an unreserved nationalist defence against the working classes of other countries. This can create a new political alliance, as we have witnessed in many countries in recent years.

Free mobility in Europe can be a seed for growth, prosperity, and solidarity across borders. But it requires political control and strong trade unions, so that there is also a fair mobility. As long as we don't have that, the slogan will not be "Workers in all countries, unite", but rather "Workers in all countries, compete with each other".

The trade unions' main task is precisely to overcome this competitive situation, and to turn competitors into colleagues and union comrades. The process of organizing workers is in its most basic form an attempt to make them agree on what the Swedish trade union movement calls the "trade union promise": "We promise and guarantee that we will never, under any circumstances, work under worse conditions or on lower wages than what we have now promised each other. We promise each other this in the deep understanding that if we all keep this promise the employer must meet our demands."

But as the cliché so wisely says: It's easier said than done. So, what do we do?

## NORWEGIAN EXPERIENCES, PAST AND PRESENT

I started working in the construction industry in Oslo as a painter's apprentice in the mid-1990s, and some years after completing my education, I was hired as a full-time organizer in my trade union, *Oslo Bygningsarbeiderforening*. My task there in the years between 2007 and 2012 was, together with colleagues from Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Bosnia, to organize colleagues who came to Oslo from Central and Eastern Europe. Eventually, the task expanded to organizing workers from the whole world, including from Ukraine, Russia, the Caucasus, Middle East, Latin America and Africa.

When the first Polish and Baltic migrant workers started arriving on our construction sites in 2004–2005, our union had a board resolution that said we should be a union not for Norwegian workers, but for workers in Norway. From day one, we tried to turn this slogan into something more than an empty resolution.

For the labour movement, the issue of free movement has been debated since its infancy. When a printer in Kristiania (the name of Oslo until 1924) dismissed his employees in 1873 and tried to import strikebreakers from Denmark, the newly established trade union — Norway's oldest surviving trade union — managed to prevent it by contacting organized Danish colleagues. On the basis of such experiences, the typographer and later Labour Party leader, Christian Holtermann Knudsen, stated twelve years later that "if this association of trade unions is to be able to achieve anything, it must break the narrow borders of nationality, it must become international". The labour movement was built up as an international organisation with national sub-divisions, and as it gained social power, its leaders often actively intervened to break down the nation-state boundaries.

Today's common European labour market was gradually shaped in the decades that followed the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Union in 1951. The Nordic countries' common labour market was in many ways a model for this development. However, it is important to emphasize that Nordic integration was conditioned by a Keynesian, planned economy approach to employment, education and re-education policies, a prerequisite that is completely lacking in today's common European labour market.

With the EU enlargements to the east in 2004 and 2007, Norway became part of a labour market 100 times the size of our own. Since then, Norway has become one of the European countries that has received most migrant workers from Eastern and Central Europe. According to the research report *Labour migration: What do we know about the consequences for Norwegian working life, society and the economy?* (Fafo report 2016: 2), this not only constitutes one of the largest migration flows to Norway ever; it has also “represented a supply-side shock in parts of Norwegian working life that lack a historical counterpart”.

In the report, researcher Jon Horgen Friberg points out that increased labour migration has changed the organisation and functioning of working life, in the form of increased flexibility and a strengthened negotiating position for employers. Labour migration has “influenced wages, productivity and skills development in the Norwegian labour market”, with uneven distribution of both costs and benefits for the various domestic employee groups. Immigrant workers are over-represented in the lower wage bracket, without any signs of “rapid economic assimilation”, and the long-term consequences of labour immigration for the economy and the welfare state are uncertain. Much of this is linked to a lack of language skills, a deregulated working life with zero percent contracts and temporary contracts, and weak incentives to organize.

Another report written by researchers from the same research institute, based on interviews with Polish labour immigrants to Norway, sums up the *laissez faire* attitude to this immigration well in the report's telling title: *The immigrants who had to fend for themselves* (Fafo report 2013: 31).

This despite the fact that the experiences from the first wave of immigration in the 1970s, with labour immigration from, among other places, Pakistan, were quite unambiguous. Many of those who came then were relegated to miserable and undignified living conditions, and many were exploited as cheap labour in industries with weak worker collectives, such as in the hotel and restaurant in-

dustry. After a few years of extremely hard work and poor living conditions, many ended up as permanently disabled people. The result was an early exit from the labour market.

## WHEN EXIT IS THE ONLY WAY

In today's common European labour market, it has become easier for employers to opt out of both the collective agreements with the trade union movement, and the obligations towards the individual employee, by which they were previously bound. The territorially defined, collective solutions that, among other things, characterized the Nordic working life and social model can be abandoned, without the company even having to leave the geographical territory. In an initial phase, such exit strategies can be chosen by those employers who wish to do so. If enough employers do it and over a long enough time, however, the "choice" appears increasingly like a forced situation: Those who do not choose a full or partial exit from such collective obligations, do not survive the competition.

For the trade union movement, the new reality also presents new challenges. As early as in the beginning of the 1970s, the social scientist Aud Korbøl undertook an extensive field study among Pakistani migrant workers. There she described a disinterested and mainly passive trade union movement. Combined with a changeable and unpredictable immigration policy — LO itself was in favour of an immigration freeze, which created many legal uncertainties — many migrant workers ended up living in constant uncertainty and fear.

In her thesis, Korbøl gives precise descriptions of the alienation and powerlessness many foreign workers felt. Korbøl also described many of the obstacles that had to be overcome in order to create a common level of understanding between Norwegian and "foreign" workers. One example was the gap she described between the collective and long-term interests that characterized the work of the traditional trade union movement, and the short-term, "personal and acute" ones that characterized (and continues to characterize) many immigrants' everyday lives (Korbøl 2018).

Korbøl also predicted issues few, if any, saw at the time, such as tendencies towards parallel societies and social control in immigrant communities. Drawing on the close and personal contact she had with many of her informants — she ended up being more or less a representative for many of the workers — she discussed

the tension between the two main strategies the immigrants had to choose between: Segregation (isolation and ostracism from the larger society, but also security in one's own identity and close community), and integration (participation in the larger society, but loss of one's own identity and alienation).

Many of these issues would resurface again when Norway became a recipient country for large groups of European migrant workers. The basis for this was laid when Norway became part of the common European market when it entered into the EEA Agreement in 1994. The EEA Agreement led to a strong concern on the part of the trade union movement that workers from low-income countries such as Spain and Portugal would put Norwegian working standards under pressure.

Ahead of the EEA Agreement's entry into force, LO made a draft of a law designed to protect and generalize the collective agreements' minimum provisions, and make it possible for the trade union movement to block employers who violated the agreements' provisions on, among other things, the minimum wage. The law was passed with a narrow majority in the parliament, and against the votes of the right-wing parties. The clearest criticism came from the Progress Party, which argued that such a law would destroy what was best about the entire EU project. One of the party's parliamentarians said that "if workers from other EEA countries [...] can help to push the cost level in Norway down by working for a slightly lower salary, I see it exclusively as an advantage".

Portuguese and Spanish workers never arrived to Norway in big numbers, and it was only with the EU's expansion to the east in 2004 that the law was put into use for the first time. There was a natural reason for this: In the first five years between 2004 and 2009, more than 150,000 work permits were granted to workers from the new EU countries. From having been a dormant law, the law on general application of collective agreements became an important tool, indeed *the most important tool* for protecting acquired rights, by granting migrant workers access to them. In the following years, there were constantly new demands by the LO for collective agreements that had to be made generally applicable. The petitions, which had to be documented, contained significant amounts of documentation on underpayment, discrimination, and indecent treatment of foreign workers. The brunt of this documentation was brought in with the help of the foreign workers themselves.

Generalization of the collective agreements became important for several reasons. The most important thing was that by raising the collective agreements' minimum wage to law, a common perception of what was the "wage floor" was ob-

tained; a “Swedish promise” could be made, even with non-organized workers. The reason was simple: Although some migrant workers were willing to work for lower wages, it surprisingly turned out that they were also willing to work for twice as much. And although many employers tried to continue the art of underpayment, many workers used the Norwegian trade unions to demand the wages we told them they were entitled to.

When we advocated making the agreements generally applicable, many unionists were afraid we would hand over hard-earned rights for free. It was therefore emphasized that we were not just in favour of generalization, but that we wanted “generalization + organization.” Consequently, huge resources were set aside for translations, production of information materials, free classes in Norwegian for new members, etc. In the Oslo Building Workers Union, the proportion of Polish members reached around 40 per cent after a few years, a figure that has remained stable over many years.

In this way, foreign and native workers have not only gained a common platform, or a common salary floor, but also very concrete experiences of standing in the same trade union. In union courses, workers from different backgrounds that had never spoken to each other in the meal breaks suddenly sat down as fellow workers around the same dinner table. I can hardly think of a better antidote to right-wing populist and, at worst, far-right fascist mobilization, than the images from these settings.

## SOCIAL DUMPING IS BEST FOUND BY THOSE WHO ARE EXPOSED TO IT

After EU integration between East and West began in 2004, many lessons have been learned the hard way about the difficulties that arise when workers from countries with low labour standards, low wages, and often a rather strong scepticism towards trade unions, collective agreements, and anything resembling collective solutions or social welfare, meet a social model such as the Norwegian or Nordic.

In 2017, the Working Environment Institute STAMI determined that foreign workers are one and a half times more likely to die from work accidents than Norwegians. The study concluded that the main explanations are that foreign workers do more dangerous jobs than Norwegians, have a shorter career with each em-



ployer, and less stable employment. In addition, there are challenges related to language, according to the Fafo report *Norwegian competence among workers born abroad* (Fafo report 2020:27) leads to “exclusion and marginalization”.

Many have also ended up with a very unstable and uncertain connection to Norwegian working life, and have been locked into a permanent shadow existence, where they rarely learn Norwegian, remain at the minimum wage level or below, and have constant uncertainty about whether they have a job to go to. Several studies have shown that temporary work agencies have been the most important recruitment route for many migrant workers, and analyses of register data show that temporary work agency jobs very rarely are a stepping stone to ordinary work.

Therefore, one of the most important political demands of the trade union movement in Norway in recent years has been to regulate, and preferably ban, the right to hire labour from temp agencies. At the time of writing, there is a proposed law which will, among other things, prohibit such letting within the construction industry in the area around Oslo, and regulate the industry very strictly in the rest of the country as well.

Both this requirement, and demands for, among other things, responsibility for wages in contractor chains, have been introduced after joint political mobilization by Norwegian and foreign-born workers. And there is still much to be done. A recent research report written by Johanne Stenseth Huseby at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), *Immigration and the Norwegian Labour Movement* (Huseby 2022), suggests, among other findings, that linguistic barriers continue to be an important explanation for lower union density among immigrant workers. Facilitating language training, more information for foreign workers about the trade union movement, and a greater commitment from the trade union movement to educate, agitate and organize migrant workers is needed.

## TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR ORGANIZING MIGRANT WORKERS

I have tried to summarize some of our own experiences in the following ten “commandments”, based on organizing work in the last decade. I conclude this article with them in the hope that they will inspire others to organize workers across national backgrounds — and thereby also beat right-wing populism and fascist forces back to where they belong — in the outer margins of civilized society.

- 1) They are not victims or strike-breakers, but potential union comrades.
- 2) You will not get anywhere without language and some knowledge about the culture.
- 3) Say welcome (and mean it!).
- 4) Do not start by asking and digging. Gain trust, then the information will come by itself.
- 5) Ask if they know what unions are, and explain the essentials.
- 6) We do not show up along with Labour Inspectors, tax officers, or the police. They do not show up the day after we have been visiting either.
- 7) Do not interpret scepticism as hostility, but as a natural and healthy defence mechanism.
- 8) We submit claims in agreement with the members, and talk things through until we have a common understanding, even if it takes time.
- 9) Many believe that unions are not for them, and have heard a lot negative things about us. So, do not think you can persuade them to join in five minutes.
- 10) Action speaks louder than words. Win victories, however small and insignificant at first.

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# COUNTRY STUDY PORTUGAL

Hermes Augusto Costa  
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This study offers a brief analysis of the relationship between trade unionism and far-right populism in Portugal, which is tenuous but has potential to grow. The authors argue that the origins of trade unionism and its historically consolidated democratic values (emancipation, solidarity, and legitimised collective representation) are the very antithesis of populism. In the Portuguese case, i. e., in a context marked by a labour relations system dominated by traditional union structures, such as the *Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses* (CGTP; General Confederation of the Portuguese Workers) and the *União Geral de Trabalhadores* (UGT; General Union of Workers) that were first established in the 1970s during the period of democratic transition. The populist “calls” are relatively recent and have to do with the way in which the party composition of the country’s parliament was reshaped after 2019. We are thus witnessing a “populist agenda”, seemingly imposed from the outside in a far-right partisan logic targeting the very heart of the trade union movement, whose aims are obvious but also murky and perilous.

## INTRODUCTION

In order to analyse populism’s “intrusion” into trade unionism, we first look at the latter’s historical legacy and its noblest missions. Ultimately, however, to invoke that heroic past is to be faced with the multiple signs of the crisis affecting trade unionism, notably in Europe (the cradle of trade unionism), where that crisis has been felt for several decades. In our view, the populist projects have emerged in part as a reaction to manifestations of the trade union crisis, often with the aim of serving as a political alternative.

Similarly, the perception of the problems currently affecting trade unionism cannot be dissociated from a reassessment of trade union power resources. The intensity and the timing of those populist forays is largely determined by the strength or weakness of the resources available.

In the third part of our text we offer a brief characterisation of the Portuguese labour relations system and a description of the key trade union actors. Actors in the Portuguese labour relations system are historically on the side of working-class values and committed to a left-wing agenda.

The advent of the political party *Chega* (CH; Enough!) is the latest instance of a populist notion taking root on Portuguese soil. It is addressed in section four,

where the party's ideological tenets are briefly presented and a description of the connections between *Chega* and *Movimento Zero* (Movement Zero), an emerging inorganic movement that has made a few public appearances, especially during demonstrations organised by police and other security forces. *Movimento Zero* is, in fact, a virtually “faceless” phenomenon, without a clear voice or a spokesperson one might consider a legitimate interlocutor.

The fifth part deals with a recent sociological fact in the Portuguese context: The public announcement (in August 2022) of the establishment of a union (*Solidariedade*; Solidarity), that shares *Chega*'s ideological identity and owes its inspiration both to the Polish phenomenon spearheaded by Lech Wałęsa four decades ago and, more recently, to Spain's *Vox* party.

By way of conclusion, we list a number of challenges and obstacles that far right trade unionism is inevitably bound to be faced with and proceed to make a few comments and recommendations regarding trade union action.

## HISTORICAL LEGACY

In order to analyse the sociological relevance of trade unionism, it is imperative that we travel back to the past and look at its origins. The struggles waged by workers and trade unions since the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century played a crucial role in terms of achieving decent living and working conditions and shaping the identity of the modern working class as a social class. The 20<sup>th</sup> century proved the importance of trade unionism for the emancipation of the working class, notably in the area of labour rights (and in Europe in particular). Progress in this area was indeed impressive, a telling example of which was the eight-hour day (which, not coincidentally, was also the theme of the first convention of the International Labour Organization in 1919).

By the same token, the welfare state and the entire body of legislation underlying labour law, especially in the period between the post-war and the 1980s, helped guarantee stability and security with regard to wages, working hours and working conditions. In Portugal, the process had largely to wait until after the 25 April 1974, and took place during the transition from almost 50 years of right-wing dictatorship to a democratic system. During the 1970s, the two main trade union organisations gained increasing relevance. These unions are CGTP, which stands for a class-based, mass-based trade unionism, and UGT, which advocates for so-

cial dialogue and is committed to the process of European integration. These two unions continue to be relevant today. In partisan terms, CGTP was closer to the *Partido Comunista Português* (PCP; Portuguese Communist Party), whereas UGT had links to the *Partido Socialista* (PS; Socialist Party) and *Partido Social Democrata* (PSD; Social Democratic Party).

Alongside this return to a relatively distant (and promising) past, there is the history of the last four decades of European trade unionism, along a path that has led to vulnerabilities and to a pessimistic present marked by a crisis – indeed, a number of crises – that are gaining ground both in terms of discourse and social practices. On the one hand, a number of “external” circumstances (especially visible on an international scale since the end of Fordism), such as the affirmation of neoliberal globalisation and the growing financialisation of the economy, have greatly deepened the commodification of labour and caused trade unionism to become increasingly fragile, notably in peripheral contexts. Coupled with austerity, the crises that afflicted Europe have unleashed processes of “precariousness-inducing exclusion” that have been particularly harsh in the peripheral countries of Southern Europe (Costa et al. 2020). As far as Portugal is concerned, the economic and social crisis brought about by the Troika’s intervention following the country’s 2011 bailout request and the adoption (mainly by the 19<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Government) of austerity measures at the domestic level made the vulnerabilities of trade unions even more blatant (Silva / Estanque / Costa 2020).

On the other hand, the crisis affecting trade unions was also highlighted by “domestic” factors, such as the difficulties inherent in bringing together shared interests and building collective identities, the poor effectiveness of trade union action, insufficient cadre rejuvenation, the small number of women in leadership positions, limited receptivity to non-union related topics and structures, and more. As Jelle Visser (2019) also pointed out, among some of the structural concerns driving the internal logic of union action is the ongoing decline in unionisation (the number of new members has remained low), persistent polarisation (public versus private sector, stability versus precariousness), and the need to “reach out” to other organisations of worker representation. While there may be a predisposition among trade unions to adopt best practices in order to defend workers in distinctly precarious situations, there is also evidence that unions are increasingly losing the ability to defend a cohesive collective identity. This is especially the case as we witness increasing atomisation among workers, alongside calls for a broader view of union representation (Rego / Costa 2022).

## TRADE UNION POWER RESOURCES PUT TO THE TEST

Structurally, the power of trade unionism manifests itself in the specific position occupied in the labour market (as measured in terms of qualifications, for example), and in its bargaining capacity within the labour market (measured, say, by the capacity to autonomously influence working conditions). In recent years, mainly as a result of the pandemic, the bargaining capacity of workers in the context of work has been greatly diminished. This has mainly been due to the dramatic rise of unemployment and threats of collective dismissals in temporary work agencies and in sectors such as hospitality and tourism.

Trade unionism's organisational power is best measured by the number of registered workers. Union membership (through payment of membership dues) and membership rates (the ratio of unionised workers to total unionisable workers) are key indicators in terms of assessing representativeness and perceiving the viability and effectiveness of collective bargaining, social dialogue, and the degree of participation in collective labour relations (Sousa 2011; Costa / Rego 2021). Contemporary individualism (which the confinement has only enhanced), the climate of economic uncertainty (enhanced by the war in Ukraine), and the "new" modes of labour brought by the digital age (with its revival of teleworking) tend to make unions' associative power weaker.

As for trade unionism's institutional power, it helps establish compromises with an impact on the passing of legislation. Labour legislation not only plays an important role, but also encapsulates the outcome of processes of both conflict and negotiation. In fact, two complementary and equally important paths are involved here: The first is important because it seeks to legitimise discontent expressed through properly regulated forms of protest; the second, because, for example, it highlights the position of trade unionism vis-à-vis collective bargaining.

The fourth form of power recurrently mentioned in the literature (Lehndorff et al. 2017) is societal power. Societal power is comprised of two primary components; a cooperative dimension (building networks and coalitions with other civil society organisations sharing the same problems) and a discursive dimension capable of influencing public discourse and speaking to the heart of society, thereby paving the way for the adoption of innovative trade union strategies (with the potential of increasing other forms of power, such as organisational power).



The difficulties inherent in implementing these forms of power, whether separately or all at once, are one of the reasons for the proliferation of populist projects within the trade union movement. The populists are positioning themselves as a radical alternative to trade unions and taking advantage of the ways in which traditional trade unionism is failing to enforce those forms of power.

## THE LABOUR RELATIONS SYSTEM AND THE STRUCTURE OF TRADE UNIONISM

Portugal's system of labour relations is characterised by the following specific aspects: Both internally and among themselves, the relations between capital and labour organisations follow a pluralistic, competitive and fragmented model; the processes for negotiating working conditions tend to be highly politicised; trade unions have ties to the party system; the state plays a central role in the relationship between capital and labour; and, there is a persistent blockage of collective bargaining. In addition, the employment system is characterised by low productivity, low wages, a correlation between employment and intensive labour, low levels of education, skills, and qualifications, poor-quality employment, and a widespread presence of various non-standard forms of employment such as “green receipts” (bogus self-employment), fixed-term contracts, temporary and part-time work, and work in the informal economy, for example.

Since the end of the 1970s, the trade union field has been dominated by a “top-down polarisation” between the two trade union confederations, CGTP and UGT. First, the CGTP was originally an underground organisation when it was first established back in 1970, when Portugal was still living under a dictatorship. When it came on the scene, the CGTP defined itself as a “class-based, unitary, democratic, independent, mass trade union organisation” (CGTP 2020), whose roots and principles lay in the organisational and fighting traditions of Portugal's working class and Portuguese workers in general. To paraphrase Richard Hyman (2001), CGTP stands for a *class-based* type of trade unionism that draws its strength from anti-capitalist mobilisation and the class struggle. This means that, as a trade union, it is historically made up of blue-collar workers with low educational qualifications. However, in recent years it has strengthened its presence in the public service; as a consequence, the number of union members with higher education has increased.

The UGT was established in 1978 in response to the hegemony held by the (pro-Communist) CGTP within Portuguese society. It was mostly comprised of

office workers' unions and unions from the banking and insurance sectors, and from the outset it had the support of the PS and the PSD at the national level, trade union confederations in Central Europe and Scandinavia, as well as Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Eisfeld 1983). Positioning itself as the political and ideological rival of the CGTP, the UGT was built and grew around a coalition of service trade unions and white-collar workers. To use Hyman's typology once again, one could say that UGT represents a society type of unionism, first and foremost because its member unions are basically in favour of social integration and the promotion of social dialogue (2001).

According to Estanque, Costa and Silva (2015), the influence of the PCP with its counterpower strategy on the CGTP has exacerbated the protest dimension, while the influence of the PS and PSD on the UGT has pulled it toward a negotiation-based kind of trade unionism. The two opposing stances, a protest-based unionism, which often fails to produce palpable results and a negotiation-based unionism that often confuses participation with submission to management criteria, have ultimately converged in creating a void where defensive unionism prospered. This has led to a gradual tendency toward de-unionisation.

## THE CHEGA PHENOMENON AND MOVIMENTO ZERO

In the Portuguese context, the origins of contemporary far-right populism can be traced to the political party *Chega*. Formally created in April 2019, *Chega* is a radical right-wing party that mixes nationalism and conservatism with an appreciation for laissez-faire economics. As is frequently the case with radical parties, *Chega*'s message is often indistinguishable from that of its leaders. In this case, extensive media coverage of André Ventura, the party's leader, began when he was still a member of the Social Democratic Party, Portugal's second largest party and the spearhead of a parliamentary coalition that ruled the country from 2011 to 2015, the period of the Troika's intervention (2011–2014). Ventura began to use the media to accuse the Roma communities of living on welfare and leading idle lives during this time period.

Although Ventura had already run in the European Parliament elections of May 2019 as a candidate of the *Basta!* (Enough!) coalition. The first true shock came in October of the same year, when he won a seat in the elections for the Portuguese Parliament. The election was all the more striking at the time because of its un-

precedented nature in the country's parliamentary context and of the candidate's high profile. A new shock happened in 2022 elections, when *Chega* succeeded in winning 12 from a total of 230 seats in the national parliament, becoming the third most representative political party. According to final results from the national election agency, *Chega* grew from 1.4 per cent to 7.4 per cent of the vote, which means that 399,659 people voted for the party in the 2022 elections. On February 1, 2022, the main trade union confederation, CGTP, made no direct reference to *Chega*. In its public position on the election results, CGTP called for a "fight intensification", saying that "still at the electoral level, the increase in the vote for the most reactionary and far-right forces stands out, which must be fought with a new policy that responds to the needs and concerns of the workers, rejecting populism and individualism". Similarly, on 18 February 2022, in a meeting of its union members, CGTP made no reference to *Chega*, with the exception of the note that "the results of the elections confirm the rejection of the projects of increased exploitation and destruction of public services and social functions of the state of the parties more to the right, while at the same time there have been changes in their expression." UGT, on the other side, also opted to stress the Socialist Party's win and made no reference to the right-wing forces in the Executive Press Release dated January 31, 2022. An exit poll from Pitagórica shows that *Chega* voters are mostly young men with a high school degree (Cancela / Magalhães 2022).

*Chega*'s first links with Europe's far-right political family came as early as September 2019 when it signed a protocol with the *Vox* party in neighbouring Spain, pledging to fight socialism and communist-inspired totalitarian regimes. This international ideological alignment (formally concluded in July 2020, with *Chega* joining the far-right association Identity and Democracy) is in line with a xenophobic rhetoric that calls on the state to stop unchecked immigration and advocates the introduction of immigrant quotas. Opposition to feminism and so-called gender ideology and LGBT movements, combined with a defence of family values, are some of *Chega*'s other watchwords.

Although *Chega*'s pronouncements have not been known to attach much importance to the world of work, one month into his election to the Portuguese Parliament, André Ventura sought to capitalise on the topic by participating in a police demonstration held in November 2019. In this particular event organised by police forces in the early days of the Socialist government (the PS had taken office in October), the main demands made by the police unions involved included the following: Wage increases, as there had been pay raises neither for *Polícia de Segu-*

*rança Pública* (PSP; Public Security Police, Portugal's urban police force) nor for the members of *Guarda Nacional Republicana* (GNR; National Republican Guard, Portugal's rural and traffic police force) since the Troika-era; update of wage supplements; a risk bonus; and the assurance of more and better personal protection for the security forces.

Members of *Movimento Zero* walked alongside police trade unionists demonstrating on the streets on November 2019, their representatives clearly identified by their distinctive t-shirts. The movement had been created on Facebook in May 2019, following the conviction of PSP officers from the Alfragide police station (near Amadora in the greater Lisbon area) for assaulting a group of young people from Cova da Moura (one of the largest and oldest neighbourhoods in the Lisbon metropolitan area where there are large concentrations of immigrants). *Movimento Zero* portrayed itself as “an informal protest movement that aims to defend the interests of PSP and GNR professionals and their pride in serving in the police forces” (Rego et al. 2021: 130).

In March 2021, the non-institutional movement had as many as around 60,000 followers; at this time *Movimento Zero* showed little interest in talking to the supervising ministry. Nevertheless, from early on it gave signs of being close to *Chega*. This proximity, attested to by the inclusion of members of *Movimento Zero* on *Chega*'s lists of candidates, was read as a criticism of traditional trade unionism for its inability to give voice to the abovementioned police demands and for the fact that, in a context of union fragmentation (only partially remedied by Law 49/2019), the absence of effective negotiation processes between the trade unions and the supervising ministry considerably diminished the possibilities of improving the working conditions of these professionals. Rather than viewing *Movimento Zero* as an allied force, the police trade unions (and, in particular, the more established ones) tended to have a very critical view of the dynamics of *Movimento Zero*: “It is more like a movement against the unions than anything else”; “*Movimento Zero* is policemen, and the only reason it has emerged is because we have reached this point where the unions themselves lack the tools to make the Government back down in a number of issues or fail to respond to a number of problems” (statements by members of police trade unions, Rego et al. 2021: 131).

In the aftermath of the demonstration in November 2019, and probably out of the fears caused by the emergence of *Movimento Zero*, the Ministry of Home Affairs seemed concerned enough to go back to holding regular meetings with the trade

union associations that “represent the interests of workers, both legally and formally” (Rego et al. 2021: 131). Nevertheless, the logic of *Movimento Zero* continued to be aligned with *Chega*, a party that has been a vigorous defender of a strengthened authority of the country’s police forces, including prison sentences of two to five years for filming or photographing the security forces.

In June 2021, the *Movimento Zero* organised a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Home Affairs to demand the resignation of Minister Eduardo Cabrita. The demonstration, which was to include a concentration in front of the Portuguese Parliament, ended up spilling outside the limits initially agreed upon with the authorities, creating traffic chaos and causing PSP itself to take the case to the Prosecutor General’s Office. It is true that socio-professional dissatisfaction was the stated reason for the protests, hence its addressing some of the concerns voiced by the main police trade unions such as better wages or the attribution of a risk bonus to all members of the police force. However, in practice the protests gave way to negationist chants and calls for civil disobedience, all this right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the leader of the largest police trade union association the *Associação Sindical dos Profissionais da Polícia* (ASPP; Trade Union Association of Police Professionals) put it at the time, it was all about “exploring the dissatisfaction of police officers for political purposes (...) because there is a sector of Portuguese politics that is taking advantage of the present situation, of this dissatisfaction, which I have no doubt is the case here” (Santos, 2021). He also expressed his fear that the movement might become more dangerous. In fact, the leaders of other police unions, such as the *Sindicato dos Profissionais de Polícia* (SPP; Trade Union of Police Professionals) and the *Associação Profissional da Guarda* (APG-GNR; Professional Association of the Guard) also chose not to be officially represented at the demonstration, “to avoid giving a voice to inorganic or faceless movements” (Neto, 2021).

In August 2022, *Movimento Zero* announced its own dissolution while simultaneously accusing some trade unions of supporting the demonstrations of the police forces for no other reason than allegedly seeing the protests as an opportunity to promote themselves by latching onto the movement’s success in the media. This is illustrated by the following excerpt from a press release: “despite our commitment, the Movement has failed to attract the PSP and GNR professionals and therefore is forced to end” all its “operational activity and protest actions, so that it will now continue only and exclusively for purposes of dissemination and solidarity through the *Associação Núcleo de Amigos do Movimento Zero* (Association of the Core Friends of Movement Zero); “the end of MO was brought

about by all those who attacked it, ignored it and kept undermining it” (excerpts from a statement by Franco 2022).

## ESTABLISHING A FAR-RIGHT TRADE UNION?

It seems no coincidence that the dissolution of *Movimento Zero* in August 2022 coincided with *Chega*’s efforts to create its own trade union structure. *Chega*’s intentions in this regard gained traction when the party won 12 seats in the Portuguese Parliament in the January 2022 elections. With this result, *Chega* became the third political force in the country, a position previously held by consolidated left-wing parties like *Bloco de Esquerda* (BE; Left Bloc) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP).

The proposal to create a trade union (or a federation of unions) was publicly announced in mid-August 2022, and the name *Solidariedade* (Solidarity) was suggested on October 17, 2022. Hardly an original name, it takes its inspiration from the party’s international identity as a member of the Identity and Democracy political group and replicates the situation in Spain with the far-right party *Vox* and its “social arm” *Solidaridad*, created in 2020. More important, however, is the trade unionist dimension, namely the fact that the brand identity is drawn from (and actually a copy of) Lech Wałęsa’s *Solidarność*, the trade union that fought communism in Poland the early 1980s.

Making the police and security forces the main focus of its future trade union can be read as *Chega*’s way of institutionalising *Movimento Zero* in the framework of a trade union structure rather than maintaining it as an informal movement. Other likely targets for its proposed trade union are senior officials in public administration, teachers, and health professionals. Whatever the professional sector, however, the political objective set by *Chega*’s leader is very clear: To represent those workers who do not identify with the left-wing union confederations, CGTP and UGT, which they view as being “linked to the Communist Party, the Left Bloc, and the Socialist Party” in order to create the conditions for “taking social protests to the streets” (excerpts from a statement by Santos 2022).

The creation of a trade union organisation backed by political parties is not unprecedented (the creation of UGT in the late 1970s was also political to the extent that it was a response to the Portuguese Communist Party’s growing hegemony within CGTP, which to this day continues to be accused of being instrumentalized by PCP). Now, however, we are faced with an especially conspicuous phenome-

non, because of its high profile and the fact that it has a “top-down” (i. e., party-induced) logic as opposed to a “bottom-up” logic. In other words, it is not rooted in society, in organised social movements, or in more established and reasoned forms of organisation.

There are a few potential obstacles to the establishment of a Portuguese *Solidariedade*. One of them has to do with the fact that, in addition to the aforementioned lack of originality, given that it is a replica of the trade union model used by Spain’s *Vox*, the project in question is not unanimous and is not based on a broad consensus. Indeed, from the start, the notion that *Chega* might be compatible with a “trade union dimension” has always been viewed defensively rather than with enthusiasm. In the words of a former vice-president of *Chega* and one of its founders, who is also the president of *Sindicato do Pessoal Técnico da PSP* (SPT/PT; Union of PSP Technical Staff), the creation of a trade union federation “is pure posturing to make newspaper headlines”, “will be a total failure”, and “will be over even before it begins, because no trade union will ever join it”, because “it is not being taken seriously by the members of the police force” (excerpts from a statement by Santos 2022).

Furthermore, under existing laws, police trade unions has to have members, and so the mere creation of an artificial structure will not be enough. The measure of representativeness has been altered by Law 49/2019. Under the terms of the new law, right to compensation of union-related work (hours paid) requires that at least 10 per cent of the members of the police force be unionised. In addition, for each union delegate there must exist at least 10 unionised members in the workplace. By the same token, participation in negotiations with the supervising ministry is predicated on the existence of trade unions representing at least 20 per cent of the total number of workers or of trade unions representing a single category of workers, as long as their members total at least 5 per cent of the members of the category in question.

In addition to the required “evidence” of *de jure* and *de facto* representativeness – which in any event would have to vie with the structures of more established trade unions – it would still be necessary to set in motion an active effort aimed at dismantling the well-oiled machine of trade unionism with its historical commitment to working class values as embodied in historical struggles whose culmination was the consolidation of labour law as the guarantor of labour protection. As we’ve pointed out at the outset, traditional trade unionism is not (and could never be) above criticism, but any trade union strategy that is excessively dependent on party directives would be doomed to failure especially if it is bound to breed more disunity than solidary-driven integration.



## TO CONCLUDE: A FEW RECOMMENDATIONS

Trade unionism and anti-democratic values are just not compatible. It is ironic that the trade union proposed by *Chega* is called “Solidarity” while assuming, in line with what is advocated by the party, an anti-systemic stance. The fact is that, if it affirms itself for what it stands against, for what it rejects or excludes, and not so much for what it stands for in a constructive manner, it will certainly run a serious risk of moving away from the original spirit of trade unionism.

As recently as 8 November 2022, judgement no. 751/2022 of the Constitutional Court (Acórdão nº 751, 2022) found that *Chega*’s statutes, approved in the party’s congress held in November 2021, are unconstitutional. According to the judgment, § 15, not only was there “a significant concentration of powers in the hands of the party’s president”, but there was also a “pronounced increase in the complexity of the party’s internal organisation, which poses problems in terms of articulation and transparency”. In the same paragraph, the court also condemned what it described as “the extension of the prohibition to join associations and bodies directly or indirectly associated with another party or otherwise subordinated to it”, for it could prevent the members of *Chega* from joining not only trade unions linked to other parties, but also other types of associations. Such questions of constitutionality cast uncertainty on the party’s objectives with regard to the trade union movement.

Trade unionism — a “training school”, “sword of justice”, and a vehicle for emancipation and social integration — has been faced with multiple crises. In order to address these challenges, it needs to reinvent itself and respond vigorously to any populist attacks that have the potential to limit its actions in democratic contexts. In addition to assuming a reactive posture to such attacks, trade unionism will also have to be proactive. The fact that trade unions refuse to make alliances with obscure forces or even with trade unions directly emanating from political parties does not mean trade unionism should refrain from seeking to build bridges between union structures of the same professional sector and with union organisations belonging to other sectors, be it through acts of solidarity or by promoting reciprocity mechanisms.

If trade unionism is to have a future, a whole new strategy for attracting members is required. In any event, trade unionism will fail to expand its associative power if fragmentation triumphs over trade union pluralism, particularly if the trade unions now existing in a number of sectors (such as the police forces, here under analysis) are joined by other trade unions derived from failed inorganic movements or from political moves masterminded by party leaders.



Whether driven by the values of conflict or by those of negotiation, trade unionism's institutional power needs to be grounded in organisational forms whose legitimacy in terms of representation is beyond question and within the confines of the law. In the Portuguese context, the unions that claim to represent the police force cannot negotiate with the relevant supervising ministry if it does not meet the legal threshold for legitimate representation.

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# COUNTRY STUDY SLOVENIA

Matej Klarič



## A DEFINITION OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Populism is usually associated with the rise to power of right-wing and far-right movements in the West, although the term was originally introduced into political science to refer to left-wing political movements (including the People's Party) that campaigned for more rights for peasants and workers in the United States of America (USA) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the end of the Second World War, the term spread from the USA to other parts of the world; arriving first in Latin America, where it was used as a label for the style of government of Juan Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (Šalaj 2018).

Šalaj (2018) traces the origins of today's meaning back to the 1950s. At the time, Edward A. Shills defined populism as "the existence of populace dissatisfaction with the current social order imposed by the ruling class, whereby people believe that this ruling class has a monopoly on power, property, and culture." The most influential contemporary definition of populism, as described by Szalay, comes from the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, who defined populism as "an ideology that divides society into two opposing groups, the common people and a corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the will of the people" (Šalaj 2018). A similar definition had been proposed somewhat earlier by Torcuato Di Tella (1995), who believed that populism could be defined as "a political movement that emphasises 'the interests, culture and spontaneous feelings of ordinary people against those of the privileged elite'." The central idea of populism is that society is divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: The honest people and the corrupt elite.

## THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LEFT-WING AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Šalaj (2018) distinguishes between left-wing and right-wing populism. If the elites are predominantly liberal, populism will be reactionary, as has been the case mainly in Europe over the last two decades. If, on the other hand, the dominant elites are mainly conservative, populism — as illustrated by the cases of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador — will be based on left-wing political values, such as defending the interests of workers against those of rich capitalists. However, it is important to note a crucial distinction between the two populisms. Left-wing ideology sees the problems primarily at the level of the system and wants to change it to the benefit of all people. Right-wing populism, i. e., the far right, focuses on particularised

threats, “dangerous others”, often promising that their elimination will be sufficient to fix the problems (thus shifting the blame onto immigrants, ethnic minorities, the influence of foreign capital, etc.). It, therefore, does not want to change the system fundamentally.

## THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RIGHT-WING AND FAR-RIGHT POPULISM

Another division is worth noting. Richard Stöss (2017) distinguishes between right-wing populism and far-right extremism. In analysing institutionalised right-wing extremism, we need to distinguish between moderate right-wing extremism and orthodox right-wing extremism. The former seeks to assert its demands within the existing political order and distances itself (though often just verbally or half-heartedly) from historical fascism. The latter openly acknowledges its hostility to the political system, tolerates or supports violent behaviour, and cites historical precedents in support of its own programme.

## THE CAUSES OF THE RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT

It is important to add, however, that the rise of populisms is facilitated by social discontent, which is a direct consequence of the deterioration of people’s (financial and social) situation. In Europe, right-wing populisms have most markedly been on the rise after 2008 and the crisis of capitalism. In the aftermath of the crisis, austerity measures have made people’s situation much worse and increased their discontent. In this context, it is particularly interesting to look at the past and the policies implemented by German Chancellor Heinrich Brüning. These were policies of austerity, balanced budgets, public sector redundancies, wage cuts, etc. These policies were, therefore, almost identical to the neoliberal policies that were introduced widely after the 2008 crisis and are described in the founding documents of the EU.

It was Adolf Hitler who was elected to succeed Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, taking his far-right party from 2.6 per cent of the vote before the crisis to 43.3 per cent in the post-crisis year of 1933. A similar rise of far-right ideas has taken place in the last decade or so in the West because of similar economic policies.

The events that led to the nationalist wars in former Yugoslavia are completely overlooked today. Once again, the rise of far-right nationalist ideas, which culmi-

nated in war, was brought about by austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Like most peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, Yugoslavia fell into the trap of 'cheap' credit after the oil crisis of the early 1970s. Lowinger (2009) stresses the role of the IMF in the deterioration of the economic situation, as it started to impose 'austerity' measures on Yugoslavia as early as the late 1970s. Between 1979 and 1988, the country entered into no less than six standby loans with the IMF, as it needed an inflow of foreign capital. According to Lowinger, the rise of nationalisms was thus a consequence of these policies, which enabled the breakup of Yugoslavia and the bloody war. Wolff (2014) writes that the IMF created a particularly negative era in Yugoslavia by extensively contributing to increasing poverty in the country. The growing dissatisfaction of the population, a result of the exacerbated economic situation (inflation, deepening debt crisis, etc.), resulted in the accelerated political and economic disintegration of the Yugoslav federation (Popović 1996).

## A SHORT HISTORY OF SLOVENIAN INDEPENDENCE

Slovenia's post-independence story was unique and differed from the transition processes of other post-socialist countries, which more or less zealously followed the radical neoliberal shock doctrine. Unlike some other countries of former Yugoslavia, Slovenia avoided a prolonged war. After 1991, it developed in a concentrated period, following a pattern that was prevalent after the end of the Second World War. From 1991 to 2004, Slovenia, like Europe in the post-World War II period and until the 1970s, developed in line with a neo-corporatist model (Klarič 2021). Unlike other post-socialist countries, it was pressured to do so mainly by strong trade unions, the legacy of socialism, and a proportional electoral system that forced political parties to take account of broader social interests and to work together to form government coalitions. The legacy of socialism also left strong trade unions with numerous members, which, by means of protests, made it easier to force the government to consider their interests. After all, at first the post-independence governments also wanted to introduce radical neoliberal reforms in Slovenia. Since this was not possible, policy-making, as in Europe under post-war Keynesianism, was based on tripartite negotiations between trade unions, the government, and employers. Policies were based on advocating for full employment and wage growth, for instance. Slovenia achieved enviable results during this period, described by some as a success story, mainly due to positive economic indicators. For most of this time, the left-liberal *Liberalna demokracija Slovenije* (LDS; Liberal Democracy of Slovenia) was the largest party in government.

When Slovenia joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, the existing development model came to an end. The centre-right won the elections later that year and the government's policies took a turn towards a more radical neo-liberal doctrine. The turnaround was similar to what had already taken place in the West at the end of the 1970s, only the reasons for the change were somewhat different. The state lost some of its macroeconomic levers in the fiscal and monetary domain (customs duties, the possibility of autonomously controlling the amount of money in circulation, and, in particular, its mechanism for devaluing its own currency). These currency devaluation mechanisms had previously allowed Slovenia to pursue autonomous Keynesian policies.

Slovenia was forced to abandon these policies mainly because of the structural changes mentioned above, which were a consequence of joining the EU and following its neoliberal rules prescribed by EU documents. In doing so, Slovenia lost a part of its (economic) sovereignty, even though that had been one of the main reasons for gaining independence. The trade unions (once again), with massive protests in November 2005, prevented the radical implementation of neoliberal reforms that would have been imposed by the right-wing government coalition led by the *Slovenska demokratska stranka* (SDS; Slovenian Democratic Party) and Prime Minister Janez Janša. The party came to power after many years of LDS rule. The SDS was economically neoliberal at the time, but at the time policies were less extreme in other areas than they were in later years.

During this time, after joining the euro area and in the absence of measures to prevent the economy from overheating and excessive borrowing from abroad, there was an enormous increase in external debt. In fact, the country's gross external debt doubled in the four years that followed. Public debt increased simultaneously, thanks to ill-advised reforms that lowered the corporate tax rate and tax rates for on the richest. When the crisis hit in 2008, those in power, just like experts and politicians in the West, were unaware of its scale and its long-term (structural) nature. The unpreparedness for the crisis was reflected in the policies pursued by Slovenian governments after 2008. Following the electoral defeat at the end of 2008, the government of Borut Pahor, who led the *Socialni demokrati* (SD; Social Democrats), succeeded Janša's government. This coalition, even though the SD party was in charge, also followed neoliberal policies, which, at the time, were based on 'austerity' measures and were directed mainly against the poorest segments of society. Due to slow and inadequate action, which led to a decrease in demand, economic growth was also lower. At the height of the crisis, Slovenia changed governments a total of three



times; new faces with new parties and (unrealised) promises to pursue different policies won the early elections following the rule of the Pahor government. Dissatisfaction with politics had been high due to rising unemployment, poverty, as well as cuts to pensions, wages, and other benefits. However, various governments still pursued (more or less) radical neoliberal policies, imposed by international (and especially European) institutions in the face of ever more expensive borrowing. The space for alternative policies was thus even more limited than the years directly after Slovenia joined the euro area. The crisis only started to subside at the end of 2014. Since then, Slovenia has recorded one of the highest growth rates in the EU, but this benefited mainly the wealthiest few, as inequality has risen further. In 2014, a political newcomer, Miro Cerar, won the elections with his Miro Cerar Party, later renamed *Stranka modernega centra* (SMC; Modern Centre Party) as an anti-pode to the SDS party, which had been accused of rampant corruption.

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PARTNERS AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL DIALOGUE

As mentioned above, during the 1990s, unstable, centre-left coalition governments systematically prevailed. These governments were open to trade union demands. On the other hand, they were also strongly determined by the ongoing process of accommodation to EU rules and demands. High inflation, which first fell below 10 per cent in 1995 – having previously risen to three and then two digits (Silva-Jáuregui 2004) – was a problem that had to be dealt with during the accession process. Accordingly, reducing inflation was a permanent priority of Slovenian governments. This focus implied systematic wage moderation, which was not possible without sustained cooperation with social partners. Accordingly, the resulting policies were strongly focused on job protection, sustaining a low unemployment rate, and a gradual lowering of relatively high inflation.

It seems that the constellations associating strong unions and employers' organisations, combined with the unstable centre-left coalition governments, almost spontaneously generated the 'neo-corporatist' compromise. Institutionalisation of the neo-corporative system was concluded in 1994 when the Economic and Social Council (ESS), the most important institution for social dialogue, was formed. The ESS basically resulted from the political exchange between the first centre-left government and trade unions. Faced with the problem of high inflation, the government intended to use wage moderation, but was aware that it would not be able to manage it without the unions' support.

The establishment of the ESS was, in some respects, the ‘price’ that the government had to pay for the unions’ support. Since 1994, social partners have systematically negotiated income and other policies within the ESS. Negotiations led to one or two-year agreements on income policies, occasionally also taking the form of broader social pacts, wherein chapters on wage policies were of central importance (Stanojević / Klarič 2013).

The key implementation mechanism of the agreed policies was the centralised collective bargaining system. In the 1990s, general collective agreements for the private and public sector framed sectoral bargaining. At the time, sectoral agreements were implemented in almost all Slovenian organisations. The coverage rate, due to the companies’ obligatory membership of the Chamber of Commerce – which was the main negotiator and signatory of the collective agreements – was exceptionally high and covered almost all dependent employees (Glassner 2013).

Trade union density rates started to decline rapidly in the mid-2000s. The intensity of this transformation, which began when Slovenia entered the EU, may be compared to the massive changes of the early 1990s. From 2005 to 2008, the density rate dropped from 40 to below 30 per cent and later on to around 20. The share of unionised blue-collar workers declined relatively quickly. Unionisation within public services has been stable and/or growing, but not intensively enough to make up for the losses in manufacturing.

In spite of this, the distribution of the unionised workforce among the main union organisations has not changed significantly. Despite recent heavy losses, the *Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije* (ZSSS; Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia) remains the largest confederation, just as it was in the 1990s. Today, ZSSS consists of 23 trade unions as members and traditionally focuses primarily on blue-collar industrial workers; ZSSS covers more than half of the unionised population (Visser 2011).

In 2006, some major unions formed the *Konfederacija sindikatov javnega sektorja Slovenije* (KSJS; Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions), which covers almost a quarter of the unionised workforce. The affiliates of this new confederation are quite strong and autonomous. Compared to the ZSSS, where internal fragmentation at the micro level is an outstanding trend, fragmentation within the KSJS is more sectional in nature. The rest of the union organisations, covering around 20 per cent of the unionised workforce, consist of smaller confederations,

that is, autonomous national, mostly public sector unions and, in addition, some company unions (Visser 2011).

The Chamber of Commerce, the main employers' organisation, had mandatory membership in the 1990s. Since it was the main negotiator representing employer interests, collective bargaining was, in effect, centralised, and coverage was almost complete. In parallel to the Chamber of Commerce, there was also a chamber of small and medium-sized enterprises that also had mandatory membership.

Under pressure from international organisations, especially the International Labour Organization (ILO), which criticised the involvement of mandatory interest organisations in autonomous and voluntary bargaining processes, both chambers set up parallel voluntary interest organisations in the mid-1990s. These new employers' associations were involved in collective bargaining and in negotiation processes within the Economic and Social Council, but were dependent on the financially strong and influential chambers.

The situation radically changed under the centre-right coalition government. In 2006, the position of the Chamber of Commerce changed; its former status as a mandatory organisation was abolished. In line with the new law, it was transformed into a voluntary interest organisation. The new status resulted in an immediate decline in membership and forced the Chamber to compete for members; in other words, it let the Chamber to adopt new, more radically oriented policies closer to the interests of its potential constituents. Accordingly, the formerly modest employers' interest organisation, which used to play an important role in the negotiations of social pacts, significantly radicalised its stance (Stanojević / Klarič 2013).

In the last ten years, as was the case across Europe, trade unions in Slovenia have had to face several unpopular measures in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, which they had difficulty resisting in the long term. Slovenia's accession to the EU has further weakened their power, as they have had to follow the guidelines of EU institutions. Nevertheless, throughout the entire period, with short interruptions, they operated within the framework of the Economic and Social Council (ESS). The ESS has seven trade union members, the largest of which are ZSSS and KSJS. Employers' organisations in the ESS are represented by the Employers Association of Slovenia, the Chamber of Craft and Entrepreneurship of Slovenia, the Association of Employers in Craft and Small Business of Slovenia, and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia.

## THE SLOVENIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY – FROM MODERATE TO FAR RIGHT

In the autumn of 2015, another landmark event took place. During this period, a large number of refugees passed through Slovenia in search of a better future. Around the same time, Janša's SDS party had started to acquire far-right ideas. They began to score political points by spreading hatred against the refugees. However, the party still failed to rise to power. Even in the 2018 elections, albeit gaining the majority vote, they remained in the opposition because most of the other parties initially refused to form a government with them.

Ever since then, the SDS party, which by a turn of events managed to form a government just as the coronavirus pandemic began in March 2020, has been moving towards the far right. Its policies – attacks on independent institutions such as the Constitutional Court, the prosecutor's office, and the media, as well as their strict implementation of anti-corona measures (the country had a strict curfew for about six months and restrictions on movement between municipalities) – have led to a number of protests, joined on some occasions by trade unions due to a suspension of dialogue with the ESS. It is telling, however, that on several occasions members of far-right and even neo-Nazi movements (misleadingly dressed as French yellow vests) have come to the government's aid by taking part in the protests, where they chanting pro government and patriotic slogans (such as, for example, 'for Slovenia', slogans promoting a militarised border, and 'anarchists are leftist fascists') and provoking other protestors. They were protected by the police and praised by Prime Minister Janša and some other ministers for their courage.

The aforementioned sympathies between SDS and far-right movements make it impossible to find a politically viable alternative on the far right. For example, Bernard Brščić, former State Secretary of the Janša government, unsuccessfully attempted to enter the European elections with far-right views using his newly founded party *Dom* (Home). In truth, the party could not be successful because their constituency was already quite successfully addressed by SDS. A similar situation occurred with the political grouping of Andrej Šiško, who organised paramilitary militias to control the border. His party, the *Gibanje Zedinjena Slovenija* (ZSi; Movement United Slovenia), has never been successful in elections either.

The SDS cannot be unequivocally labelled a far-right party, as it also advocates for policies that are more moderate. In any case, its tendencies have become increasingly totalitarian with each new rise to power under its leader Janša, who

has been party chair for the past 28 years. He seeks to subjugate every part of society and is becoming increasingly radical as a political leader, which is triggering strong resistance from the public. SDS also draws political ideas from Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, who invests heavily in party media, as well as from former US President Donald Trump. From the US Republican camp, Janša's party has adopted ideas about the deep state, left-wing fascism, and cultural Marxism, for instance.

Vehovar describes the *modus operandi* of SDS as an “administrative coup d'état”, where there is a division between “us” and “them” – the enemies who have hijacked the state (Plavčak 2020). The latter are destroying us and must therefore be defeated. In the case of an administrative coup d'état, “the means of violence are not a matter of street fighting, but of interdepartmental and inter-office struggles, where semi-legal or even illegal administrative procedures and their party army invade without any restraint”. Vehovar was describing the functioning of the Janshist government (March 2020 – June 2022) when he said that a “violent front is being waged, and administrative tanks are rolling over the systems, subsystems, administrative and expert structures (and thus knowledge, skills, social and civilizational manners) by which the state ensures its institutional functionality. When a party, under the pretext of a real or fabricated crisis, removes civil servants from decision-making positions and installs their own party militants in their place, it is not only ensuring itself a docile and obedient operative that will enable it absolute power; it is at the same time fighting the enemy, as it replaces the imagined enemy ('communist') network with its own, Janshist one. The project of Janshism will therefore only be complete when it has seized everything, only when the last enemy has been destroyed” (Plavčak 2020).

## THE 2022 NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

As already mentioned, the behaviour of the SDS party in power has provoked a great public resistance. Civil society organised more than 100 protests every Friday during Janša's government. However, despite the pressure from civil society, his government stayed in power until the elections in April 2022. However, even the generous financial resources, the strengthened media apparatus, and the takeover of many social subsystems did not help the SDS party win the 2022 elections. Another new left-liberal party, the *Gibanje Svoboda* (GS; Freedom Movement), which was formed a few months prior the elections, managed to win. What is special about the last decade is that for the third time, the voters have

Table 1  
General Elections in Slovenia 2018 and 2022 (votes in per cent)

Party	2018	2022
<i>Gibanje Svoboda</i> (GS; Freedom Movement)	–	34.45
<i>Slovenska demokratska stranka</i> (SDS; Slovenian Democratic Party)	24.92	23.48
<i>Nova Slovenija</i> (NSi; New Slovenia)	7.16	6.86
<i>Socialni demokrati</i> (SD; Social Democrats)	9.93	6.69
<i>Levica</i> (L; The Left)	9.33	4.44
<i>Lista Marjana Šarca</i> (LMŠ; List of Marjan Šarec)	12.60	3.72
<i>Stranka Alenke Bratušek</i> (SAB; Party of Alenka Bratušek)	5.11	2.61
<i>Slovenska nacionalna stranka</i> (SNS; Slovenian National Party)	4.17	1.49
<i>Stranka modernega centra</i> (SMC; Modern Centre Party)	9.75	–
<i>Povežimo Slovenijo</i> (PoS; Let's Connect Slovenia)*	–	3.41
<i>Demokratska stranka upokojencev Slovenije</i> (DeSUS; Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia)	4.39	0.66
<b>Others</b>	21.97	12.19

\* POS is a 2022 coalition of SMC and several other smaller parties.  
Source: National Electoral Commission, [www.dvk-rs.si](http://www.dvk-rs.si)

given support to a new left-liberal party that was formed shortly before the elections, and, thus, for the third time, they have expressed a strong vote of no confidence in Janša's government.

It is interesting to note that, in 2018, nine parties entered parliament, having received more than the 4 per cent threshold of votes required, while in 2022, many parties lost votes to the newly formed GS and thus only five parties entered parliament. The current government coalition now consists of the Freedom Movement (GS), led by Robert Golob as Prime Minister, the Social Democrats (SD), and the *Levica* (L; Left Party), which, after two terms in the National Assembly, joined the government for the first time.

## SYNDICALISM, RIGHT WING POPULISM AND THE FAR RIGHT IN SLOVENIA

Slovenian trade unions wanted to act constructively during the time that Janša's government was last in power (March 2020 – June 2022). After the previous two experiences with his government, they did not expect the escalations that followed. In the Economic and Social Council (ESS), trade union proposals were taken into account less and less. The pandemic was a convenient excuse for the government to make decisions without any real coordination with them. In May 2021, the negotiations under the ESS were therefore suspended. Social dialogue was not established until the end of Janša's government and was at its lowest point in Slovenia's history.

Despite this, trade unions have remained restrained in their criticism of the government. Officially, they had taken part in a few protests against the government, but there has been no major criticism. Part of the reason for this lies in the tradition of apoliticity of trade unions. It is also due to their transition from an organisation that supported the socialist regime in Yugoslavia to one that, in the post-independence context, strived to show itself as neutral, independent, and as detached from politics as possible.

Moreover, trade unions are largely reluctant to make political statements for fear that this will drive away the members that belong to certain (even extreme) political parties. However, in doing so, the unions are actually falling into a trap, because this also makes it impossible to win over all the members who are opposed to such a stance and thus do not join. Since independence, we have as already mentioned, seen a decline in unionisation in Slovenia. Dr Gal Kirn, a researcher at the Dresden University of Technology and the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, points out that workers are more than their title and have other affiliations. He also suggests that right-wing populism has further fragmented workers along ethnic and identity lines. This is where, he believes, a workers' struggle is possible, with respect for class solidarity: "The struggles must not be separate but must be presented as part of a single struggle. They must not produce an additional identity that portrays foreign workers as different. Such policies are then wrapped up in cultural phenomena and class consciousness is forgotten," Kirn explains.

Mirsad Begić, President of the Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (SSS), which operates within the framework of the largest trade union headquarters, the ZSSS, (self-)criti-

cally admits that right-wing populism offers something that the trade unions fails to. Begić explains that “much of what right-wing populism advocates for that is different and/or in opposition to the trade union movement in Slovenia and elsewhere stems from the shortcomings, failures and overlooked challenges of our agenda. In particular, right-wing populism undermines (the possibilities of) mobilisation, organisation, community action of trade unions and of the population, as well as hinders a progressive understanding of economic foundations and practices, environmental problems and demographic-technological challenges.” He also believes that trade unions are too apolitical and that this is one of the reasons they cannot address the problems described. He comments that, with a few more occasional exceptions, he does not see trade unions as being prepared to fight against right-wing politics, let alone right-wing populism and the far right, and this poses a problem. “Historically, trade unions have traditionally worked towards (greater) equality, the (gradual) equalisation of people, the economic and social improvement of the situation and the cultural convergence of all. Therefore, all concrete agreements in the area of work (collective bargaining and contracts, social policies, internal debates, etc.) that go in the direction of the above strategic political-economic orientations are those that oppose and eliminate the policies and methods of right-wing populism and its more malignant sister, the far right,” he comments.

Hana Radilovič, active member of the Movement for Decent Work and Welfare Society and investigative journalist at the *Pod Črto* web portal, describes trade unions in Slovenia as old-fashioned: “Decades of glorification of the political organs and procedures of the so-called social dialogue have led to the bureaucratisation and political passivation of trade unions. In this sense, it seems to me that the very nature of old-fashioned unions is their biggest obstacle today.” She stresses that trade unions should be more militant and address the fight against capitalism: “They should get out of the social dialogue bubble and engage in broader actions.” In this context, she gives the example of the *Lidl* trade union, which decided to assume an active role during the Water Act campaign. Limiting trade union action to legal service, confining negotiators to senior trade union bureaucrats, and leaving the wider membership without a say in the matter has become too normalised. It is the militant trade unions, which have not allowed themselves to be distracted by the empty promises of social dialogue, that are currently very successful; they are able to inspire a sense of belonging and hope in people, as well as provide realistic economic solutions to their material insecurity, as a counterbalance to the racist projects of the parties. “Involving the members more directly in the union’s decisions and negotiations with external actors is key to maintaining motivation and retaining memberships, as well as building solidarity,” Hana Radilovič explains.



Mojca Žerak, activist and member of the *Mladi plus* trade union, believes that right-wing populism in Slovenia threatens workers' interests in the same way neoliberalism does. "By advocating the privatisation of community systems such as education, health care, and public transport, by advocating the abolition of a welfare state and the elimination of aid to vulnerable social groups, by generally opposing trade union organising, by calling for workforce flexibilisation, etc. Precisely because, in the political and economic sphere, right-wing populism actually advocates the same measures as the dominant neoliberal ideology, I think it is a very dangerous combination," she comments. In her view, the problem in Slovenia is that the understanding of trade unionism is too narrow: "Trade unions or trade unionists need to understand that immigrants are also workers, that workers are members of the LGBT community, that workers are single mothers, that the unemployed and the precarious workers are also part of the working class. Some of them are a part of the active workforce, and some of them exist as a 'reserve' workforce that can be quickly mobilised in line with the needs of capital (e. g., importing foreign workers when the Slovenian economy needs them). In general, I think that in trade unionism, the understanding of the working class or workers is very narrow and limited to people with a contract of employment and a trade union membership."

In Slovenia, because the majority of their members are full-time employees, trade unions defend this group in particular. Others, such as precarious workers and younger workers, are forgotten. This weakens trade unions in the long term; the proliferation of precariousness that we are witnessing is diminishing trade union power from the outside, as it reduces trade union membership. This is why Žerak stresses that trade unions need to "first understand more broadly who they represent and what this group and all its sub-groups need for a decent life, moving beyond decent work for decent pay. Only then will the foundations be laid for broader trade union action that does not, for example, exclude precarious workers, foreigners, the unemployed, etc."

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# COUNTRY STUDY SPAIN

Holm-Detlev Köhler



## THE POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM IN SPAIN

Spain's modern democratic political and party system emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the democratic transition following the death of Francisco Franco in November 1975, bringing nearly 40 years of repressive dictatorship to an end.<sup>1</sup> Two parallel dynamics played out during this process. On the one hand, the democratic opposition groups – the underground unions, numerous left-wing and liberal political movements, student and university groups, and regionalist movements, especially those in the Basque Country and Catalonia – gained considerable strength and organized long-term protests and mass actions demanding an immediate and democratic break from the old regime. On the other hand, a system for negotiations between reform groups within the old regime and moderate opposition groups developed, with participants seeking to instigate a peaceful and orderly transition to democracy with free parliamentary elections and a new constitution.

Over the following years, the goal of making a radical, democratic break from the dictatorship gave way to the reality of a pact-based democratic transition within the monarchist framework imposed by Franco. The democratic opposition abandoned its more far-reaching aims of a republic that would prosecute the crimes committed by the Franco regime while the reformists from the outgoing dictatorship submitted to democratic rules. From 1976 to 1978, the dictatorship transformed itself into a parliamentary monarchy. The first free parliamentary elections in 1977 and the new constitution in 1978 were the two most important building blocks for the construction of the new government. The transition years up until 1982 were marked by significant uncertainties and threats: An economic crisis caused record unemployment and high inflation; several terrorist groups, including the *Basque Euskadi ta Askatasuna* (ETA; Basque Homeland and Liberty) and radical leftist groups such as *Grupo de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre* (GRAPO; Anti-Fascist Resistance Group First of October) and *Frente Revolucionario Antifascista Patriota* (FRAP; Revolutionary Antifascist Patriotic Front), threatened security; and Francoist military groups constantly attempted coups against the fledgling democracy. The centrist government of the *Unión de Centro Democrático* (UCD; Union of the Democratic Centre) never secured a stable parliamentary majority and finally dissolved in a government crisis in 1981.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the democratic transition and the democratization of industrial relations, see Köhler (1993).

On the left side of the political spectrum, the moderate social democratic *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE; Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) emerged as the clear hegemonic force over the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE; Communist Party of Spain) and other regional socialist groups. The PSOE was voted into government in 1982 with an overwhelming absolute majority. On the right, the groups and parties remained unstable. After the UCD's existential crisis and its tenure as the minority government from 1977 to 1981, the *Partido Popular* (PP; People's Party) began to successfully combine right-wing and conservative forces over the course of a decade up until its definitive founding in 1989. Throughout the 1980s, the PP developed into a political alternative to the PSOE. Other far-right groups, such as *Fuerza Nueva* (FN; New Force), were unable to assert themselves during this period.

A separate party system emerged in Catalonia and Basque Country, with moderate conservative parties leading the way: *Convergència i Unió* (CiU; Catalan Convergence and Unity) and *Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea* (EAJ-PNV; Partido Nacionalista Vasco; Basque Nationalist Party), respectively.

The year 2015 brought significant change to the political landscape; labour relations and trade unions did not go untouched. In the parliamentary elections that year, the ruling PP party, which by then had been marred by many corruption scandals, lost 3.5 million votes, dropping from 44.6 per cent of the vote in 2011 to 22.7 per cent. At the same time, the opposition socialist party PSOE received a historic low of only 22 per cent of the vote, just half of its share of the vote seven years prior, marking the end of the two-party system that had dominated since the post-Franco democratic transition. Seemingly out of nowhere, two new parties, the left-wing protest party *Podemos* (We can) and the liberal-technocratic civic democracy party *Ciudadanos* (Citizens), received 20.6 per cent and 13.9 per cent of the vote, respectively. The resentment felt by broad swaths of the population toward the corrupt and incompetent political class had finally found its way to the ballot box. New elections were called due to the absence of a majority in the government in 2016. These elections largely confirmed the new four-party constellation, and a new balance of political power was also consolidated in the states and municipalities. As a result of this shake-up, a kind of 'palace revolution' took place within the PSOE against party leadership and the "party barons" who had controlled the apparatus for decades. Oppositionist Pedro Sánchez was elected as the new party leader in a primary election in May 2017.

The state of permanent crisis surrounding the Catalan independence movement, which since 2015 has both determined and paralyzed political processes, has con-

tributed additional uncertainties and crises to the Spanish political context. Spain now has a very heterogenous and fragmented party system, with the distance between segments of the population and their parties growing. This has opened new doors for right-wing populism (see Appendix).

## TRADE UNIONS AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Spanish unions have traditionally been categorized as belonging to the Latin trade union model, which differs from the Anglo-Saxon corporatist framework typically found in Central and Northern Europe by having low levels of organization, frequent mobilization and strike activity, fragmented political unions, competing levels of collective bargaining, and a high degree of state intervention in industrial relations. Similar to neighbouring countries in Southern Europe, Spanish trade unions suffered the consequences of a deep economic crisis from 2008 to 2014 and have since faced the difficult task of substantive and organizational renewal.<sup>2</sup> The onset of the pandemic in 2020 and the consequences of the war in Ukraine contribute additional uncertainties to the context, including an energy crisis and inflation. Two large trade union confederations, the social democratic *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT; General Union of Workers) and the post-communist *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO; Workers' Commissions), as well as some regional unions in Galicia and the Basque Country, dominate the trade union landscape in Spain. The left-wing Catholic umbrella organization *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO; Worker's Union) continues to play a minor role in a few sectors.

The post-dictatorship period was a decisive time for the emergence of modern democratic industrial relations and independent trade unions. While trade unions had a positive reputation among the oppositional democracy movement during the beginning of the transition, they were internally fragmented and conflicted. Two cleavages mark the Spanish trade union movement of the 1970s and early 1980s; a historical boundary ran between the "historical" and the "new" labour movement, and an ideological division separated communist, socialist, social democratic-Catholic, anarchist, and nationalist organizations and groups.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the development of trade unions in Europe since the economic and financial crisis of 2008, see Lehndorff / Dribbusch / Schulten (2018).

Institutionalised democratic industrial relations have been relatively stable since the mid-1990s, in quiet contrast to the turbulent years of the democratic transition and consolidation (1970s–1980s). The balance of power between unions remained largely the same, and unions are among the most recognized democratic negotiating partners.

The rights to representation and participation are enshrined in the Workers' Statute (1980) and the Law on Trade Union Freedom (1985). These two laws established a bifold representation of interests consisting of trade union bodies at the company and supra-company level and works councils elected by all workforces with more than 50 employees. In contrast to the German two-part system, the works councils and trade union sections have collective bargaining and strike rights. They do not, however, have the right to participate in company personnel decisions, as is the case in Germany. Instead, they have the right to consultation. Moreover, it is mandatory to have a joint occupational safety committee in companies with 50 or more employees.

Table 1  
**Employee Representation in Spain**

<b>Direct representation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee delegates (10–50 employees)</li> <li>• Works Council (&gt; 50 employees)</li> </ul>
<b>Union representation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Union delegates (representatives of the respective union section in companies with &gt; 250 employees)</li> </ul>
<b>Works Council Rights</b>	
<b>Right to information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic status of the company</li> <li>• Employment contracts</li> <li>• Sanctions for serious offences</li> </ul>
<b>Right to consultation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective lay-offs</li> <li>• Changes in personnel organization and structure</li> <li>• Company training</li> <li>• Classification criteria and bonuses</li> </ul>
<b>Additional duties</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oversight of compliance with labour law regulations</li> <li>• Oversight of occupational safety and hygiene</li> <li>• Cooperation on measures to increase productivity</li> </ul>



The elections of employee delegates and works council members are called “union elections” in Spain and are of paramount importance; much more than just the composition of workplace representation depends on their results. The Law on Trade Union Freedom establishes a general “representativeness” criterion; only unions that surpass a threshold of vote percentage have a general right to collective bargaining, representation rights in public institutions, and access to certain government subsidies. Unions must win more than 10 per cent of the delegates in union elections nationwide; the most representative unions at the national level are the UGT and CCOO. In autonomous communities, the threshold is 15 per cent. The most representative unions at the regional level are the *Eusko*

Table 2  
Works Council Election Results in Spain

Year	CCOO	UGT	USO	ELA	LAB	CIG	Other
1978	34.45 %	21.69 %	5.56 %	0.99 % (18.9 %)	–	0.55 % (22.3 %)	20.85 %
1980	30.86 %	29.27 %	8.68 %	2.44 % (25.6 %)	0.48 % (4.7 %)	1.01 % (17.4 %)	11.94 %
1982	33.40 %	36.71 %	4.64 %	3.30 % (30.2 %)	0.68 % (5.9 %)	1.17 % (18.9 %)	8.69 %
1986	34.27 %	40.19 %	3.83 %	2.92 % (34.9 %)	1.06 % (10.7 %)	1.34 % (21.2 %)	9.95 %
1990	37.60 %	43.10 %	3.00 %	3.2 % (37.8 %)	1.27 % (13.1 %)	1.5 % (23.4 %)	9.70 %
1995	37.74 %	35.51 %	3.56 %	2.97 % (39.7 %)	1.22 % (15.4 %)	1.91 % (26 %)	17.09 %
1999	37.63 %	37.17 %	3.49 %	3.06 % (40.5 %)	1.33 % (15.2 %)	1.62 % (26.2 %)	15.62 %
2003	38.74 %	36.80 %	3.11 %	3.24 % (41 %)	1.37 % (15.2 %)	1.62 % (26.2 %)	15.12 %
2007	39.09 %	37.15 %	2.95 %	3.13 % (40.2 %)	1.39 % (16 %)	1.82 % (28.6 %)	14.45 %
2011	38.38 %	36.33 %	3.43 %	3.03 % (39.8 %)	1.9 % (17.2 %)	1.63 % (26.4 %)	15.77 %
2015	36.17 %	33.30 %	3.89 %	2.58 % (40.6 %)	1.24 % (18.9 %)	n.a. (27.6 %)	22.25 %
2019	35.07 %	32.07 %	4.01 %	3.01 % (41.0 %)	1.06 % (19.1 %)	1.07 % (28.8 %)	23.71 %

Source: CCOO internal data.

Note: The figures in the parentheses refer to the share of delegates received by the regional unions in their respective autonomous communities (ELA-STV and LAB in Basque Country, CIG in Galicia). The “other” category typically includes the corporatist federations of civil servants, teachers, nurses, and public transportation workers, as well as two “yellow” business-led federations in the retail sector.

*Langileen Alkartasuna* (ELA-STV; Solidaridad de Trabajadores Vascos, Basque Workers' Solidarity) and *Langile Abertzaleen Batzordeak* (LAB; Patriotic Workers' Committees) in the Basque Country and the *Confederación Intersindical Galega* (CIG; Galician Unions Confederacy) in Galicia. Within each company or sector, trade unions and professional associations have collective bargaining rights only if they have more than 10 per cent of delegates. Among its other impacts, this provision has simplified the union landscape by side-lining the many small, local, and more radical unions that populated the landscape during the chaotic 1970s, installing a quasi-bi-syndicalist model with a few regional variations instead. Some authors characterize the Spanish union landscape as a "representative trade union" (voters trade unionism) model as opposed to a "members trade union" model due to the significance of works council elections in Spain and the relatively low level of organisation.<sup>3</sup> The results of trade union elections are the best reflection of the balance of power among trade unions.

Social upheaval as a result of the unjust distribution of the costs of the 2008–2013 economic crisis accompanied the dramatic economic decline in Spain. Social inequality and poverty rose sharply due to mass unemployment and neoliberal austerity policies. Many households were living on minimal poverty assistance after unemployment benefits ran out; moreover, many were unable to pay their mortgage and thus at risk of eviction. The economic recovery that has taken place since 2014, marked by falling levels of unemployment, has done little to alleviate these problems. In a study published in February 2019, the EU Commission explicitly pointed to Spain's urgent problem of poverty and inequality, despite five years of economic growth, citing the prevalence of precarious employment as a major cause. The 2020 COVID-19 crisis had disparate impacts on social groups, further increasing inequality despite the cushioning effect of public support programs.

Public discontent with the incompetence and the government's socially imbalanced crisis management, accompanied by a wave of corruption scandals across all levels of politics, has led to a growing distance between the population and the political class and has inspired new civil protest movements. According to all public opinion surveys, Spain's political class is the most discredited social group, and political and administrative corruption is now the country's most pressing problem, accompanied by unemployment and, since 2020, the COVID-19 crisis. Spain and Italy have long been considered the most corrupt of the big EU coun-

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3 See Lucio (1992) and Valverde (1991), p. 25.

tries. The increased heterogeneity of political and social protest in new spheres and media spaces poses new challenges to democratic actors and institutions as well as trade unions.

Table 3  
Structural Data on the Spanish Labour Market (in per cent)

	1990	1992	1996	2000	2002	2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021
<b>Unemployment rate</b>	16.3	18.4	22.2	14.2	13	8.6	18.3	21.6	27.2	20.9	16.5	14.2	13.4
<b>Proportion of long-term unemployed</b>	51.4	46.6	54.6	44.6	37.7	22.6	34.5	50	56.3	48.7	42.8	44.3	49.0
<b>Unemployment rate – women</b>	24.2	25.5	29.6	20.5	16.4	11	18.4	23.3	27.6	22.5	18.4	16.0	15.2
<b>Unemployment rate – youth</b>	33	35.7	42	28.1	22.3	18.1	39.6	46.4	57.2	46.2	37.5	32.2	38.3
<b>Unemployment rate – Spaniards</b>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	7.9	16.8	20.6	25.1	19.9	15.6	13.2	12.2
<b>Unemployment rate – foreigners</b>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	12.3	29.7	34.8	39.2	28.3	23.6	20.1	20.9
<b>Proportion of temporary employment</b>	30.3	33.5	33.8	32.9	31.6	30.9	25.4	25	22.1	25.7	26.7	26.3	25.4
<b>Proportion of part-time employment</b>	4.6	5.9	7.4	7.5	8	11.6	13.3	13.8	16	15.7	14.6	14.6	n.a.
<b>Labour force participation rate</b>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	52.5	54.9	59.4	59.9	60.2	59.8	59.4	58.6	58.6	58.6
<b>Labour force participation rate – women</b>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	42.8	43.2	49.9	52.1	53.4	53.9	53.7	53.3	53.3	53.8

Source: Spanish Federal Statistics Office (INE), various Labour Force surveys.

## THE LATE RISE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Until recently, Spain appeared to be an exception in the European context; no right-wing populist party or movement was able to form successfully (González Enriquez 2017; Zanotti et al. 2021; Castillo Martín 2019). In the late 1970s, attempts by supporters of Franco and the Falange to form political parties, the most prominent of which is *Fuerza Nueva*, ended in failure, culminating in a botched military coup attempt in 1981. Right-wing populist discourse, including xenophobia, anti-immigration sentiments, authoritarian central state ideology (above all directed at regionalist efforts at autonomy), and social conservatism related to sex, family values, feminism, and abortion, for example, have all made inroads into the Spanish political sphere since the turn of the century. However, this discourse did not mutate into a political project; no right-wing populist party had been able to establish itself and gain parliamentary representation at either the regional or central state level until 2018. In December 2018, VOX (*vox*, Latin for “voice”) won over 10 per cent of the vote in regional elections in Andalusia, a traditional stronghold of the PSOE, which had been discredited by numerous corruption scandals. In the following years, VOX gained seats in several regional and national parliaments and established a clear public presence. With this, Spain lost its unique standing as a refuge from radical right-wing populism. In juxtaposition to the decline of *Ciudadanos* and *Podemos* during the crisis, VOX has since established itself as the third-strongest political force in Spain. In April 2022, VOX made history by participating in a coalition government with PP in the Castile and León region for the first time.

Two previous developments enabled the rise of Spanish right-wing populism in the 2020s. First, right-wing populist movements became permanently established in neighbouring European countries; in particular, France’s Le Pen exerted a great deal of influence on the Spanish right-wing radicals. Second, Spain experienced a wide-reaching political and social crisis in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis of 2008–2013. During this time, the two-party system eroded and opened the field to diverse anti-system movements, eventually leading to and including a right-wing populist project. The numerous corruption scandals, growing cleavage between population groups and the political and economic elite, the declining ideological persuasiveness of the social democratic, liberal, and conservative parties, and the negative social impacts of incompetent austerity policies in the face of far-reaching economic crisis combined forces to prepare fertile ground for right-wing populism. In a European comparison, Spain appears to be the country in which trust in democratic institutions has suffered the greatest

loss. Simultaneously, the gap between traditional political elites and the populace appears to have grown the widest since the 2008 crisis (Sanz de Miguel et al. 2019: 30). The conflict over Catalonia, with its strong independence movement, including open institutional provocations against the Spanish state such as illegal referendums and open noncompliance with constitutional procedures and rules have provided additional fuel.

The anti-welfare, neoliberal austerity policies and the associated social repercussions provoked strong protest movements against the established parties as well as trade unions, which were also plunged into a legitimacy crisis by numerous corruption scandals. For months in 2011, youthful members of the anti-austerity *Indignados Movement* (also known as *Movimiento 15-M*) occupied central squares across Spain. This was a decisive trigger for the formation of new anti-establishment groups and new critiques of the corrupt political class and the associated state institutions. First to emerge was the left-wing protest party *Podemos* (We Can), which challenged traditional parties with a new discourse opposing the encrusted and corrupt political regime in 2014 and quickly grew to the country's third-strongest political force. In the liberal-technocratic milieu, the new *Ciudadanos* party was founded, growing promptly into a strong alternative to the discredited conservative ruling PP party. By the 2016 elections, only 51 per cent of votes went to the two majority parties, PSOE and Pp. Politics' traditional "left-right" discourse was met with a "people against corrupt elites in politics and business" discourse in which both new protest movements and, increasingly, right-wing populist currents were able to establish themselves as fixtures in the political environment.

This development was further bolstered by another crisis, one rather specific to Spain. The Catalan independence movement, which is represented by the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC; Republican Left of Catalonia) and *Junts per Catalunya* (JuntxsCat; Together for Catalonia) parties, has evolved from a party with a moderate regionalist stance in 2015 to a radical independence stance achieving some electoral success. These two parties captured about half the votes and seats in regional elections and are now blocking political processes across Spain, opening the way to a centralized Spanish nationalism in response. The new right-wing populism has since benefitted from the polarization between supporters of Spanish unity and anti-Spain separatists, while this same context has posed a serious problem to the traditional parties. The socialist PSOE, for instance, struggles to maintain a coherent and inclusive position. VOX calls for, among other things, an end to Spain's system of autonomous communities and extensive regional self-government in favour of a unified central state.

From 2013 onward, discontent with the PP's all-too-moderate stance on party leadership and government spread throughout the ultraconservative circles of the PP electorate. This converged with the strengthening populist anti-system, anti-elite, and, above all, anti-regional autonomy discourse. These disaffected circles of (former) PP voters gave rise to the right-wing populist VOX party in 2013. While voter support was initially weak, by 2019, VOX gained seats in some parliaments.

The VOX party platform, in this context, is a specific mixture of well-established elements of the radical right, such as an opposition to immigration, elites, feminism, and sexual liberation, and support for traditional Catholic family values and strong Spanish nationalism. In addition, VOX combines neoliberal elements (tax cuts, reduction of the state budget, privatizations, and subsidy cuts) with social chauvinist elements (social benefits for citizens only and family and employment support for young Spaniards) in a less than coherent manner (Sanz de Miguel et al. 2019). Tacked on is an anti-liberal Francoist nostalgia for opposition to the so-called "social-communist Popular Front and its alliance with terrorists and separatists." The current left-wing coalition government led by PSOE and *Podemos* was described by VOX party leader Santiago Abascal as the worst government in the last 80 years; a range of time that includes 40 years of Franco's dictatorship. The most distinctive element of the VOX platform is not its right-wing populist anti-immigration or anti-liberal content but its vision of Spanish territorial unity with a strong authoritarian, centralist police state in direct opposition to the Catalan independence movement. Court cases brought against Catalanian politicians following the independence referendum in 2017 fed the VOX public discourse machine, which criticized the PSOE and PP for being too lax. This moment, symbolized by the regional elections in Andalusia in 2018, traditionally a stronghold of the socialists, is when the walls against right-wing extremist groups fell and VOX became socially acceptable in growing sections of the population.

Initially, VOX discourse was characterized by a consistent liberal-conservative ideology, seeking to be an authentic realization of the PP programme and lacking some of the typical right-wing populist features such as anti-immigration sentiments and anti-Europeanism. Only after defeats in the polls and the departure of some of the more moderate founding members did VOX align itself with the emerging right-wing populists on the international stage, such as Trump, Le Pen, and other figures in European right-wing populism, and shift its focus to issues such as immigration control, the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, and EU-scepticism. VOX increasingly transformed itself – both in content and style – into a classic right-wing populist party in the European context with impassioned appeals to patriotic identities.

Compared to other European countries that have cordoned off right-wing populists, the boundaries between VOX and PP are fluid; in several cities and regions, VOX and PP cooperate in the government. Some PP politicians even pursue a very right-wing populist discourse, such as the president of the Madrid autonomous government, Isabel Díaz Ayuso.

Table 4  
Evolution of VOX

Date	Event
17.12.2013	Official founding of the party.
25.5.2014	VOX receives 1.6 % of the vote in the European Parliament elections.
20.12.2015	VOX receives 0.23 % of the vote in the Spanish Parliament elections.
26.6.2016	VOX receives 0.2 % of the vote in the Spanish Parliament elections.
6.10.2018	Over 9,000 people attend a VOX rally at Madrid's Vistalegre Stadium; the rally focuses on Spanish unity and the rejection of the regional autonomy model, immigration, and feminism.
2.12.2018	VOX receives 10.96 % of the vote in Andalusian regional elections.
16.1.2019	VOX supports the right-wing coalition government between PP and Ciudadanos in Andalusia.
28.4.2019	VOX receives 10.26 % of the vote in Andalusian regional elections.
26.7.2019	VOX supports the right-wing coalition government between PP and Ciudadanos in Andalusia in Murcia.
14.8.2019	VOX supports the right-wing coalition government between PP and Ciudadanos in Andalusia in Madrid.
10.11.2019	VOX receives 15.09 % of the vote in the new European Parliament elections.
19.4.2022	VOX participates in a coalition government with PP for the first time in Castile and León.
19.6.2022	VOX receives 13.45 % of the vote in Andalusia, establishing itself as the third largest parliamentary force after PP (43.04 %, absolute majority in parliament) and PSOE (24.2 %, historical low). However, VOX fell short of its stated goal of participating in government due to PP's majority.

Whenever VOX is involved in governments, even just as part of the conservative minority government, the party uses its position to launch an attack on feminists, trade unions, and immigrants. In practice, this has looked like cutting subsidies to women's organizations or converting them into aid for programmes focused on families, pregnant women, or low-income women; domestic applicants getting priority over immigrant applicants for all social benefits; total cancellation of aid for collective bargaining and social dialogue; cessation of training and education programmes for foreign workers; and, the repeal of measures for occupational safety and hygiene. Moreover, "Institutes for Democratic Memory" were renamed "Institutes for Reconciliation" in an attempt to prevent crimes from the Franco dictatorship from being addressed. VOX also denies climate change and any need for an energy transition, as well as violence against women as a problem.

In sum, VOX and its affiliated groups can be defined as a right-wing populist party and movement, even if its longevity and social anchoring are yet to be determined. Beyond the classic far-right characteristics such as ultra-nationalism, authoritarianism, anti-communism, anti-liberalism, sociocultural traditionalism, and xenophobia, VOX also dabbles in clear elements of right-wing populist discourse: the construction of a mythical 'pure' people who are victims of a corrupt and anti-patriotic elite; the need for authoritarian leadership in the face of the fragmentation of social unity by pluralist-progressive democratic groups and ideologies; the propagation of simple solutions in response to complex social problems; and the construction of a visible enemy. In the Spanish context, these are the regional independence movements, feminism and gender ideology, and all left-wing political groups, with the trade unions at the centre.

## RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND TRADE UNIONS

"CCOO and UGT are enemies of Spain, and we will not stop until they are in prison," proclaimed VOX General Secretary Santiago Abascal at a rally in Madrid in March 2022.

For a long time, the danger of the rising right-wing populist movement was not noticeable within Spanish trade unions, as it had little resonance among employees or impact on the workplace. Right-wing populist discourse primarily occurs in online social networks and media and tends to mobilize socially isolated people and young people threatened by precarity and social marginalization. With the recent entry of the VOX party into governments and institutions, this danger has been taken more seriously; VOX explicitly aims to aggressively target unions, social policy, women's



rights, and immigrant rights, thereby directly threatening long-established social and worker's rights in Spain. "Trade Unions against Right-wing Populism" is gradually making it onto the agenda of official trade union action programmes.

The rise of right-wing populism in Spain has also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which demanded enormous effort from the unions.

*"We are having a hard time communicating just how much work we do and getting people to understand what it's all about. During the Corona crisis, we had to constantly negotiate safety protocols, short-term work regulations to safeguard employment, and collective agreements on working from home, all of which required us to do a lot of extra work, and we did that for all workers, not just our members."*

Excerpt from interviews with union representatives

Spanish trade union members credit the following factors as contributing to the rise of right-wing populism in recent years:

- In Spain, VOX emerged from the conservative PP's internal crisis. Disaffected radical right-wing groups split off from the party and, in some cases, skilfully seized on the social climate of discontent, insecurity, and rejection of the traditional political and economic elites.
- VOX has been able to exploit the Catalanian independence movement quite well; this movement has led to a strengthening of centralist nationalist discourse and brought an authoritarian solution to centre stage. Spain's unity and discussions of nationhood have taken on a new, stronger meaning. Progressive left-wing forces, in contrast, have been unsuccessful at promoting the more complex image of a pluralistic, cosmopolitan Spain with a social balance.
- The anti-welfare austerity policies implemented in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis strained the social climate, increased social inequality, and created many vulnerable population groups threatened by social decline. This has provided VOX with fertile ground for its demagoguery.
- In many ways, right-wing populism is a reaction to two trends in Spanish society. First, feminism and gender equality have grown strongly in recent years, leading to a conservative backlash from some segments of the population. Second, right-wing populism has focused on the global elite and the business world in the form of an anti-global and nationalist discourse.

- The increase in right-wing populism around the world also fans the flames of Spanish right-wing populism. France and Italy, both of which have strong right-wing populist movements, are seen in Spain as culturally close examples.
- The social media-dominated communication sphere is often used by right-wing populists as a stage for its cheap demagoguery, in which reality and rationality are displaced by fake news.
- Other themes, including xenophobia and Francoist nostalgia, are present, albeit on the margins and in more isolated instances. These themes appear not to have the same central importance as they do in right-wing populist movements in other countries.

The most important strategy against right-wing populist influences is the defence of democratic institutions such as autonomous collective bargaining, social dialogue, and systems for worker's rights, wherefrom targeted appeals can be made to employers and conservative political parties to form a broad democratic front against the danger from the right. The CCOO and UGT work closely on these issues, especially because right-wing populism is not on the works council election campaign agenda. Concrete initiatives, such as education programmes and international cooperation, remain within the jurisdiction of individual trade union confederations. However, political strategies related to the public, governments, political institutions, and the European trade union confederations are coordinated and carried out jointly.

Moreover, worker representatives emphasize the struggle to counter right-wing populists' simplistic demagoguery in the public discourse. Here, too, are alliances with all democratic institutions and movements central. Trade unionists emphasize two specific problems in this field of action. On the one hand, trade unions and progressive political forces strive to convince using rational and coherent lines of argument, while right-wing populists do not care if they are promoting completely contradictory positions and discourses. On the other hand, national symbols such as flags, colours, anthems, etc. are implicitly associated with right-wing conservative positions, while left-wing political positions always have an anti-patriotic flair.

In the summer of 2022, CCOO launched the International Trade Union Initiative "How can trade unions confront fascism and right-wing extremism?", with the first seminar held on July 20, 2022. The seminar was attended by representatives

from the TUC (*Trade Union Congress*, UK), the CTA-T (*Central de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Argentina*, Argentina), the CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*, Brazil), the CUT (*Central Unitaria de Trabajadores*, Chile), the CGIL (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*, Italy), and Steven Forti, a fascism expert from the University of Barcelona<sup>4</sup>. This first seminar was the starting point for the *Red Internacional de Estudios Sindicales* (REDES network; International Network of Trade Union Studies), which aims to use international cooperation on concrete strategies to counter right-wing extremist movements. Joint educational programmes for workers and trade union representatives are planned as the next step.

In September 2020, VOX founded *Solidaridad*, a trade union project reminiscent of the Polish *Solidarność*, as a self-described patriotic social project to protect Spanish workers from corrupt classist unions and illegal immigration. So far, its workplace presence has been very small and localized to a few centres in Madrid and Zaragoza; its membership numbers are also low. UGT and CCOO trade union representatives make clear that *Solidaridad* does not discuss working conditions, collective bargaining policies, and so on, instead only it abstractly propagates the primacy of Spanish workers over immigrants and, above all, vilifies the established “mafia” trade unions as corrupt, ideological, sold-out, and anti-patriotic. Its secretary general, Rodrigo Alonso, a member of the Andalusian PP, has been involved in several corruption scandals while being a member of parliament.

Given how challenging it is to gain a foothold in workplaces and businesses, many expect VOX to abandon its own union project in favour of infiltrating established corporatist federations beyond the left-wing “class trade unions”, such as the civil servants’ union CSIF, the federations of police and security forces, or some ‘yellow’ company unions. VOX has, to date, voted against every labour or social policy initiative put forward by the government or social partners; for example, the party has voted against short-term work regulations during the COVID-19 crisis, the minimum wage agreement, the regulation of delivery riders (*Ley Rider*), remote work regulations, and the framework agreement on pension reform.

The Castile and León region warrants special consideration insofar as it is the only of the 17 federal states in which VOX has been directly involved in government. VOX has been a coalition partner of the PP since April 2022. While the region has traditionally been governed by the conservative PP, social dialogue between the govern-

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<sup>4</sup> See Comisiones Obreras Castilla y León (2022).

ment, trade unions, and employers is well established – strongly anchored in the political culture and enshrined in the regional constitution. Even the International Labour Organization (ILO) has repeatedly praised the region as an example of social collaboration and participatory democracy.<sup>5</sup> In 2022, there were no fewer than 18 Social Dialogue Agreements on social and labour policy fields of action in place.

VOX launched a direct attack on the Social Dialogue Agreements and its actors immediately after taking office; its Minister of Industry, Trade, and Employment summarily suspended nine of the existing agreements. Meanwhile, each of the 20 million Euro grants planned to be given to agreement stakeholders were cut in half. This galvanized the unions as well as the employers, who demanded compliance with the already-signed agreements. According to the *Confederación Española de Organizaciones Empresariales* (CEOE, Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations), these uncertainties and social conflicts jeopardize potential investments in the region (*Diario de Castilla y León* 2022). The local and regional employment and training programmes that the social partners had negotiated, and for which the federal government had allocated 70 million euros, are simply not being implemented.

In addition to the attack on social dialogue, VOX has launched a number of other initiatives, such as converting the “Law for a Historical Memory” into a “Law for Reconciliation Between the Two Spains” or replacing the “Law Against Violence Against Women” with a “Law on Domestic Violence”. The regional holiday *Villalar*, which is enshrined in the constitution, was replaced by the Day of the Holy Apostle Santiago. This can be understood as yet another component in the ideological culture war against all democratic symbols of regional autonomy in promotion of a unified, conservative, and Catholic Spain. Moreover, under the label of national energy sovereignty, VOX has demanded the reopening of nuclear and coal power plants. In all of its official documents, VOX has systematically denied climate change, violence against women, LGBTQI+ rights, and crimes committed under the Franco dictatorship.

The situation in Castile and León is currently unclear, and the future remains undetermined; most PP ministers officially defend the Social Dialogue Agreements while simultaneously allowing VOX ministers to attack its social partners freely. CCOO and UGT complain of a deep loss of confidence and have announced a mobilization campaign for the fall of 2022, in which they want to involve the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions (CoR), and the International Labour Organiza-

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5 Servicio de información sobre discapacidad (2018); UGT Castilla y León (2022).

tion (ILO) in Geneva. The aim is to strengthen the Social Dialogue agenda at the local level, where VOX is not yet represented. Meanwhile, unions are investigating potential legal action for noncompliance in the bi- and tri-lateral agreements. The regional employers' association has pledged its full support for this effort.

It is rather exceptional that the Spanish employers' association is taking such a direct political position, as they are typically strict about being apolitical.

*We sit down with every government, negotiate with every labour minister regardless of party affiliation or ideology. Our organization encompasses all political beliefs; we have no political orientation – not like the so-called class unions that represent certain political ideologies.*

Excerpt from interviews with CEOE representatives

In this respect, the clear commitment to social dialogue as a fundamental principle of industrial relations and the region's social constitution outweighs the employers' association's typical stance. Representatives from business organizations also admit a certain closeness to the neoliberal economic positions espoused by the right-wing populists (free market, minimization of the state, subsidy cuts, and so on) but also point to their contradictory and populist nature given their simultaneous calls for a strong, interventionist, and authoritarian state and the discourse against the 'globalist' and economic elites and big banks.

In summary, trade union strategies to counter the rise of right-wing populism focus on four main areas of action. First, they explicitly integrate the topic into union education programmes for members and delegates. Relatedly, the second strategy is to encourage people to respond to right-wing populist positions expressed in the workplace or among employees directly and openly with clear argumentation. Third, work is being done to promote public discourse that strengthens democratic, pluralistic, and tolerant positions that define diversity and difference an enrichment rather than a threat. The final strategy is to emphasise the importance of European and international cooperation against right-wing populist tendencies.

## CONCLUSIONS

The rise of a right-wing populist movement and political party in Spain since 2018 caught many of Spain's social actors and unions unprepared and coincided with the decline of the other populist parties, which led to the dissolution of the previ-

ously established two-party system with *Podemos* on the left juxtaposed with the liberal-technocratic party *Ciudadanos*. Many hoped that right-wing populism would fall as sharply as it rose in the face of a resurgence of the traditional conservative right-wing party Pp. The trade union perspective on this, however, is mixed insofar as it would correspond with a decline of the current left-wing coalition between PSOE and UP. In many respects, the current left-wing government has made positive headway in tackling the crisis, including the implementation of short-term work regulations, the establishment of a guaranteed minimum income, the strengthening of civil liberties and gender equality, labour market reforms to safeguard employment and reduce precarious employment, and an urgently needed pension reform, for example. In this respect, the governing coalition has clearly distinguished itself from the PP, whose crisis response from 2011 to 2018 was disastrous. The fact that the electorate is opting for a failed conservative alternative in the face of these recent policies is cause for great concern and fore-shadows difficulties for progressive, pro-union policies in the future.

The VOX party, which began entering parliaments and institutions in 2018, can be clearly characterized as a right-wing populist party insofar as it combines strong nationalism, a “people against the elites” discourse, and authoritarian centralism (Halikiopoulou/Vlandas 2022). While VOX avoids direct fascist or Falangist symbols and accepts formal democratic rules, democratic values are clearly subordinate to nationalist and authoritarian goals within their framework. It aims to abolish the Spanish system of autonomous communities and calls for direct and, if necessary, military intervention by the central state against regional independence movements. The right-wing populist offensive is concentrated primarily on the symbolic-cultural level, with a strong emphasis on nationalist and Catholic symbols and traditionalist family values. Defending Spain’s multicultural, modern, and cosmopolitan reality against this attack will be difficult so long as the crisis in Catalonia and the corruption scandals continue to shape Spain’s political landscape, and democratic diversity is perceived by many as a weakness.

At present, it is still unclear whether right-wing populism is a permanent phenomenon or a temporary manifestation arising in the broader context of a political party system crisis. The rise of right-wing populism in Spain is evidently less the result of social and economic conditions (such as unemployment, social inequality, or mass immigration) than a product of subjective perceptions, such as the perceived distance between people and democratic institutions and elites. The fact is, however, that the entire institutional framework has become unstable; voter behaviour

is subject to strong fluctuations, and unions, like the political left as a whole, are negatively impacted by a legitimacy crisis. If populist discourses against the welfare state and pluralistic democratic governance models continue to advance and permeate sectors of the workforce, the risk of post-democratic authoritarian capitalism will grow. The challenge, then, extends far beyond the fight against right-wing populism and is to regain lost trust in democratic and social progress with trade unions as central social actors among large swaths of the population.

*Translated from German by Tanager*

## APPENDIX

### SELECT ELECTION RESULTS IN SPAIN (2015–2022)

The following section documents some of the election results from recent years, which illustrate not only the sudden rise of the right-wing populist VOX party but also the dramatic fragmentation of the party landscape since 2015 when the two new parties *Podemos* and the liberal-technocratic party *Ciudadanos* shook up the outdated two-party system comprised of the populist *Partido Popular* (PP) and the *Partido Socialista Obrero* (PSOE) which had been discredited by corruption scandals.

On the national level, something of a renaissance of the two-party system with PSOE and PP, with VOX playing the role of a third new force, can be observed. *Ciudadanos* is now in a complete existential crisis, and *Podemos* is also dealing with many internal problems and divisions. In sum, the regional heterogeneity of the Spanish political system has increased enormously. The Basque Country and Catalonia have traditionally had their own systems dominated by regional nationalist parties; now, a fragmented party structure without a clear majority has become established in other regions as well.

The left-wing protest party *Podemos* has never managed to build a unified party structure and competes in various regions through independent groups (Catalonia: *Catalunya en Comú*; Valencia: *Podem Comunitat Valenciana*; Basque Country: *Elkarrekin Podemos*). In other regions, *Podemos* competes against other alternative left-wing groups (Madrid: *Mas Madrid*; Galicia: *En Marea*; Andalusia: *Adelante Andalucía*). In the near future, whether or not the very popular Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labour and Social Economy Yolanda Díaz Pérez's initiative to unite the various groups on the left of the PSOE under the "Sumar" banner as a new political project succeeds will be decisive. Yolanda Díaz comes from the Galician Communist Party and has always maintained her independence, even within *Podemos*.

**Spanish and European Elections:** The percentage points group under "Other" are primarily regional parties in Catalonia, Basque Country, and Galicia.

**Catalonia and Basque Country:** Centralist Spanish parties such as PP and VOX have only very small shares in these two regions, which have very strong independence movements. In Catalonia, the independence parties *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), *Junts per Catalunya* (JuntxsCat), and *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (CUP) together account for about half of all votes, demonstrating the deep divisions that



## Election Results by Party (in per cent)

	PSOE	PP	VOX	UP	Cs	MM	Other	ERC	Juntsx Cat	CUP	ECP	PNV	EH Bildu	AA
Spain 2019	28.3	21	15.2	13	6.9	2.3	11.4							
Spain 2016	22.6	33	0.2	21.1	13		10.1							
Spain 2015	22	28.7	0.2	20.6	13.9		28.5							
Madrid 2021		16.8	44.7	9.1	7.2	3.6	17	1.6						
Madrid 2019		27.3	22.2	8.9	5.6	19.5	14.7	1.8						
Andalusia 2022	24.2	43.04	13.45	7.7	3.3									4.6
Castile and León 2022	30	31.4	17.6	5.1	4.5		11.4							
Andalusia 2018	28	20.7	11	16.2	18.3		5.8							
Andalusia 2015	35.3	26.8	0.45	14.8	9.3		13.3							
Catalonia 2021	23	3.8	7.7		5.6		4.5	21.3	20	6.7	6.9			
Basque Country 2020	13.65	6.8	2	8			2.6					39.1	27.9	
Europe 2019		32.8	20.1	6.2	10	12.2		18.7						

Legend: PSOE: Partido Socialista Obrero Español; PP: Partido Popular; VOX: Vox; UP: Unidas Podemos; Cs: Ciudadanos; MM: Mas Madrid; ERC: Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya; JuntsxCat: Junts per Catalunya; CUP: Candidatura d'Unitat Popular; ECP: En Comú Podem; PNV: Partido Nacionalista Vasco; EH Bildu: Euskal Herria Bildu; AA: Adelante Andalucía.

have characterized Catalanian society and politics for many years. In Basque Country, the rather conservative *Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea* (EAJ-PNV; Partido Nacionalista Vasco; Basque Nationalist Party) and the more radical left-wing nationalist *EH Bildu* hold a clear majority over Spanish-wide political parties.

**Andalusia:** Spain's largest and most populous state, traditionally a socialist stronghold, was governed by PSOE until 2018. Here, the turnaround and the advances of the right-wing populist VOX into the political landscape are the most apparent. In the elections on June 19, 2022, PSOE found itself in a deep crisis, while the PP found itself in an absolute majority. VOX was able to establish itself as the third political force. However, VOX was unable to achieve its stated goal of participating in government, as the PP has its first absolute majority. *Ciudadanos*, in contrast, disappeared from Parliament and *Podemos* split into two groups: *Por Andalucía*, which is linked to the federal party, and *Adelante Andalucía*, a radical splinter group critical of capitalism.

**Castile and León:** This state in central Spain is, thus far, the only state in which VOX has been directly involved in a coalition government with the conservative PP. In addition to the rise of VOX to its status as the third strongest party, the election results show the appearance of new local and regional splinter parties, including *Unión del Pueblo Leonés* (UPL; Unity of the People of the Province of León) and *Soria ¡Ya!* (SY; Soria Now!), which now have parliamentary representation, as well as the decline of *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*.

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# COUNTRY STUDY SWEDEN

Johan Sjölander



## JUST A MATTER OF TIME? THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS AND THE SWEDISH TRADE UNIONS

*This is just a matter of time. The more we are, the more workplaces we can take over and vote for delegates who share our values, and appoint new boards.*

Jörgen Fogelklou, SD

In the Swedish national elections in 2022 a right-wing extremist party, founded by neo-Nazis, became Sweden's second largest party (20.54 per cent). The *Sverigedemokraterna* (SD; Sweden Democrats) did not only pass the traditional leading conservative party *Moderata samlingspartiet* (M; Moderate Party) (19.1 per cent) when it came to popular support, they also became an important part of the parliamentary majority behind the new conservative government.

On December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the *Svea Hovrätt* (Svea Court of Appeal) published a judgement between the the *Svenska Transportarbetareförbundet* (Transport; Swedish Transport Workers' Union) and one of their members. The court reconfirmed earlier rulings that made it illegal for the trade union to exclude the member in question for being a member of the SD. Two opposing principles were presented in the court: The trade union as an independent non-governmental organisation and its right to establish rules for who can be a member, and the members' right to uphold membership in an organisation of economic and practical relevance. The judgement was controversial and might very well be tried in the highest instance. Moreover, it highlights the tensions that arise in the heart of the labour movement with the rise of the SD.

It is not right to say that the SD is a working-class party. They have support in all social groups. But it is true that they have been able to mobilise working class voters in a way that the traditional conservative parties have not.

This puts a substantial tension in Swedish politics and Swedish trade union organising. While the trade unions in the LO federation (*Landsorganisationen i Sverige*, Swedish Trade Union Confederation), that organises a large majority of the blue collar workers, have strong, historical, and ideological bounds to the Social Democratic Party, a larger and larger part of the working-class electorate, especially the males, has turned to the Sweden Democrats' extreme right populism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This country study is an updated, revised, and English language version of a previously published paper by the author; Sjölander, Johan (2022): "Populisme de droite et syndicats en Suède : quelle est la position des Démocrates de Suède vis-à-vis du dialogue social et de l'électorat ouvrier?" in: Greef, Samuel et al. (Eds.) (2022): *L'extrême droite européenne contre les travailleurs*, Éditions Fondation Jean-Jaurès, pp. 17–21, <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/lextreme-droite-europeenne-contre-les-travailleurs-un-dialogue-social-menace/>.

## PROFILE OF THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS

It's worth underlining that the SD is not a normal right leaning populist party like the *Fremskrittspartiet* (FrP; Progress Party) in Norway or the *Dansk Folkeparti* (DF; Danish People's Party) in Denmark. The SD was formed by neo-Nazis and when the present party leader Jimmie Åkesson joined, the party still consisted of skinheads hailing during party meetings and shouting openly racist rhetoric. Today, the SD continues to struggle with scandals regarding leading officials stepping way out of line.

The SD party leadership has tried very hard to wash off the stench from history. They claim the party has changed and that they should now be seen as a “conservative” party. In a way, this seems to have worked. The SD is Sweden's second largest party, they are negotiating the budget with the conservative government, and even though they are not formally a part of said government, they have party officials working in the government administration. Party leader Jimmie Åkesson has himself stated that SD is a part of the government in all but name. The relationship with the traditional conservative and liberal parties has also changed quite quickly, from total condemnation a couple of years ago to today regarding the SD as a legitimate party. *Kristdemokraterna* (KD; Christian Democrats) party leader Ebba Bush has, for example, stated that she is sure that the SD will one day be part of the government (albeit not right now) and *Liberalerna* (L; Liberals) party leader Johan Pehrson struggles between ensuring his European party colleagues in Brussels that his party is still the number one opposition to Swedish Democratic right wing-populism and telling Swedish media that he is not sure of SDs extremist roots because “he was not there at the time”.

On an ideological level, the party traditionally placed itself on a “neither left nor right” position, saying no to class struggle but yes to social rights, especially for Swedish born workers and pensioners. During the last years, they have developed quite good relations with organised business, which has led to position changes on issues like privatisation. They have also associated themselves clearly with the main-stream conservative parties in Swedish politics and are, after the 2022 elections, a part of the parliamentary majority behind Ulf Kristersson's conservative-liberal government. The term the party uses to position itself is “social conservative” and they usually describe themselves as a part of the conservative, i. e., non-social democratic, right but with a social consciousness.

Many scholars have instead pointed out that the core of the Sweden Democratic political project is better described as “ethno-nationalistic”. This is probably a more accurate description, and the idea that there is some sort of essential “swedishness” that is under threat and that not all people living in Sweden are de facto part of this “nation” is an accurate way of understanding the core of the Sweden Democratic ideology. Another quite apt way to describe the SD is as a one-issue-party about migration and immigrants. For most of the Swedish public, that is what they have been hearing and that is what they associate SD with.

## THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS' VIEW ON THE SOCIAL PARTNERS

Formally, SD is very supportive of “the Swedish model”, wherein independent partners sign collective agreements in the labour market with minimal state involvement. From that point of view, they criticised the *Socialdemokratiska arbetarpartiet* (S/SAP; Social Democratic Party) government, which was in office until October 2022, for being soft on EU-legislation in the social sector, with the issue of minimum wages as one prominent target of criticism. Former Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (2014–2021) has doubts about what bureaucrats in Brussels can and do know about the conditions of Swedish workers. “The shift in power that the Social Democratic Party is willing to stand for, will provide reduced opportunities to protect the Swedish model. (...) It is obvious that the overall plan is to give the EU total power over labour law. These measures lead to increased supranationalism, more power to Brussels and are a slap in the face to Swedish workers”, wrote SD-party leader Jimmie Åkesson in *Aftonbladet* in 2019 under the headline “SD is the last hope for the Swedish model”.<sup>2</sup>

Even though the SD, in theory, advocates for the presence of independent partners on the labour market and “the Swedish model”, they are, in practice, also opponents of the largely social democratic LO. Together with the mainstream conservative parties, they have, for example, voted for abolishing the possibility for a tax deduction for trade union fees, and other such measures.

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2 Åkesson, Jimmie (2019): “SD är den svenska modellens sista hopp”, in: *Aftonbladet* (online), 30.4.2019. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/g7dMna/sd-ar-den-svenska-modellens-sista-hopp>

## THE SWEDISH TRADE UNION MOVEMENT, WITH A FOCUS ON LO

There are three large confederations of Swedish trade unions. The *Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation* (TCO; Confederation of Professional Employees) is the umbrella organisation for 13 trade unions that represent and organise white collar workers in the private and public sectors. The *Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation* (Saco; Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations) is comprised of 23 affiliated unions for professions that require an academic education. The LO is the central organisation for 14 affiliates who organise blue collar workers within both the public and private sectors.

Looking at the relationship between the TCO and Saco unions and the extreme right would of course be interesting. There are indeed things happening. TCO recently decided to rethink their policy towards SD that had been in place for the last twelve years.<sup>3</sup> They no longer mention SD explicitly but rather focus on that TCO distances itself from “nationalism, anti-democratic movements, xenophobia and racism.”<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, I will focus on the confederation of blue collar workers, LO. The reasons for this are twofold. One is, that I think there is a special interest in better understanding the relationship between the extreme right and the working class. The second is that the LO maintains close and explicit links to the *Socialdemokraterna* (S/SAP; Social Democratic Party), which sets the LO-unions apart from the formally nonpartisan and unaffiliated TCO and Saco confederations.

LO is an explicitly social democrat confederation for historical and organisational reasons. The party’s full, formal name is the *Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti* (SAP; Swedish Social Democratic Workers’ Party) but it is usually referred to as *Socialdemokraterna* (S/SAP; The Social Democrats). It was founded by trade unions in 1889 and the LO was formed nine years later, in 1898, with very close ties to the SAP. A commonly used expression, that the LO and the SAP are “two branches on the same tree”, is indeed a good way of de-

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3 Crona, Malin (2022): “TCO öppnar för Sverigedemokraterna”, in: *Arbets Världen* (online), 10.10.2022. <https://www.arbetsvarlden.se/tco-oppnar-for-sverigedemokraterna/>

4 Wingborg, Mats (2022): “TCO:s nya partipolicy nämner inte SD”, in: *Arbets Världen* (online), 16.11.2022. <https://www.arbetsvarlden.se/tcos-nya-partipolicy-namner-inte-sd/>



scribing their relation. For example, the president of the LO has a given place in the SAP Executive Committee.

LO-unions are completely dominant in organising blue collar workers. There is some competition from, for example, the syndicalist federation *Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation* (SAC; Central Organisation of the Workers of Sweden), but the numbers are overwhelming: About 3,000 people are organised in the SAC compared to around 1.4 million in the LO unions. For most ordinary Swedes, the Social Democratic LO-unions represent “the Union”.

The working class is not a homogeneous entity, and neither are the 14 trade unions that form the LO. There are differences between the industry and the welfare workers, between male and female dominated unions, between unions organising mainly private and public sectors, and so on.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SWEDEN DEMOCRATS AND THE WORKING-CLASS ELECTORATE

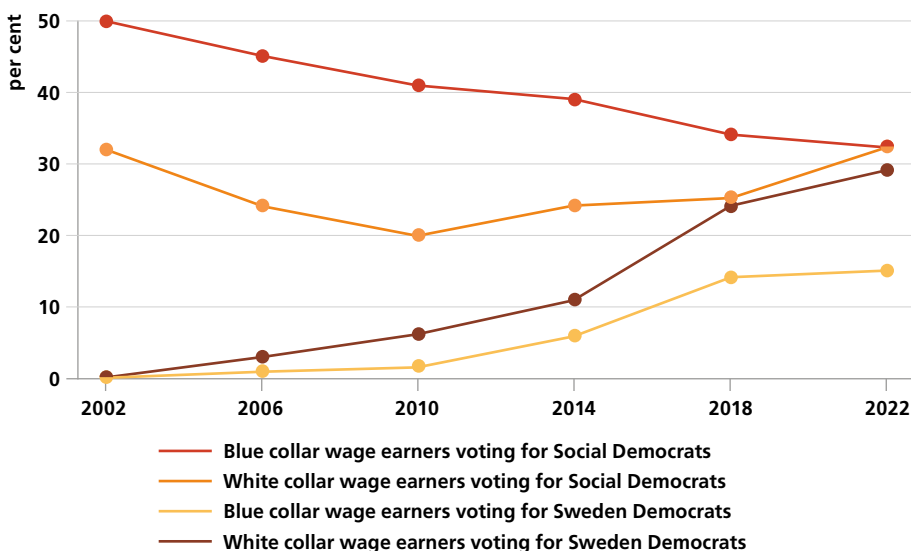
SD has, over time, gained support all over the Swedish electoral map and is now the second largest party. It's worth noting that, while SD has gained popular support during the last twenty years, they are still a controversial party. There is resistance from the public, not only increasing support. But, nevertheless, the development over time is pointing in a clear direction. In fact, the SD have gained popularity in each election since they formed.

Of special interest here is of course the support among blue collar workers and especially those organised in the LO-unions. When it comes to organised workers, the 2022 elections were, in a way trend breaking. The support for SD went down to 27.2 per cent. This means quite a distance to the SAP with 42.4 per cent. Still, if we look at it over time, the picture is not that bright. In 2012, the support for the SAP was over 50 per cent and the SD loomed at around five to ten per cent. Thus, even though the steady increase in support for SD faltered in 2022, the overall picture stays the same.

The broad takeaway is even clearer if, instead of looking at organised workers, we shift the focus to all voters who consider themselves “working class”. Among this section of the electorate, there is a continuation in the 2022 election results, where the SAP and the SD are nearing one another in terms of popular support.

Figure 1

**Vote share for the Social Democrats (SAP) and the Sweden Democrats (SD) among blue and white collar wage earners**



Source: Johansson, Daniel (2022): "Hur gick det i valet, egentligen?", in: *Tiden Magasin* (online), 1.11.2022.  
<https://tankesmedjantiden.se/tiden-magasin/hur-gick-det-i-valet-egentligen/>

How can we better understand this trend over time? According to internal polls made by the LO, there was a clear shift in 2015. While prior to 2015, there was increasing support for SD observable among young men, what happened in 2015 was a quite radical turn — the demographics of the LO-supporters shifted towards the middle-aged. If the SD-supporter pre-2015 was the typical angry young man, the SD supporter after 2015 was the working family father. SD support remained still very much gendered, among the LO-members as well as in the broader public. Men turn to the populist right, women do not.

The stark shift in 2015 coincided, of course, with the immigration crisis in Sweden as well as in other countries. The development in Sweden was extremely dramatic (although not as dramatic as in the countries people had to flee from). Over the course of the year, 162,788 people took refuge in Sweden, and during several weeks during the fall over 10,000 people arrived in the country.

It is therefore very hard to avoid the conclusion that the shift in LO-member sympathies is to a large extent immigration-driven. The roots of support for extreme right populism are complicated and very much debated among scholars and polit-

ical analysts. In the very interesting book *Det svenska missnöjet* (The Swedish Discontent), authors Lisa Pelling and Johanna Lindell<sup>5</sup> paint a very clear picture of how even though people are troubled by questions related to work life, lack of welfare, and housing, they still name migration as the number one problem to solve.

The question of immigration is in itself, and from a quite materialistic perspective, complicated for the trade unions. On the one hand, the unions are ideologically anti-racist, have solidarity as an intrinsic value, and have many members with an immigrant background. On the other hand, the working-class labour market is exposed to the risk of wage dumping and unsound competition from new immigrant groups.

This dilemma is expressed quite clearly in what interestingly is the most recent LO programme on immigration and immigrants from 1979<sup>6</sup> (over 40 years ago!). The program focuses heavily on what the trade unions could do to better reach out to workers with immigrant background. However, it also raises a clear warning about what could happen with the popular support for immigration if it is not “well controlled and organised” and “regulated according to our capacity to offer new immigrants work, housing, social services, schools, health care etc” (LO 1979: 10, authors’ translation).

Since the LO programme was published, the problems the authors pointed to have escalated in the Swedish society. The reasons for this are certainly not only because of refugees. The conservative government in the mid-2010s liberalised labour force immigration, the EU membership has had its impact, and policy changes that have nothing to do with immigration (such as lowering taxes and the privatisation of welfare) combined with the effects of globalisation itself are other factors to consider.

Nevertheless, the impacts the LO warned about in 1979 have now occurred, and popular support for liberal immigration policies has plunged. Combined with the tendency of the SD to frame themselves (and be framed as) a one issue party against immigration, this should without doubt be seen as the driving force behind the increased support for SD among working class voters.

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5 Lindell, Joanna / Pelling, Lisa (2022): “Swedish Discontent”, book review, Labour and Social Justice, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/stockholm/18834-20220126.pdf>.

6 Invandrarna och fackföreningsrörelsen – Los invandringsspolitiska handlingsprogram för samhälle och arbetsliv, LO 80.01, TunaTryc AB Eskilstuna.

## SWEDEN DEMOCRATS AND THEIR RELATION WITH LO TRADE UNIONS

There have been attempts from the SD to overcome the heavy Social Democratic dominance in the LO trade unions by either working within the Swedish trade unions or by creating their own parallel structure. None of these strategies have worked so far. As mentioned, there have been attempts to expel members from existing unions for being members of the SD.<sup>7</sup> An attempt to form a new alternative trade union by the SD (*Löntagarna*, “The Employees”) brutally failed after only being able to recruit around 200 members.<sup>8</sup>

The trade unions within the LO are independent non-governmental organisations. They are, in that sense, nothing more than their members, and their members have every right to decide what their organisation should be, who should represent them and, indeed, who can be member.

As mentioned earlier in this report, a recent court judgement in Sweden questioned the right of unions to exclude individuals based on political party membership. The issue has not yet been resolved by the highest instance, but the court judged it wrong for *Transport* (the transportation workers’ union) to exclude a member who was openly a Sweden Democrat. The court’s decision was based on the fact that union membership was of economic and personal importance to the member in question.

This is an example of the tensions within the Swedish labour movement that come with the rise in SD support within the working class. Still it is important to underline that the *Transport* has taken a quite hard stance in the question of SD-leaning membership, even within the LO family. For example, *IF Metal* (the metal workers’ union in Sweden) recently changed their statutes so that it wouldn’t be possible to be elected as a trustee for the union if you don’t share its core values, but you can indeed be a member. Several of other LO unions have taken a similar stance. The argument for this being that you cannot represent an organisation if you do not share its values and, which is of course of special importance when it comes to the

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7 See Frisk, Martina / Flood, Linda (2019): “LO-fack vill stoppa SD från fackligt inflytande”, in: *Fastighetsfolket* (online), 27.11.2019. <https://fastighetsfolket.se/2019/11/27/lo-fack-vill-stoppa-sd-fran-fackligt-inflytande/>.

8 See Andersson, Linnea (2014): “SD-fack läggs ned”, in: *Kollega* (online), 20.10.2014. <https://www.kollega.se/sd-fack-laggs-ned> or Andersson, Linnea (2013): “SD startar fackförbund”, in: *Kollega* (online), 17.12.2013. <https://www.kollega.se/sd-startar-fackforbund>.

SD; it is hard to represent other members that are of immigrant background when you yourself have a right-wing extremist political view.

The trade union stance on active Sweden Democrats being members or being possible to elect as trustees is a question of principle. Trade unions are independent non-governmental organisations. No one is forced to become a member. It is, as the example of *Löntagarna* shows, possible to create your own union if you don't like the ones available. If the members decide that their interests are best represented by an organisation that is openly Social Democratic and that the Sweden Democrats are, in fact, a threat to these interests, that is their right. Even though this argument is solid, it is hard to totally disregard the question of numbers. The argument from the LO unions in practice depends on the fact that members and would-be-members generally share the view that social democracy does represent their interests on a political level, and that the Sweden Democrats do not.

To sum up, this does not mean that the LO organisations are in some way totally detached from the SD-leaning opinions among the members, but rather that there is an organisational thickness or resistance within the trade unions themselves, based on ideological affinity. The question of SD influence within the trade unions is still very much on the agenda, as the recent court ruling and the active strategies from, for example, *IF Metal* show.

This also means that the important question in the long run is not how the organisational structures of the LO unions handle the Sweden Democrats, but rather how the question of right-wing extremism and populism among the working classes are met.

## VIEW OF LO TRADE UNIONS ON THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS

As mentioned before, the LO has a tight organisational and ideological relationship with the SAP. SAP was formed by trade unions, and ever since the party has always been paramount in the formation of the LO. The president of LO is always a member of the SAP's executive board and there is deep coordination on the national, regional, and local level.

The historic link between the LO and the SAP is only one part of their close relationship. Using this connection only is too narrow a frame to understand the resistance in the LO towards the SD as just a question of loyalty with the SAP. There are strong

ideological reasons for any blue collar trade unions to resist the extreme right, xenophobia, and the neo-fascism the SD represents. It's important to underline that the LO trade unions are independent non-governmental organisations, which have every right to formulate what ideas and what values they stand for themselves.

Without going into too much detail, there are two lines of argument from the LO unions regarding SD. The first is to underline that the Sweden Democrats are, to quote from a LO report on the party, "hostile to workers and anti-union". The other is that SD is, at its core, a party that wants to make a difference between workers depending on their ethnic background, and that that is incompatible with the trade union values. For example, it has been argued from leading officials within the trade unions that it is a strong argument for removing union members who are openly Sweden Democrats from positions within the unions, that they cannot represent all of the members, since a large percentage of trade union members today have some sort of immigrant background.

The trade unions have made many attempts to lower the degree of support for the Sweden Democrats among trade union members. To this end, the LO has tried several different strategies. They have focused on values and anti-racism, tried to remind workers about the neo-Nazi roots of the party, attempted to take on the SD on traditional left-right issues, and pointed out when SD takes on anti-union stances on various issues. As a leading official said in an interview for this report stated: "We have tried everything".

These attempts have had a varied degree of success. There is some evidence that individual campaigns had positive outcomes, but overall, these have not been able to turn the tide. Over time, the Sweden Democrat support among the working class has risen. As one could see from the latest national elections, the support for the Sweden Democrats among the members of the LO unions went down in 2022, although one cannot say for sure whether this could be explained by the LO union's campaigns.

Even if more structural results cannot be seen, it is not fair to say that these efforts have been pointless. It is very hard to say how the situation would have been had the LO unions not taken such a strong position. Taking a firm stance on anti-racism is, of course, important, not least to the many members of immigrant background, even though it is not successful in reducing SD support. Some of the campaigns, especially when confronting SD with traditional right-wing positions, have been partially successful in winning back former SAP supporters. At the end of the day, it is clear that the LO's relationship with the SD is, at its core, political.

## FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

When looking at the relationship between the LO and SD, it is easy to forget the third part of the drama, the SAP.

The overall strategy from the party to strengthen the bonds between the SAP and the LO has as a main target the goal of increasing the share of LO members who vote for the SAP. One of the major strategies is to increase the number of staff and elected officials in the SAP itself with a background in the trade unions. In their mid-term strategy, which was adopted by the SAP board in 2019, winning the votes of LO union members was also declared number one priority.

The former party leader Stefan Löfven was personally able to mediate some of the tensions, being himself a trade unionist rather than a politician. His successor, former minister of finance Magdalena Andersson, has quite a different background. She is a Harvard educated academic with long background in party politics, including working closely with former prime minister Göran Persson during the 90s. It is, therefore, quite interesting to see how she handles the situation in her new role as party leader.

On an organisational level, it is worth noting that the new party secretary-general, elected with Magdalena Andersson, was recruited from a trade union. Tobias Baudin came directly from being president of *Kommunal* (the Swedish Municipal Workers Union). This is in line with the strategic target to increase the number of staff and officials with trade union background.

Moreover, it is interesting to see how the political priorities and rhetoric from the newly elected party leader has been in line with an ambition to win back blue collar voters. The political priorities of Magdalena Andersson include being hard on crime and using every available tool (to “turn every stone”) to break segregation and increase integration, taking a tough stance against the privatisation of welfare and having a job-creation and industrialisation approach to climate change. In her inaugural speech at the party congress in 2021, she explicitly approached trade union leaders by mentioning them by name and explaining how their members would be involved in a concrete manner in her new Social Democratic project.

As we could see in the 2022 elections, more of the LO-organised blue collar workers voted once again for the SAP. The current Social Democratic strategy of being clear on traditional left-right issues like privatisation of the welfare systems while,

at the same time, being hard on crime and not returning to the former more liberal stances on migration is working. At the same time, we can see that, when we look at all of the voters who define themselves as working class, the trend was rather consistent with previous elections. The reason the SAP gained two points in the election was not because workers returned to the party but because of votes from the middle class.

In conclusion, it can be argued that organisational strength and ideological awareness within the Swedish trade unions have prevented the SD from gaining more influence over the unions on an organisational level, but that this hasn't prevented the party from gaining support among individual members of the working class that the unions organise. It is fairly obvious that this political movement is driven by different views on immigration policies. The SD message that Sweden has a much too liberal migration policy has resonated with blue collar workers. However, that is only one piece of the puzzle. The message on immigration would not sound as clear if it wasn't heard against a background of increased inequality and insecurity, especially for the working class. The key to turning the tide is in the understanding of this complex context.

Since the 2022 election, there have been some further dramatic shifts in the public opinion. The fact that the extreme right SD party is in a position of power combined with the economic crisis has changed the political scenery. It is still far too soon to say how this will end; the battle over the Swedish working class is not at all over.





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The rise of right-wing populist movements and parties is an almost universal phenomenon in Europe. Right-wing populist tendencies are not without consequences for trade unions. On the contrary, the patterns of social interpretation propagated by right-wing populism are highly problematic for trade unions. The trade unions perceive right-wing populism, albeit to different degrees, as a force that endangers and calls into question the solidarity-based representation of interests through, on the one hand, the strategic weakening of trade union solidarity relations and, on the other, a frontal attack on the trade unions themselves. This is directed, above all, against trade unions' institutional power.

12 country studies and a comprehensive comparative analysis of the political processes and trade union experiences examine trade union options for dealing with right-wing populist forces.