

The “New Economy”

A new model for development coalitions?

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The article discusses industrial political activities conducted in regional networks by German trade unions. Referring to the example of Dortmund it is shown that the industrial political strategies of local trade union sections are currently at a watershed. On the one hand, trade unions prove capable of socially compensating for the consequences of a radical structural change. On the other hand, however, they have great difficulties in gaining a foothold in the newly emerging economic sectors. ‘Action research’ will help the trade unions to develop adequate strategies for the new economic sectors.

Keywords: new economy, postfordist production model, Dortmund project, participation rights, micro regions

Introduction

Since the mid 1970s, all developed industrial societies have undergone accelerated structural change of their economies. There are many signs that during the 1990s this process has taken on new characteristics. The iridescent “new economy” phenomenon has become a reference point for a number of industrial political concepts that attempt to encourage sectoral change within national and regional economic areas. The very positive image of the “new economy” was originally based on the extraordinarily long boom period of the US economy, the explosive growth of the Internet, large increases in share prices, particularly of Internet start-ups, and an unemployment rate that had fallen decisively below five percent (Scherrer 2001). In the meantime the crisis of the “new economy”, together with the recession in the US, have shattered this image. Euphoric declarations of the emergence of a thriving “economy within the economy”, promoting innovation and overcoming standard economic rules

while leaving behind the principle of ownership (Rifkin 2000) have been cruelly exposed as unrealistic. Not only in the US, but also in Munich, Stuttgart and Dortmund, people have come to realise that so called “new economy” firms cannot grow indefinitely, and that in periods of economic decline they too cut jobs, or even vanish from the market. It would nevertheless be premature to write the obituary of the “new economy”. Behind the myths of the “new economy” (Hickel 2001; Frank 2001) lies the disturbing reality of a radical structural change that seriously puts into question the organisational foundations of long-established modes of societal regulation.

Our argument is that industrial political strategies intended to organise the transition toward a postfordist economy are currently at a watershed. They are confronted by a transformation process that, according to Castells (2001), can be seen as the transition to an “informational economy”. The term informational economy refers to the “mode of development”, the technical-organisational nucleus of a postfordist production model which is responsible for the irreversible restructuring of the entire economy, including the enterprise structures, working conditions, modes of consumption and identity. The “new economy” in the strictest sense, that is to say Internet, IT and telecommunications companies listed on the high tech stockmarket indices, represent only one element of this transformation. They do however demonstrate a socio-economic, cultural and ideological reality that reflects on the entire production model (the category is explained by Boyer and Durand 1997). In other words the “new economy” and its particular configuration of management principles, firm organisation, education and training, and labour relations is becoming a greater reference point for many other economic sectors. There is no specific “new” economy within the “old” one (Hack 2001). There is however an increasing competition between different industrial political concepts, which is decisive for the survival of the trade unions, and not just them.

This approach will be specified in several stages in the following article. For this we refer first to empirical results from a research project examining industrial political activities of regional networks in the former industrial regions of Dortmund, Nuremberg and Chemnitz.¹

Radical industrial change and the trade unions

As a response to the sectoral change these micro-regions, as in other economic regions, have seen the creation of industrial political networks consisting of

companies, chambers of commerce, labour offices, universities, interest groups and local government. Trade unions or better, single trade unionists and works councillors, also play an active role in these networks. The activities of these networks coincide, partly explicitly, partly implicitly, with changes in regional economic and industrial political discourse. Regional political conceptions at the beginning of the 1980s were principally concerned with considering alternative possibilities for social development. The principal idea was to add a social dimension to economic internationalisation through democratic modes of regulation (Hirst 1993, 1996; Lipietz 1998). The 1990s, however, saw a shift in the focus of industrial political discussions. The impact of increasing competition between locations led to the "small is beautiful" concept being gradually replaced by a mode of competitive regionalism, which aims to strengthen the position of small economic regions in the international restructuring race, by modifying qualitative local factors. The basic idea behind this competitive regionalism, as supported for instance by Porter (1993, 1999), is that within a global economy regions have decisive competitive advantages such as specific knowledge, skills and relationships which geographically separated competitors cannot match. The interesting aspect of such an approach is the understanding of regions as activating entities. According to this approach the micro-region is seen as a creative entrepreneur, exercising governance functions that cannot, or can no longer, be exercised at the level of the single enterprise. This is exactly why it is so appealing to trade unions to participate in this new kind of collective entrepreneurship. Intelligent regional policies emphasising qualitative locational factors can be a real alternative to short-term cost-cutting strategies of competing firms. Moreover, because private enterprises neglect their regional responsibility, the role of the entrepreneur becomes at least in theory a public one, which means that it is related to societal goals. It is not "the state" in its strictest sense, but the industrial political network which is becoming a "regional general capitalist", which compensates for the weaknesses of the private entrepreneurial system. An example of this is the organisation of company transcending qualification schemes through employee societies, or through sectoral initiatives of generating product innovation.

Trade unions, or actors close to trade unions, normally participate in competitive regionalism, with the implicit promise that those losing their jobs in declining industries can be provided with new career opportunities through industrial political activities.² This assumes a positive sum game, which in fact implies an evolutionary structural change. According to this perception all innovations, foundations of new enterprises and the creation of employment

are supposed to be done in favour of the ‘modernisation losers’ of the old industries. Consequently, until recently the networks concentrated their attention on the decline of the old Fordist industries. Efforts to compensate for job losses in these industries were partly successful. The regions succeeded in saving and restructuring firms, in re-skilling unemployed people, and thus offering them new opportunities. Nowadays, however, the emergency interventions of the networks are more limited in their scope. Especially in the old industrial regions, the economic transformation has taken on an obvious dynamic which forces the industrial political actors to re-define their activities. Dortmund affords a good illustration of this problem.

The Dortmund project

It is well known that Dortmund and its surroundings have had to cope with the decline of the coal, iron and steel industries, which have been the most important industries for several decades. The dynamics of change can be illustrated with reference to simple statistics. At the beginning of the 1990s there were still about 15,000 workers employed in the steel industry. In 2001 there are only about 1,500 workers left. Steel is no longer produced in Dortmund itself. The last furnace has seen its fire extinguished. Dortmund has become an insurance city. The machine tool industry as well as iron, tin and metal wares has decreased by 40 to 60% in eight years. Twenty two years ago nearly 70% of all employed people in Dortmund worked in the trade and industry sector. Nowadays, by contrast, 70% of all employed people are working in the service sector and the percentage is increasing. The loss of 40,000 jobs in declining industries in the 1990s compares to the creation of 20,000 jobs in the service sector and new sectors. Mainly in the south of Dortmund there has been a dynamic increase of so-called “new economy” firms. According to a regional study, there are around 1,000 software firms employing more than 11,000 people. These numbers confirm the particular importance of the “new economy” (Vollmer 2000) for Dortmund. This boom has of course been slowed down by the general crisis of the “new economy”: the growth rate has decreased from 12% to 5% annually. Job cuts are starting to be seen in IT companies. The whole sector is nevertheless still growing despite the crisis, and the skills shortage is acting as an internal brake on growth. It is clear, however, that the creation of jobs in the new sectors (1998 to 1999 alone saw an increase of 20% in the software sector, Vollmer 2000: 15) is not sufficient to compensate for the

job losses in the old industries (coal, steel and brewing industry). This has led to high unemployment. At its peak times 52,000 people were registered unemployed in Dortmund; in the year 2000 the number was between 47,000 and 48,000. The average unemployment rate is 14.4%.

The sectoral change and high unemployment in Dortmund have led to a dramatic decline in trade union density. During the last ten years, the regional trade unions have lost approximately one third of their members. Another third of the members are pensioners, atypical workers, and those on re-training schemes following redundancy. While some years ago the situation of the labour movement was still strong — “A call for action made outside the bicycle sheds of Hoesch would result in 10,000 people taking to the streets” (E. Weber, regional head of the DGB) — Dortmund is nowadays a city with no large companies. Trade union membership is made up almost entirely of workers from the remaining old industries. With few exceptions, the firms of the “new economy” are devoid of trade unions, and often also of co-determination.

The city of Dortmund has a complex network that aims to support the structural change of the economy through targeted interventions. Important players within the network are the Office of Economic Development, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the Chamber of Trade & Manufacturing, the regional Employers’ Association of the Metal Industry, the Office of Cooperation of Science and Employment, the Employment Office and the Social Research Institute of Dortmund. The most committed actor on the side of the trade unions is the regional DGB, with its local chairman Eberhard Weber at the helm. This picture is completed by a number of trade union activities, and quasi trade union initiatives such as employee corporations and bridging projects, and also innovation coalitions which aim to support the creation of clusters. All the industrial political activities have been brought together in the so-called Dortmund-Project.

An important aspect of that project is the promise of Krupp-Thyssen to create 3,600 new jobs in the region in the near future (trade, logistics etc.). The implementation of that promise is monitored annually. This again results in Thyssen-Krupp having a keen interest in supporting dynamic regional clusters. The objective of the Dortmund Project is to create approximately 70,000 new jobs by 2010, 10,000 of which should be in the existing industries and 60,000 in “the new leading industries” (Dortmund-Projekt 2000:5). The project aims primarily at expanding of knowledge-based jobs, which according to a broader definition can be considered as “new economy” jobs. It intends to create new leading industries such as information technology, e-commerce, micro-

electronics and e-logistics, which ideally should strengthen the already existing sectors. In addition, the project aims to further develop training systems, qualification, science and research on an international level as well as supporting the foundation of new firms and the establishment of new firms in the region of Dortmund. The industrial political measures comprise numerous single projects. Altogether around 100 people are involved in the realisation of these projects. This industrial political effort has become possible against the background of regional subsidies of more than 50 million euros over ten years. The entire costs of the project will doubtless be much higher.

The political culture of the city of Dortmund enables the trade unions to participate in all the important decision processes. Despite the right to participation being officially guaranteed, the possibilities of involvement are limited, owing to the lack of personal and political resources on the side of the trade unions. The regional DGB chairman Weber has only a very small number of academic consultants for advice, often at short notice. Among the single trade unions, as well as among the great number of works councils, the industrial political concept of the DGB is not sufficiently established. Against the background of a further decreasing trade union density this deficit becomes all the more significant. Even if it is quite clear that, due to the severe crisis of the “new economy”, not all the industrial political measures of the Dortmund Project will be successful, every step in the expected direction will by definition increase the dilemma of the trade unions. The sectors and firms that expand will be those that do not even have works councils.

It could be argued that the Ruhr capital Dortmund is an exceptional case. Looking at our comparative cases of Chemnitz and Nuremberg, however, shows us that this is not true. Not only do these cities have a growing number of IT and software firms as well as industrial services and knowledge-based sectors with a low trade union density, but also in these cities the transition to an informational economy is taking place within the old industries. In the region of Nuremberg this phenomenon can best be observed in the firms belonging to the Siemens Corporation. In the course of the transition to a mode of shareholder value-governance (i.e. the contribution of each single business area becomes the core criterion of governance), of the orientation of the portfolio toward win-targets, of increasing internationalisation and of the orientation toward new business areas of the “new economy” the corporation is undergoing fundamental change at a high speed. The consequences for trade unions are the same as in Dortmund: While interest representations still rely on the traditional production sphere and blue collar-workers, the proportion of blue collar to

white collar workers, 20 years ago two to one, has exactly reversed. In the majority of white collar sectors, trade unions are barely present anymore.

"New Economy" – "Old Economy"

These changes possess a revolutionary character (Castells 2001), because they contribute to the revitalisation of capitalism, by undermining the regulative potential of the labour movement. In fact, the trade unions in the examined regions have only little time left to establish themselves in the knowledge-based leading sectors of the "new economy" with their special employment conditions. Restricting themselves to the traditional business of collective interest representation, as well as the sheer defence of the last trade union strongholds, as the modernisation critics demand in all the regions studied, does not represent a viable political alternative.

Instead the question to answer is whether and how the trade unions can gain a foothold in the "new economy". To find an answer to that question, it is first necessary to make clear what we understand by "new economy" in the regions examined. In our view the phrase becomes more tangible if it is placed in the context of a far reaching transformation which can be defined as the transition to a new flexible and market-oriented production model (Dörre 2001). According to our definition the "new economy" not only describes knowledge-based leading sectors, but also the changed economic rules and modes of governance, even applying nowadays to firms and enterprises of the so-called "old economy". The term "new economy" cannot be reduced to Internet-firms and the IT and telecommunication industries. Neither is it a purely economic phenomenon. It refers much more to networks of small, medium and large firms, to specific types of enterprise, to particular bank and credit relationships but also to groups of politicians, analysts, brokers and journalists which stand for the cultural avant garde of a post-Fordist economic regime. These groups, to which 10% percent of the younger generation belong, play the role of ideological leaders (Mann 1994) who propagate the spirit of a revitalised capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2001:459ff.). Confronting market risks is seen as a challenge by these groups, the regime of flexible capitalism as described by Sennett (1998) is considered to be a personal utopia. The crisis of the "new economy" has adversely affected their self-confidence but has not destroyed it. Even during the economic downturn the representatives of the new sectors confront the representatives of the "Old Economy" with the

arrogance of future winners (Their motto is: “Why should we talk to you? We shall soon buy you!”). Seen from that perspective, the “new economy” is also a cultural phenomenon. The “new economy” can be seen as based on the invasion and commercialisation of culture and the private-sphere (Wittemann 1996). It is the midwife of lifestyles that obtain cultural distinction through the attendance of after-work parties, sessions in the gym and trips to restaurants, through the demonstrative will to take risks and the demonstrative optimism in the future or through the participation in the shareholder culture.

Used to the uncertainties of unstable markets, “new economy” firms are at the same time the pioneers of the much discussed “limited de-limitation” (Minssen 2000) of organisations and activities in the work sphere. Through their activities in risky markets, as well as their strong orientation towards human capital, particularly the Internet, IT and data processing firms in particular generate forms of organisation that resemble the mode of “adhocracy” (Deutschmann 1991; Mintzberg 1992). The “new economy” firms confront their employees time and again with non-routine decisions. It is not so much the monotony of atomised activities, which also exist in these firms (Castells 2001), but the constant changes and undermining of routines which put the employees under stress. Therefore flexible firms depend on young, qualified, ambitious and highly motivated employees being prepared to accept considerable variations in working times and conditions. The hierarchies of these firms are relatively ‘flat’. Authority stems primarily from expertise. Informal and constantly changing activities are organised on the basis of fixed-term projects and autonomous teams. All employees are forced to constantly improve their knowledge. Those at the top of the hierarchy concentrate on the representation of the organisation as well as on the mediation of internal forms of co-operation. Bargaining processes often take place on a one-to-one basis between the employee and the management, and as such corresponds to the mode of individualised participation. Even though collective interest representation is on the increase, it exists only in a minority of firms (in 19% of the IT-firms). If there is any collective interest representation at all, it usually takes the form of informal employee committees or round table discussions, which replace works councils and institutionalised co-determination. Trade union density in most “new economy” firms tends towards zero. Management tries to compensate for governance difficulties resulting from informal company organisations through targeted recruitment policies, underwriting the costs of professional qualifications and the creation of an integrated corporate identity. In summary, “new economy” firms embody the ideal type of deregulated

companies, free of co-determination and trade unions. The fact that these characteristics do not solely refer to IT and Internet-firms does not undermine the argument, but proves that these firms form the fertile soil for a paradigm that has already started to affect the so-called “old economy”.

We know from our empirical findings as well as from former studies (Dörre 1999a, b) that even in Old Economy firms, management principles become more and more dominant, which reflect the emergence of a new flexible and market-oriented economic regime. These management principles are: the “internalisation of the market” (Moldaschl and Sauer 2000), the market-driven active participation of the employees in rationalising work, the changing definition of roles, work patterns based on flexible working times, salaries and work organisation concepts and last but not least the conflict resulting from the ever finer line between work and private life (Lehndorff 2002; Peters 2001; Martens, Peter, Wolf 2001). The dogma of flexibility at work corresponds with the “regime of short-termism” which under the impact of globalisation, shareholder value-orientation, the strengthening of the owner and linked to that the increasing interest in quick profits, penetrates even the “negotiated enterprises” of the Rhineland Capitalism. This is exactly where the work and organisational political confrontation between the “old” and the “new” economy lies. The confrontation is not about two different types of economy, but has a societal character. At stake are the modes of regulation and governance of a sustainable economy. Either the paradigm of the deregulated firm will gradually influence the way the “old” work sphere operates, or it is possible for trade unions and other collective interest representations to find modes of regulation which can be applied likewise to “old economy” and “new economy” sectors.

The perspective of re-regulation

When looking at employment, the perspective of re-regulation has to be at the centre of a political project of the future. Are there indications at all that a reversal of the deregulating effects of the “new economy” may happen? Are industrial and structural political measures able to become a platform from which trade unions might succeed in penetrating the “new economy”? On the basis of our current findings these questions cannot be definitively answered. Earlier studies however show that the term “new economy” describes a divided work sphere (Dörre 2002: 166 ff., 300 ff.). The group of participants whose working life resembles in some aspects the ideal type of autonomous work

contrasts with the masses of executants (Castells 2001), who can usually only implement decisions taken by others. Both factions of knowledge-workers are characterised by a stronger connection of their careers to market risks than is the case with “Fordist workers”. However, the confrontation with market risks does not affect the cultural barrier between the “old” and “new” economy, which has so far been insurmountable for trade unions and similar parties. Even the injustices linked to the prevailing mode of individualised bargaining, whereby the capacity of an employee to market him/herself determines the level of the salary (Gorz 2000), do not have much effect. And even if works councils are established due to for instance economic crises, or the intention of regulating working times and job content for older workers, it does not necessarily lead to full-scale unionisation. In this respect one should not overestimate the regulative effect of industrial political efforts of trade unions. At the same time however, such an effect cannot be fully ruled out.

The regulative effect of regional industrial policy depends to a large extent on the capacity of industrial political networks to identify, in their particular region, the interests of inter-firm co-operation, and most of all the capacity to convey these interests. Hidden interests of co-operation can even be found in the “new economy”. Young avantgarde firms are often too small to deal with big orders. They are only partly capable of increasing the number of their employees through informal contacts and co-operative relationships. Small firms in particular are often confronted by an immense number of unsolved management problems. This could be changed through intensified co-operation. Inter-firm co-operation could also be very useful for organising the use of scarce qualified personnel and financial resources. However, as far as this kind of co-operation exists at all, it is often weak and fragile. The dog-eat-dog tendencies of a short-run economy, which functions according to the motto “expand or perish!”, renders difficult the establishment of lasting loyalties and relationships. The paradox, however, is that an informational economy depends on stable and trustworthy institutions (Brinkmann and Seifert 2001). For example, e-commerce is rarely used even where technology allows it to be, owing to a general distrust of virtual business relations. For that reason the expansion of the informational economy has to be built upon governance mechanisms which confine market forces. As we know from the region of Nuremberg, the crisis of the “new economy” has even inspired the ‘Internet-winners’ to think about possibilities of improving their image through local co-operation. This is the opportunity for regional networks to be useful. The involvement in such activities would enable trade unions to get their message

across, in areas of the economy which at the moment are completely lacking collective interest representation.

To become effective, trade unions would benefit from initiating new modes of regulation. For instance, attempts to introduce collective agreements would be helped by providing consultancy services, aimed at achieving better contractual security for individuals. Such consultancy services are mostly requested by those employees who, whilst faced with the pressures of re-commodification resulting from a market-oriented mode of governance, also have something to gain from the freedom associated with the market-centred mode of control. Conventional protective policies, for which there is again demand in several areas of the "new economy", should be combined with a "reflected individualism" to take account also of people's desires for increased education and training. This type of consultancy could improve the ability of employees to orientate themselves in a work sphere ever more characterised by many forms of flexible employment. It is not the simple rejection of market flexibility which would have to become the core idea of such a strategy, but the positive aspects which this flexibility can sometimes allow. At the centre of such a "policy of participation rights" (Trentin 1999) should be a new work constitution allowing the combination of periods of employment with periods of leave for training, qualification and family reasons, as well as the provision of a system of social security that allows for "patchwork-biographies" and the guarantee to abolish gender inequalities which would encourage the demand for qualified services and thus create new jobs. It should also be linked to a new set of industrial rights, based more profoundly on individual interests. By embracing such a strategic approach, regional alliances could become regional development coalitions (Ennals and Gustavsen 1999), capable of combining the necessity of industrial restructuring with the capability to defend the well-being of all those people whose quality of life depends more than ever on the quality of their employment. In this sense, trade union regionalism would really enable a policy of social re-embedding of economic activities.

Radical industrial change and action research

Can social scientists support trade unions in developing a structural and regional policy which responds appropriately to the radical structural change? Dortmund again serves as a useful example. There has actually been intensive co-operation between the DGB and the Social Research Institute of Dortmund

for some time. The department of 'Science and Trade Unions' of the Social Research Institute plays an important role in this co-ordination. The department runs a regular working group dealing with structural political questions; it is responsible for the regional co-operation of work sphere related research projects; it organises the sharing with and transfer of information to the trade unions and launches new initiatives in workplace organisation (for instance in call centres and the software industry). In this the department has the advantage of being able to call upon a well developed scientific infrastructure, which partly implicitly, partly explicitly is geared towards concepts of 'action-research' (for further information refer to Martens 2001: 340–342). Action research in this context means a type of work-related organisational and political consultation, which is based on "open dialogue", on a form of exchange that is not purely theoretical but also practical (Van Beinum and Van Beinum 2001: 311, referring to Toulmin 2000). To put it another way, social scientists see themselves as work-focused consultants, who attain practical relevance through direct and continuous communication with trade unionists.

This co-operation changes the habits, the role and the function, not only of the scientists, but also of the Dortmund DGB trade unionists. Below full strength in terms of personnel, the active element of the DGB Dortmund section consists of its head Eberhard Weber, plus a circle of directly co-operating and loosely associated social scientists. Mr Weber's co-operation with social scientists is of vital importance, owing to his involvement in so many decision-making processes within the Dortmund Project, where he relies on active consultation. When one considers this kind of co-operation, which admittedly does need to be limited to specific topics, owing to the involvement of 100 regular employees in the New-Dortmund Project, the future of trade unions does not seem as bleak as membership statistics might suggest. The network structures of Dortmund, Nuremberg and Chemnitz all in fact have a number of key figures who at least consider themselves to be 'close to trade unions'. In this context, action research could be more than just a research method. It could become an approach that enables social researchers (and others), with their own views on crucial regional problems, to position themselves in the trade union environment with their own activities.

For the moment this scenario is still more aspiration than reality. With our research project we aim, like other projects, at encouraging real change. We consider our approach as participation research, which should enable the researchers to experience the activities which they are researching. We would like to see a knowledge transfer process that helps the key regional actors to

reflect on, and in some cases to improve, their own practice. For this reason a “transfer-workshop” is organised after each research period, involving participants from the three examined regions Nuremberg, Chemnitz and Dortmund. The objective of these workshops is to identify best practice, which enables reciprocal learning processes between the participants. The fact that this creates a sphere of co-operation, allowing the trade union sections involved to exchange experiences outside of the official institutional apparatus, is not unique for German trade unions, although by no means common. Maybe this is not much more than the famous drop in the ocean but, as we know, persistence gets there in the end. The deregulating effects of the “new economy” do not have to simply be accepted: there is potential to respond to the change in a positive way. It is up to the trade unions to take advantage of the situation.

Notes

1. The research project, financed by the Hans-Böckler-foundation, started on 1 August 2001. In addition to the authors, Ulrich Brinkmann from the University of Trier also belongs to the research group.
2. It is obvious that such an industrial political strategy will lead to a substantial change of the traditional identity of trade unions. If a region is transformed into a proactive industrial political alliance, real commitment of powerful actors is essential. Without regional identification and without a consensus on industrial political measures there will be no regional industrial policy. The stronger the gravity of regional networks, the greater the likelihood that trade unions will compete with each other on regional level. In all the examined regions we have observed increasing conflicts concerning the collective trade union identity.

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