

TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

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 FPÖ¹ 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. Heimattreu”

[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 (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 composi-

¹ 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).

tion 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 Kurz² 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)³ conducted for this purpose.

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 1.9 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.⁴ 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 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 com-

² 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).

³ 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).

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

panies 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 resources⁵ 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 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 (Astleithner/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).

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.

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.⁶ 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 government is choosing short-term financial subsidies, a presumably cost-saving path.⁷ 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.

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).

⁷ As of September 2022.

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 bourgeoisie 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 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 assess-

ments 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).⁸ 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 run-off, where a majority of members voted for the Green Party candidate (55 per cent) 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 com-

⁸ 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

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.

Table 3

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

	Member	Non-member
Alexander Van der Bellen	55%	49%
Norbert Hofer	45%	51%

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

Table 4

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

	2002	2004	2006	2014	2016	2018
	Member / Non-member	Member / Non-Member	Member / Non-Member	Member / Non-Member	Member / Non-Member	Member / Non-Member
Migration is ... for the Austrian economy.			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	
Immigration enriches/undermines Austrian culture.	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				
Migration makes Austria a better/worse country.	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	
How many immigrants from poorer countries outside of Europe should be allowed to come and live here?	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	
The state should take measures to reduce income inequality.	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
Proximity to the right						
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
Proximity to the SPÖ	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).

plex 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, 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.⁹ 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 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.

⁹ 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.

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 Mi-

gration' 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 demagogy. 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 Zentralkomitee (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). 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 strongholds 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)¹⁰, the 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 inter-

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).

ests 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"¹¹ 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 inter-

viewed 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 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 Er-

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

ben 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 dependent 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.

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