

Report on WIBAR-3 Seminar: The Defence and Advance of Collective Bargaining in Metal and Electronics Manufacturing -- 23 September 2016, Crowne Plaza Hotel, Bratislava, Slovakia

Participants

This second WIBAR-3 seminar out of three was organized by CELSI, Bratislava, and hosted at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. It was attended by 26 participants, of which nine belonged to the WIBAR-3 consortium (2 AIAS-UvA, 5 CELSI, 2 Ruskin College). The 17 participants from outside the consortium all had a trade union background; two of them represented an international union organisation (one ETUI, one IndustriALL). As for their country origin, the 26 participants were divided as follows: Belgium 1; Czech Republic 2; France 1; Hungary 4; Ireland 1; Italy 1; Netherlands 2; Poland 2; Portugal 1; Slovakia 9; Slovenia 1; United Kingdom 1. Eight participants were female, 18 male. Unfortunately, in the week before the seminar an Italian trade unionist had to withdraw due to urgent duties; her planned introduction was integrated in the presentation of an Italian colleague.

The seminar language was English. Professional interpretation was made available on behalf of the Hungarian and Slovak participants.

Preparatory materials

With the seminar invitation participants also received a 3-page flyer 'Introduction to the WIBAR-3 project'. Ten days before the seminar, participants received the draft 'WIBAR-3 Report on Metal and Electronics Manufacturing' produced by AIAS project coordinators Maarten van Klaveren and Kea Tijdens. The first two chapters of this 96-page draft focussed on constraints and opportunities for multi-employer bargaining (MEB). Chapter 2 went into the feasibility and the recent history of multi-employer bargaining (MEB) throughout the European Union. Chapter 3 detailed developments in employment in the five industries and 23 countries scrutinized. Chapter 4 analysed the outcomes of the WageIndicator survey used for mapping collective bargaining coverage and employees' bargaining preferences, as well as outcomes of the WIBAR-3 Industrial Relations survey covering industrial relations characteristics. An extensive Statistical Appendix completed the draft report.

Presentations

The seminar gathering remained in plenary format throughout as group work was not envisaged. Seven presentations took place. Besides the introduction to the WIBAR-3 project and the preliminary results from the draft report just mentioned, six presentations from participants covered:

- collective bargaining in the metal sector in the Slovak Republic;
- the Slovak case study: experience from Volkswagen;
- introduction to industrial relations in metal and electronics in Hungary;
- collective bargaining on company level in the electronics sector in Hungary: trade union experiences, strategies, obstacles and achievements;
- industrial relations in Italy and collective bargaining in the Italian metal and electronics sector;
- collective bargaining in the UK car industry.

Because presentations were prepared by various participants, nine of them and one absentee were involved in shaping the presentations.

Debate

In spite of the considerable number of presentations, about 1.5 hours were available for debate. The major issues in the debate embraced: developments in employment, competitive structures, technology and employment; developments in industrial relations, including political conditions and the position (and the lack) of employers' organisations; and the implications for collective bargaining practice. The discussion on these issues will be taken into account and be reflected in the final WIBAR-3 reporting.

Developments in competitive structures, technology and employment

Internationalisation / globalisation showed up as a dominant factor, with major implications for employees. In particular in the CEE countries, unions and employees have come under pressure of the combination of internationalisation and the weakening of the social dialogue, including the weakening of the position of the trade unions and the decrease of collective bargaining coverage. Also, the tensions around growing migration and the multicultural society put the opportunities for collective action under pressure. In most countries a sharp division can be seen between subsidiaries of multinational firms with an often high union density and the large majority of small firms with low or totally lacking union presence. In some sub-sectors and in some countries, collective bargaining was a near-impossibility due to the lack of any employer organisation. Notably the Czech and Polish delegates noted this as a problem. By contrast, in Italy the existence of a multitude of employer federations has led to about 700 nation-wide collective agreements in the metal industry, creating coordination and similar problems for the unions as well. It was also noted that in particular Volkswagen seems to export elements of the German industrial relations model to countries like Italy, and that –partly in contradiction with the literature– this could work out negatively for the position of trade unions, for example if the creation of works councils were advertised.

In particular for the car industry various recent developments in **technology and organisation** were highlighted. It was noted that, in spite of the breakdown of the Japanese (country) model, world-class manufacturing and lean production have remained as leading trends, and have spread from the car industry to other parts of metal and electronics manufacturing. These organisational models imply the growth of ever more complicated subcontracting chains. It was argued that this growth on the union side asks for forms of multi-level bargaining while at the same time maintaining forms of internal coordination. In large countries like Italy and the UK, it was suggested, regional coordination may be more effective than national coordination, in particular when it comes to detailing pay scales and developing claims on specific arrangements, like concerning the work – life balance.

Developments in industrial relations

The general discussion focussed on the **role of governments**. In particular delegates from the Czech Republic and Poland reported worrisome developments concerning the Labour Codes in their respective countries. A major but growingly difficult task for the union movement under such conditions is to force employers and their organisations to the negotiation table. In this respect some participants put some hopes from **the revival of the social dialogue** as recently announced by the European Commission while others indicated to expect more from genuine international trade union cooperation like through international framework agreements (IFAs). It was noted that, at least in some countries, the dominance of MNEs in sub-sectors like the car industry led to multi-employer bargaining

mainly existing in rather marginal sub-sectors with much lower pay levels. The issue of the relationship between trade unions and works councils returned in the debate. Various participants argued that governments currently seem to gamble on strengthening councils with the implication of weakening the unions.

In particular the presentation on (pay bargaining in) the UK car industry gave rise to a discussion on **how to strengthen collective bargaining preparation** and related trade union policy-making. The importance was acknowledged of including as many lay unionists as possible in preparing pay claims, and of using training facilities and other supportive facilities like cooperation with workers' consultants and progressive researchers to the utmost. It was argued that the inclusion of broader layers of the rank-and-file may in particular be important for developing specific demands, like concerning the adaptation of work for older workers and concerning the creation of challenging jobs for young workers related to vocational training schemes.

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