

**Labour mobility, union immobility?  
Trade unions & migration in the EU**

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the interactions between trade unions and migrants in the case of intra-EU migration following the EU enlargement eastwards. Against representations of unions as insiders' exclusionary organisations, it will point at the rich evidence of co-operation within unions and migrants. In the case of the EU, it is argued, unions have particular incentives to organise migrants rather than oppose them. However, the role of unions is much more difficult in the case of movement of services.

**Introduction**

In debates on the liberalisation of the movement of services in the EU (the so-called Bolkenstein Directive), on freedom of movement and on legal cases on 'social dumping' in the European Court of Justice, migrants from the new EU member states are often

portrayed as a threat to established worker rights in Western Europe. This is consistent with some traditional approaches to labour migration, but oversimplifies the dynamic nature of the current migration flows and their interactions with labour regulations and worker organisations.

This paper discusses the nature of the movement of worker in the EU and the interaction between Central Eastern European workers and labour market institutions in the West (especially in the United Kingdom). It will argue that the ‘transnational’ nature of current migrations, and the emerging elements of a European civil society prevent the simple opposition between eastern and western European workers, despite political and legal pressures in that direction. The role of trade unions, in particular, differs in most country from the ‘protectionist’ one that it is traditionally associated with them, and is open to the migrants also in allegedly ‘restrictive’ countries such as Germany. Differences between the social and legal nature of labour migration and of movement of services, however, cause differences in union capacities and attitudes.

## **1 – Trade unions: from exclusive to inclusive actors?**

Current debates on labour markets are frequently framed within an ‘insider-outsider’ modelling. Typically, insiders would be middle-aged male local workers belonging to the ethnic majority, with no disability, while the most typical outsiders are migrants. To guarantee the perpetuation of their advantageous position, insiders have a number of institutional device – most typically, it is argued, the trade union. As a corollary, within the EU it is often claimed that western European trade unions are potential obstacles to the employment opportunities of migrants from the new member states.

However, while it is historically true that trade unions in many cases have supported barriers against migrants, this is less and less the case around the world. Moreover, it will be argued, this is least true in the case of the EU, given the transnational nature of much intra-EU migration and the specific forms of socialisation European trade unions are involved in. This does not automatically mean, however, that trade unions will help migrants and outsiders instead. Trade union action on migration is still limited, and is

particularly difficult on the emerging issue of movement of services and posting of workers abroad.

The insider-outsider idea on migration is rooted in structuralist conceptions of the labour market. A pioneering work in this regard was that of Piore (1979), arguing that capitalist economies require continuous flows of new migrants in order to maintain occupational hierarchies, that is to provide labour for low-prestigious occupations (marginal jobs). Without migrants, employers would have to pay local workers to take those jobs considerably higher salaries, which in turn would have entailed a rise in wage demands from workers in mainstream jobs, who would not accept to be paid as much as those in marginal jobs. Old migrants are never enough, as they gradually socialize into the host society and adapt their understanding of prestige and their economic demands to the local practices.

Piore's work resonates, but in a more sophisticated way, with the Marxist arguments by Castle and Kosack (1973), who similarly see migration as a capitalist strategy, but without distinguishing between labour market sectors. According to them, migration is used to keep wages low in general, and trade unions are in the difficult situation of having to resist it, but at the same time to offer solidarity to immigrants.

The distinction between insiders and outsiders varies depending on country, and it is assumed to be strongest, among industrialized economies, in 'Southern European' and 'continental' (esp. Germany) welfare states (Ferrera, Hemerijck and Rhodes 2000). An emerging consensus, in organisations like the OECD and the EU, argues that flexible labour markets such as in Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian countries provide a solution to such labour market segmentation.

In the past, there have been famous cases of trade unions erecting barriers against migration. The American Federation of Labor campaigned for migration controls since the turn of the XX Century until the 1920s, when it obtained them, and around 1900 exclusionary practices against migrant groups (especially Eastern and Southern Europeans, and even more against the Chinese) were commonplace in US unions. Exclusionary practices French trade unions were asking for migration controls still around 1970 (Castle and Kosack 1973), despite the rise of new social movements at the time.

However, already Piore (1979) had noted that unions are not permanently against migrants, and that migrants are not permanently excluded from trade unions. In the USA, already in the 1930s second-generation migrants, who were being assimilated, joined massively the unions, and the development of industrial unionism, replacing the more selective craft unions, offered the opportunity for their incorporation (Milkman 2000). Yet, the image of union as insiders' barricades remained, and remains strong. Historically, an association between mass migration and trade union weakening (notably, in the early XX and late XX Century) cannot be denied in the USA (Waldiger and Der-Martirosian 2000).

More recently, there has been an increase in studies on the relationship trade unions policies towards migration, following the emergence of debates on globalization (e.g. Martens 1999; Haus 2002; Watts 2002; Milkman 2000, 2006; Penninx and Roosblad 2000; Wrench 2004). These studies have problematised the role of trade unions, pointing at dilemmas they face and at strategies and choices they can develop. Importantly, migrants' characteristics (such as language, educational level, country of origin, previous experience in unions) have showed to be scarcely influent on union inclusive outcomes (Penninx and Roosblad, 2000). At the same time, empirical studies have dismissed the complementary idea that migrants are not prone to unionise. Their union propensity is actually high, and in the USA, even regardless of legal status (documented or undocumented), although the length of past and planned stay in the country is very important (Milkman 2000). Where union density among migrants is low, it is as an effect of occupational segregation and the difficulty migrants have to get jobs in unionised workplaces (Waldiger and Der-Martirosian 2000). Overall, empirical evidence suggests that it is industrial relations institutions, and union attitudes and practices, rather than subjective factors related to migrant workers, the most important factor in the determination of union-migrants relations. Nonetheless, migrants are also actors of change and, for instance, their self-organization can affect unions in return (e.g. Wrench, 1992; Virdee and Grint, 1994).

The most recent studies challenge, therefore, the frequently held assumption of a difficult relationship between migrants and trade unions. Both European and North American reality has shown that the opposite can be the case: trade unions (even if with some major

ambiguities) can be at the forefronts of migrants' defence and organizing, in countries as different as the UK (Avci and McDonald 2000), Spain and Italy (Watts 2002) or the USA (Milkman 2006). Even in the supposedly exclusionary corporatist Germany and Switzerland, trade unions have organised migrants to large and growing extents (Schmitter 1981, Erne 2008). According to Haus (2002), the factors behind US and French unions' move towards inclusive practices are economic and political internationalisation, and the entrenchment of the human right discourse. The former entails that trade unions are now aware of the impossibility of preventing migration, and the latter means that it would be inconsistent for trade unions' own policies and campaigns to be seen campaigning against migration. Watts (2002) reiterates the point on internationalisation in the case of French, Spanish and Italian unions' shifts towards open migration policies. She also adds two factors: the importance of the illegal economy (especially in Italy and Spain), with the consequent union interest in channelling migrants towards legal status, and organising needs in face of declining membership, a point also made by Milkman (2006). These studies focus mostly on migration from outside the EU, and were carried out before EU enlargement. The next sections will discuss whether the reality of mass migration following the enlargement confirms the thesis of a pro-migrants shift in labour organisations.

## **2- The EU enlargement challenges**

During the negotiations leading to the EU enlargement eastwards of 2004, the freedom of movement of workers was the most debated social issue. Although they did not formally take position against enlargement or against the principle of freedom of movement, some western trade unions, and especially the German and Austrian ones, supported the introduction of transitory periods as a protection for host country labour markets (Meardi 2002, Bohle and Husz 2005). The overall debate on migration was polarized between the EU arguing that migration flows would be minor, as in the previous enlargement to Southern Europe in the 1980s (Boeri and Brücker 2001), and some fears of massive 'social raids' which would have dismantled western European welfare states (Sinn and Ochel 2003). In fact, migration flows after 2004, towards those countries that had not introduced transitional barriers (initially, UK, Sweden and Ireland), were much larger

than the EU expected, but also more employment-oriented and economically beneficial than the skeptics feared.

At the same time, however, the previously neglected issue of the freedom of movement of services and posting of workers has led to tensions, both symbolically and in real disputed. The mythical figure of the ‘Polish plumber’ was a crucial factor in the French rejection of the European Constitution in the referendum of May 2005. Real tensions emerged in the transport sector, and major disputes occurred in both transport and construction (sectors where labour mobility is a normal occurrence). The Laval and Viking union disputed in Sweden and Finland led European Court of Justice’s rulings (on these cases as well as on the Rüffert and Luxembourg ones) undermining unions’ efforts to protect established worker rights. But the freedom of movement of workers as such – which was by far the biggest social concern – failed to confirm the worst fears, at least until the economic downturn starting in 2008. Some common union reactions to further liberalisation took place, with at least partially successful union protests against the ‘Bolkestein’ Directive (Gajewska 2009), following the previous example on the Port Services Directive (Turnbull 2006), which even if only indirectly connected with the enlargement, had proved the potential of cross-border mobilisation on EU policies. The social concerns marginalised by the enlargement can re-emerge even more strongly because of it.

The situation on migration is made more complex because of the different regulations that the various old member states have introduced. Between 2006 and 2009, most old member states followed the example of UK, Ireland and Sweden in opening the borders, leaving only Austria and Germany to apply restrictions until the latest deadline of 2011. The movement of workers from the new to the old member states has been unprecedented in the EU, and estimated to around 1m towards the UK and 200 thousands towards Ireland. For the first time in the EU, the assumption that mobility is a prerogative of capital but not labour has been proved wrong, and this has not failed to impact on power relations between capital and labour. Even if the ‘voice’ of employees in the new member states has remained feeble, their massive ‘exit’ has forced employers, and to a lesser extent governments, to important concessions, leading to higher than expected wage growth and some improvements in employment conditions. Moreover, the labour market

effects of exit have in turn resulted in more attention to voice, with multiple instances of trade union revitalisation and newly found assertiveness (Meardi 2007): in 2007, strike levels have been increasing (even if starting from very low levels) in the new member states while they kept falling in the old ones (Carley 2008).

Immigration can be a threat to labour conditions (Castles and Kosack 1973). In the case of the enlargement, the disruptions for social standards have been noticed not only on working conditions in the receiving states, but also in the social conditions in the ‘leaving states’, in particular in the extreme case of Latvia (Woolfson 2007). A government census (not survey) of migrants’ families in Poland found 110,000 so-called ‘Euro-orphans’, i.e. children missing at least one parent (and often both) to migration (‘Co czują EUrosieroty’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2008), raising within Europe the issue of ‘care drain’ (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003).

Unexpected migration has also modified the terms of an East-West divide among trade unions. While trade unions usually have an interest in controlling the supply of labour and limiting migration, once migrants have arrived (or when their imminent arrival can no longer be prevented) they have an interest in organising and defending them – bypassing reciprocal scepticism. How this has happened is discussed in sections 3 and 4.

### **3- Trade union reactions to intra-EU migration**

In such a situation of strains on both sides of the migration movement, the risk of mobilisation *against* migrants rather than for their social rights was strong. This is an instance where the risk of conflicts between eastern and western trade unions was particularly strong, as some tensions during the accession process had indicated (Meardi 2002). A specific risk of *liaisons dangereuses* between western European employers and eastern European labour, both converging against employment protection in western Europe, was raised. The diverging interests between some western (especially German and Austrian) and eastern trade unions (Meardi 2002; Menz 2008; Krings 2009; Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt 2009) might turn into a divide between western and eastern labour. Indeed, the European Trade Union Confederation elaborated its own policy, against transitional limits to the freedom of movement of workers, but without the

authority to impose it on its reluctant Austrian and German members (resolution ‘Towards Free Movement of Workers in an Enlarged European Union’, December 2005). The cases of *liaisons dangereuses* between labour and capital, as well as international intra-labour conflicts have remained extremely rare, though. Much more visible have been the organizing efforts by trade unions towards the new migrants, especially in UK and Ireland (Hardy and Fitzgerald 2010, Heyes 2009, Meardi 2009), which have led to numerous successes and to attention in the media, with even reports of Polish migrants as ‘bringing solidarity back in fashion in Britain’ (*the Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2006). Organising migrants in the UK included innovative practices, such as co-operation with ethnic associations (e.g. with the Polish Catholic Association in Birmingham) and setting up Polish-language sections (in Southampton and Glasgow). It focused on two particularly important factors leading to migrants’ exploitation: information on employment rights, and skills, including qualification recognition and English language. On the former issue, the unions made an effort in information materials publication, and it is now unlikely for any new migrant not to receive some publication on employee rights in their own language. Moreover, the unions reinforced their campaigning on employment rights in Temporary Work Agencies, an important labour market segregating institution: over one third of new migrants receive their first job from agencies, which in the UK do not guarantee the same rights as direct employees. Such campaign had some success, forcing the government to concede new legislation in 2008 and preparing the ground for EU regulations. On the second issue, an important area of both organising and servicing became the defence of free English language classes, threatened by public funding cuts, and subsequently the provision of them directly by the unions through the government-sponsored Union Learning Fund (Heyes 2009).

Western trade unions have also engaged in cross-border co-ordination. The most significant activity has been the co-operation with eastern European trade unions (mostly Polish, given the ‘critical mass’ of Polish migration), leading to the posting of organizers from Polish trade unions Solidarity and OPZZ to UK and Ireland, which in turn facilitated the recruitment of activists and organizers among migrants. Such co-operation is made easier by the frequent ‘transnational’ nature of intra-EU migration, and it has established inclusion as the dominant union approach towards migrants (Hardy and

Fitzgerald 2010). British trade unions have proved to have the strategic capacity of putting migration in the broader context, avoiding the temptations of localized exclusionary conflicts. The Trades Union Congress placed the migration issue within the broader social context of – not exclusively migrant – vulnerable work (TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment 2008), shifting the focus from migrants to poor employee rights as the problem: the case of Temporary Work Agencies shows clearly that campaigns for migrants can also improve working conditions for large numbers of British workers. The British experience is similar to that of Ireland (Dundon et al. 2007) and of construction sector unions in other European countries and especially Switzerland (Erne 2008). Combined together, they represent clear examples of new co-operation between trade unions and other social movements in complex social settings, and not simply in the workplace, something which has received particular attention in the USA (Milkman 2006, Turner and Cornfield 2007).

However, in terms of cross-border trade unionism, the focus on the national, political level of trade unionism is limited and leads to the unwarranted conclusion of a gap between the ‘openness’ of British and Irish trade unions in comparison to their German or Austrian counterparts. Such conclusion is often based on the institutional argument that ‘Liberal Market Economy’ trade unions are more prone to organising than those relying on corporatist institutions (Krings 2009). This argument is not entirely convincing as it neglects, behind the idea of encompassing national models, intra-sector differences, and especially the fact that in the low-wage sector the German labour market is actually *less* institutionally protected than the British, due to the lack of a minimum wage: it is therefore in countries like Germany that a migrant organising effort is more needed, and indeed there is evidence of some movement in that direction (Turner 2009).

The argument is also unconvincing empirically, because, behind the focus on national official policies, it overlooks developments on the ground. In fact, not only, as we have seen, have UK trade unions been active in servicing just as much as in organising. There have also been a number of campaigns on migration by German trade unions, which not only provide advisory and training services to migrants, but have also reacted politically, notably demanding the introduction of a national minimum wage. German trade unions provide advisory and training services for migrants. Most notably, major developments

have occurred in cross-border co-operation, especially in the border regions through the Interregional Trade Union Councils (seven of them involve Austrian or German trade unions and partners from the new member states). In 2006, for instance, DGB, Verdi and Solidarity protested jointly in the border region against a megastore that was violating worker rights (Szewczyk and Unterschütz 2009). In May 2009, a Polish-German trade union forum was launched in Gdańsk. In Austria, trade unions are distinctive in their explicit rejection of special projects geared to migrant workers, on the grounds that all members should be treated equally (Chaloupek and Peyrl 2009), which reflects a different national approach to the issue of diversity (Greene et al 2005). But even there, information initiatives have not been lacking, and it is reported that most people seeking help from the Chambers of Labour have a migrant background (Chaloupek and Peyrl 2009). Interviews with trade union members in Austria and Hungary in 2005 and 2006 have revealed that, on the ground, unionists of both sides involved in cross-border contacts did not consider the issue of transitional periods to be an obstacle to co-operation, and that they easily ‘agreed to disagree’ on that point while still co-operating on others. German and Austrian trade unions, despite supporting transitional arrangements of the freedom of movement of workers, are aware that soon (2011) these arrangements will end, and therefore have the same need as British trade unions to organise migrants (Donaghey and Teague 2006). Moreover, at the grassroot level, where socialisation occurs between workers, possibilities for transnational co-operation do emerge (Gajewska 2009). If there are limits to German trade union activity on migration, we should not forget that there are limits to the more advertised British action. The UK unions programs of co-operation with Solidarity relied largely on public funding, and some proved not to be self-sustainable once such funding finished. Interestingly, in Poland both Solidarity and OPZZ international affairs officers, as well as Polish construction sector’s unionists (own interviews, 2009) consider co-operation with German unions, on the ground, to be easier and more productive than with British trade unions.

The overall implication for cross-border unionism is that – whether in the UK or in Germany and Austria – co-operation on migration issues, despite the political difficulties

that may come from the extreme Right, proves the potential for combining inclusion and dialogue *within* trade unions with solidarity and dialogue *among* national unions..

#### **4- Trade union responses to movement of services**

The freedom of movement of services has emerged as a contested social issue at the same time as the enlargement, due to conflicts on the so-called ‘Bolkestein Directive’. Unlike the freedom of movement of workers, it is not subject to any transitional period. In spite of the service Directive not being approved in the original Bolkestein text – with the ‘country of origin’ principle –, the destabilising effect of the freedom of movement of services for industrial relations has become apparent very quickly (Verschueren 2008).

The Laval conflict, with the subsequent ECJ ruling, has been the most visible case. In that occasion, the Swedish and Latvian employer side tried to organise Latvian workers in Latvian trade unions to bypass and undermine the Swedish ones (Woolfson 2007), an example of the feared ‘*liaisons dangereuses*’ between unions and employers that might disrupt the Europeanisation of industrial relations. Hardy and Fitzgerald (forthcoming) have detected an even clearer case: the Polish union FZZiZ (Seamen’s and Fishermen’s Trade Union – federated to the OPZZ confederation) organized recruitment for jobs abroad for its members (who were suffering from the massive redundancies in the Polish maritime sector). This was done in co-operation with western employers, in a fashion similar to a job agency, and without contacts with the western (notably British) trade unions. Such activity was criticized in both Poland and UK and resulted in the official disapproval and disaffiliation from the OPZZ. More generally, there is also some evidence of a ‘trade-off’ between free movement of workers and free movement of services, the latter being more disruptive where the former is limited. Both Polish and German media highlighted in 2007 the case of Polish subcontractors employed by the largest meat-processing company in Germany, Tönnies, within its own factories: German trade unions were struggling to find a way to oppose the employment conditions of Polish contract workers (€3.50/hour pay, 84-hour working week), as these were not considered as German employees. The later Ruffert and Luxembourg cases and ECJ rulings highlighted the disparity between EU-protected economic freedom and national regulations.

Interestingly enough, however, the most visible mobilisations against foreign contract workers occurred not in Germany or Austria, but in the ‘open border’ Sweden (Laval), Ireland (Irish Ferries), and UK (in construction engineering). The question is whether such mobilisations’ nature is nationalistic or not. In the Irish Ferries case, the Latvian trade unions were involved, and some efforts in this regard was made also by the Swedes on Laval: these cases are not primarily protectionist or against international solidarity. The case that rang the alarm bell of nationalism occurred in the UK in January and June 2009 at the Total Lindsey refinery, under the banners ‘British jobs for British workers’. It did not actually involve workers from the new member states, but contractors from one an oldest, founding member of the EU, Italy – but the case quickly gained national relevance for the issue of foreign contract workers in general, and especially from eastern Europe.

In the Lindsey case, the role of the media was instrumental in depicting the protests against Sicilian contractor IREM as ‘xenophobic’. BBC reports engaged in selective quotations when showing protesters saying ‘we cannot work alongside the Eyties’ (politically incorrect, but not necessarily offensive, colloquial term for ‘Italians’), cutting off the subsequent explanations that they were not allowed to (rather that they did not want to) work together with contractor workers. Even worse was the representation of the events in the Italian media. Leftwing newspapers *il manifesto* and *l’Unità* devoted to it the whole first page and compared the protests to the concomitant rightwing anti-migrant actions in Italy, while the state broadcaster RAI opened the reports from the safety of the Italian workers under alleged siege on their barge, and even provocatively interviewed Italian workers on Italian sites where British workers were employed, asking whether they wanted to take revenge for the treatment of their compatriots in England (for the bafflement in the interviewees). Such reports had political effects, with strong condemnations of the protests, among others, by Business Secretary Lord Mandelson in the UK, and even from the Italian President Napolitano. The Sicilian governor Lombardo even threatened to stop procurement contracts to British companies in retaliation.

Such portrayal influenced national- and international-level trade unions. The European affairs officers of the largest Italian union, CGIL, Nicolosi and Petrucci, signed a declaration opening with the words ‘What’s going on in Lincolnshire is one of the ugliest

pages in the history of the trade union movement in these globalised times: English workers against Italian workers' (Ufficio Stampa CGIL, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2009). The initial reaction of the second Italian trade union, CISL, was similar. However, if one moves from the official level to the local one, the picture was different. In its home town Syracuse (own interviews with CISL and CGIL union officers), IREM was known by the trade union for its anti-union practices and for by-passing of national collective agreements (through the affiliation to the artisans', rather than employers' confederation). Unionists on the ground understood the British protesters for two reasons: they were not surprised that IREM would have tried to undercut British collective agreements on pay (something that, crucially, the arbitration body ACAS failed to investigate in its report), and agreed with the British concern on employment, given the Italian unions' practice to sign local 'employment continuity' contracts in large industrial sites or ports, to bind foreign contractors to the use of already locally employed workers (whether Italians or foreigners) local labour and the respect of collective agreements. In short, as one unionist said, if the same problem with a foreign contractor had occurred in Syracuse, 'we would have done exactly the same'. At Lindsey, at the same time, a question mark on the xenophobic nature of the demonstration is raised by the participation in the protests of locally resident Polish workers.

The Lindsey case demonstrates the disruptive effects of the freedom of movement of services, and the possibility of workers' success only through major political pressure: legally, IREM and Total could have claimed, like Laval, that the protests were illegal (and Total did so in June, but still had to succumb to worker unofficial strikes). On transnational trade union action, it confirms the weakness of transnational organisation: Italian unionists were only informed of the issue through the Italian media at the end of January, even though British trade unions had started negotiating the issue with Total before Christmas. At no stage there have been direct Italian-British union contacts, also due to the non-union nature of IREM foreign operations, but also indirect, slow and easily distorted links through European federations in Brussels. However, like in the manufacturing cases described in section 3, the existence of some sort, even if vague, of common European labour organisation and identity has prevented, in spite of strong political and media incentives, the emergence of xenophobic conflicts – even if it has

proved too weak to produce any positive, active solidarity. In the case of the freedom of movement of services, the emergence of transnational networks is more difficult than on migration not only because of the lack of institutional and structural resources (union-unfriendly legislation), but also because of the segregation, in the workplace as well as housing, of foreign contract workers – as the IREM barges symbolise. This situation is confirmed by the developments at similar, if less prominent, protests against Polish contractors in England and Wales in winter and spring 2009 (especially, at Alstom in England and at the South Hook natural gas refinery in Wales). Again, no contacts between Polish and British trade unions were established (even though the Alstom's Polish contractors Remak and ZREW is unionised, while Hertel's Polish workers were not), but nationalistic developments were at least side-lined, and the focus remained on the labour issues of working conditions, respect of collective agreements, and employment security. Interestingly, in a parallel case involving the same Polish company ZREW in France (another country that initially had transitional limits on migration), ZREW's Solidarity and Alstom's CGT co-operated in 2005-06 to campaign against bad treatment of Polish workers in the French site ZREW, and the French court condemned ZREW to respect French collective agreements.

### **5- Co-operation between unions and Polish associations**

Community organising has gained in relevance in trade unions in the USA and subsequently in the UK. Polish migration offers an important large-scale test bed in this regard. The picture of co-operation between trade unions and Polish associations in the UK is mixed, with failures reported in Southampton, and would require systematic analysis. As an illustration of the potential of such co-operation, I describe here the co-operation project between the TUC and the Polish Club which run in 2006 and 2007. The project covered primarily information and advice on basic social and employment rights, with the secondary aims of recruiting and organizing migrants into the unions as well as creating capacities (in terms of organization and expertise) within the Polish Club to pursue such activity autonomously in the future. In practice, it mostly consisted in surgeries offered by union experts within the Polish Club one afternoon per week, with translation provided by volunteers of the Polish Club.

The project is interesting for the interaction between cultural/ethnic associations and class-based ones. The Polish Club in Birmingham (officially named Polish Catholic Association) was created by World War II veterans in the post-war period and it has had a mostly cultural and religious function so far (it includes a Church and the most attended event is the Sunday Mass). There is a large generation and cultural gap between that generation of Polish refugees and the current generation of migrants. The old generation's identity was based on staunch anti-communism, and an idealized version of patriotism which is alien to the new generation. The old generation did not even recognize the People's Republic of Poland as a legitimate state – while the new generation was born in it and, willy-nilly, it accepted it as a matter of fact. The borders of Poland have also changed so much after 1945 that the two generations may often refer to different homelands: the old one mostly coming from the eastern territories that now belong to the Ukraine or Belarus.

This cultural and generational gap seems to have been bridged, however, by the emergency of the large number of young Polish migrants coming to the Club with requests of help. The Club, lacking the necessary expertise and capacity, turned to the Trade Union Congress which, coincidentally, was keen on starting a project on migrant workers. The project seems to have met the approval of workers and the surgeries enjoy certain popularity. Questions are raised as to the degree to which the secondary aims have been reached, though. Recruitment has been meagre, and the unions doubt about the autonomous capacities developed by the Polish Club. By contrast, the Polish translators already argue to know, by now, all that needs to be said and to be able to answer (even more quickly and effectively) queries without even the presence of the union experts.

The issues emerging from the Polish Club-TUC co-operation can be further examined through migrants' answers. Most migrants have no experience and nearly no interest in trade unionism. According to a survey run by the TUC among 100 Polish who attended the surgeries, 10 per cent have been trade union members in Poland, and 3 per cent are members in the UK. Qualitative interviews carried out in 2007 show that respondents seem to put more hope and trust in Polish organizations rather than in local trade unions.

*First of all, the initiative for helping Poles should be taken by the Polish Club.*

[Male cleaner, 37]

However, the weak interest in trade unionism should be contextualized and not treated as inherent to migrant or Polish workers. Low unionization is normal for low-pay young employees in temporary employment, whether migrants or not. Some respondents actually express some appreciation for trade unions, while others point at the difficulty in organizing in sectors where the employers are anti-union.

*Generally it's always good if there is an institution or a trade union which represents the employees.*

[Female cleaner, 49]

*There is such a tyrannical management that there is no chance for a trade union. They would sack half of the people.*

[Male driver, 40]

*There was a trade union but when I arrived it didn't exist anymore. The people who had created it had been sacked, as simple as that. [...] it would be certainly useful; thanks to the union we got a half-hour break.*

[Female warehouse operative, 21]

In the 1980s and early 1990s the experience of Polish workers abroad (especially in Germany) was in the informal economy, with no contact with the trade unions or with negative contacts only, the unions being seen as obstacles and barriers because of their opposition to illegal migrant's work (especially in the construction industry). The situation appears to be different now, when Poles enjoy the status of EU citizens, and host-country trade unions prove to be potential resources rather than enemies.

## **Conclusions**

While ETUC policies look ineffective in implementing a common migration policy from above, this paper shows that, from below, networks are developing between trade unions from eastern and western EU. The freedom of movement of labour is faced by unions with some unexpected successes, and provides a fertile terrain for coalitions with other

social movements. By contrast, unexpected difficulties have emerged on the freedom of movement of services. A focus on the ‘transnational’, unlike ‘methodologically nationalist’ analytical frameworks, allows to understand why developments depend not so much on national countries, as it would appear from top-level developments (Krings 2009): it is imprecise to counter-oppose British ‘openness’ to German ‘closure’, for instance. They depend rather on the ground: on the degree of broader European socialisation and networking resources and opportunities. Migration provides more opportunities than the movement of services. In particular, migration seems to make it easier for trade unions to ‘humanise’ foreign workers and develop solidarities with them, than the simple existence of remote foreign subsidiaries. On the freedom of movement of services, the opportunities for socialisation are minimal, and the only positive effects come indirectly from broader European labour socialisation, whereby nationalism tends to be sidelined.

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