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Dr Sonia McKay is a newly appointed Visiting Professor at UWE, attached to CESR. Here she reports on a European Commission (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities) funded project supported by the European Trade Union Confederation and on a recent book, *Workplace equality in Europe – the role of trade unions*, co-authored with Dr Anna Paraskevopoulou. She develops a number of themes that emerged from the project, with a view to understanding the effect of the economic crisis on trade union actions to combat discrimination.

Background

Trade unions are Europe's largest civil society organisation and by the mid-2000s many had adopted policies aimed at combating discrimination and prejudice. However, the impact of these policies was uncertain and this was highlighted in the publication of Eurobarometer (2007), a European-wide survey on discrimination, which showed that only a very small proportion of Europe's citizens responding to the survey (around eight per cent) identified trade unions as playing a significant role in challenging discrimination at work. It was thus important to understand why there seemed to be a gap between trade union policy intentions and their impact on members and workers and to understand why it was that trade unions were not seen as relevant in fighting discrimination, even by their own members.

The context was also the introduction of the Racial Equality and Employment Equality Directives, introduced more than eight years earlier, which had, for the first time, highlighted specific strands of discrimination, against which there should be protection by Member States, to include racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, age, disability and sexual orientation.

The project

The Pan-European mapping study on trade union practices in fighting discrimination and promoting diversity was conducted between 2009 and 2010 and involved a survey of trade union anti-discrimination practices in 34 European countries. It was thus an enormously complex project, requiring a high level of organisation, in locating experts to conduct interviews; in insuring as much as possible an equal standard of interviews; and in analysing the responses consistently, together with producing a report that would be recognised as authoritative. In each of the countries experts in trade unions and/or discrimination were appointed to conduct around 8-10 interviews with senior trade union officials and representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations working in the field of discrimination. In all more than 250 interviews were conducted. They were analysed by the WLRI research team and the resulting report, *Trade union practices on anti-discrimination and diversity*, was published by the European Commissionⁱ in 2010.

ⁱ *Trade union practices on anti-discrimination and diversity* can be downloaded at: ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=6164&langId=en



The project aimed to:

- Map trade union anti-discrimination initiatives;
- Classify them by two categories – significant or innovative; and
- Identify good practices, through case studies.

In all it located around 130 initiatives taken by trade unions which were categorised as significant or innovative, defined in the project report as follows:

Significant - have wide coverage, are likely to be sustained (or repeated if they were one-off initiatives), or are important to the national context in which the initiative took place.

Innovative - represent new ways of engagement for the trade union in the context in which it operates or engagement beyond traditional trade union communities.
(European Commission, 2010: 9)

While this was important from a policy perspective, in that it provided the Commission and the trade unions with a systematic way of identifying the effectiveness of policies on non-discrimination, there was limited scope within the funding and objectives of the project to reflect on what these policies had meant in practice and, in particular, on how the policies that trade unions had adopted had fared in the light of the economic crisis of 2007 and beyond. This was therefore the aim of the book.

Workplace equality in Europe – The role of trade unions – Looking to the future

Having explored the key theoretical issues relating to equality and diversity policies and having looked at the role of legislation and at the exchange of knowledge and practice between trade unions and NGOs in the field of discrimination, the final chapter of the book, titled 'Looking to the future' (Paraskevopoulou and McKay, 2015: 125-126) reflects on the

The final chapter of the book, titled 'Looking to the future' reflects on the wider role of trade unions, particularly in the context of the economic crisis.

wider role of trade unions, particularly in the context of the economic crisis. It argues that legislation, either at national or EU level, of itself cannot eliminate discrimination at work and it is for this reason that the actions of trade unions are pivotal. What the book suggests is that trade unions that have adopted strong anti-discrimination policies are better placed

to foster workplaces that offer less discriminatory spaces. Importantly it suggests that trade unions are never neutral in the fight against discrimination. Where they have a positively declared commitment to promote equality and where they have taken action in furtherance of such policies, they can make a difference. However, in cases where trade unions have a weak commitment to equality (where they might have paper policies but have not, in practice, done anything) they might actually have a negative impact on equality at work.

The book furthermore suggests that the economic crisis of itself is neither an inhibitor nor promoter of equality. When trade unions had established and effective policies on combating discrimination at the workplace and more generally within societies and communities, their commitment could survive the impact of economic crisis and indeed crisis could be the motor

for the reinforcement of such policies. However, trade unions that had weak, ineffective or limited policies were more likely to use the crisis as an excuse as to why they were unable to pursue non-discrimination policies.

Drawing on the interviews with NGOs in all of the 34 countries, the book suggests that the decline in trade union membership throughout Europe, together with the economic crisis, has meant that policies on non-discrimination are more likely to be effective where trade unions work with or alongside NGOs active in the field, but that to do this trade unions need to embrace new forms of organisation which often are in conflict with their traditional methods and with their model of democracy. Here the book takes Larsson's (2012) concept of 'hard' and 'soft' issues and applies this to discrimination, finding that whilst trade unions on their own promote 'soft' issues, they need the support of external bodies, such as NGOs or European level institutions, to take up those issues which they viewed as 'hard'. European Union funding was also a catalyst to encourage trade unions to work around 'hard' issues but this also meant that trade union agendas were influenced by what funding there was and what non-discrimination actions this sought to promote.

The research shows that trade unions remain important actors and, where they have the political will, they can contest discrimination in the workplace.

Although trade union influence in Europe may have declined through the twin effects of the decline in collective bargaining coverage and the dominance of austerity as the political direction for EU Member States, the research shows that trade unions remain important actors and, where they have the political will, they can contest discrimination in the workplace.

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