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When does solidarity end?
Transnational solidarity during and after the crisis – the GME/Opel case revisited

by

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Abstract: The GME/Opel case provides an example of labour solidarity across borders that has been investigated from many different theoretical perspectives such as rational-choice based interest theory (Bernaciak 2010, 2013), institutional approaches (Banyuls/Haipeter 2010) and more actors-oriented concepts of identity work (Greer/Hauptmeier 2008, 2012). Yet all of these different theories support the assumption that the ‘national turn’ of trade union politics during the crisis has eroded transnational solidarity and mutual trust relations. By disentangling normative and cultural-cognitive orientations of actors from their behaviour we aim to develop a more differentiated perspective on transnational labour solidarity. Our hypothesis is that a decline in transnational cooperation does not necessarily mean that mutual trust relationships and norms of solidarity ceased to be influential. We draw on neo-institutional concepts (Lawrence et al. 2009, Scott 2008) to explore whether or not norms and shared understandings of cross-border solidarity are still intact and impact upon the (non-)behaviour of trade union actors. The case of GME/Opel is contrasted with Volkswagen in a ‘most-different’ case study design to show how the varying endowment with resources impacts on the actors’ capacity for ‘institutional work’. Empirical evidence from three countries (Germany, Poland and the UK) is used to demonstrate that solidarity has not come to an end and could contribute to repertoires of contention (Tilly 2006) in future labour conflicts.

Vera Glassner worked at the ETUI from November 2007 until February 2012 as researcher in the area of industrial relations. Before joining the ETUI she held the position of research assistant at the Institute of Industrial Sociology, University of Vienna. Vera Glassner has conducted comparative studies on labour relations and social partner organisation for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. She has also carried out studies for various organisations including the International Labour Organization, the Hans Böckler Foundation, the Otto Brenner Foundation, the European Metalworkers’ Federation, the European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers’ Federation, the European Trade Union Confederation, as well as other national and European unions. In her research on the Europeanisation of industrial relations she also cooperates with several academic research institutions.