

Global Issues

Refugees and Labour in Europe

Germany's *Willkommenskultur*: Trade Unions, Refugees and Labour Market Integration¹

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the relationship between German trade unions and refugees by focusing on union policies and practices aimed at integrating refugees into the labour market and wider society. Based on web research, newspaper articles, participant observation and internal documents, this article shows that unions follow a “logic of optimisation” in their support of the state’s migration and asylum policies. As employers aim to undermine existing labour standards, unions’ strategies of integration run up against limits. This article further finds that that unions’ positive stance toward refugees is based on Germany’s labour shortage, demographic trends and their commitment to anti-racism.

Introduction

German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decision to not close Germany’s borders to Syrian refugees in 2015 has been labelled “the summer of solidarity” despite asylum seekers from Afghanistan, the Balkan states or even Iraq being stranded at the European Union’s outer border. Germans welcomed Syrian refugees at train stations across the country, provided them with food and clothes, and even offered up their homes. According to a study by Germany’s Protestant Church (EKD), an estimated 10.9 per cent of the population have been involved in voluntary work with refugees (Ahrens, 2015; Karakayali and Kleist, 2015). Initially, German corporations welcomed Chancellor Merkel’s political stance, too. Daimler CEO Dieter Zetsche argued that these refugees were highly motivated and could “cause” the next economic miracle (FAZ, 2015). However, one year later, corporations listed on the DAX stock exchange – Germany’s largest corporations – had only employed fifty-four refugees, with fifty of them being employed by Germany’s postal service, *Deutsche Post*. Other employers’ associations and mainstream economists repeatedly used the opportunity to argue against the minimum wage law and that it should not apply to refugees. Despite this, German trade unions and their members have displayed solidarity with the new refugees, as well as with civil society efforts to build a solidarity movement. Most visibly, trade unions raised hundreds of thousands of Euros for humanitarian help

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through their charitable organisation *Gewerkschaften helfen*.

Yet, this *Willkommenskultur* – the promotion of a positive attitude of politicians, businesses and other institutions towards foreigners and migrants – has its limits. According to Amnesty International (2016), over 1 000 homes of refugees and asylum seekers were attacked in 2015. Meanwhile, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has made gains in recent elections, winning 24.3 per cent in the federal state of Sachsen-Anhalt, 15.1 per cent in Baden-Württemberg and 20.8 per cent in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Trade unions are not immune to these political trends. As a recent study by The Confederation of Germany Trade Unions (DGB) stresses, trade unionists are just as likely to vote for the AfD as the general electorate (DGB, 2016).

With three federal state elections and the national election coming up in September 2017, this article investigates unions' measures to integrate refugees into the labour market and wider society. By drawing on websites, flyers, trade union magazines and the author's participation in trade union meetings, this analysis focuses on the services union ver.di, the industrial metalworkers' union IG Metall, the Trade Union for Mining, Chemical and Energy Industries (IGBCE) and the Food, Beverages and Catering Union (NGG). Ver.di and IG Metall were selected due to their large memberships, while the IGBCE and NGG were selected because they lay at opposite ends of Germany's dualised labour market. This article finds that unions support Germany's asylum and migration policies and seek to optimise these. However, their bipartite initiatives run up against limits because employers aim to use refugees to undermine existing labour standards. This article concludes that trade unions' *Willkommenskultur* is predicated on cooperation with employers and is a result of Germany's labour shortage, as well as changing demographics of unions and the political threat posed by the AfD.

Background

Historically, the German labour movement has approached the relationship between trade unions and immigrant labour through the prism of a Turkish guest worker strike at the car manufacturing plant at Ford Köln-Niehl and that of migrant women workers at the car parts manufacturer Pierburg in Neuss in 1973 (Wittermann, 1994; Braeg, 2012; Huwer, 2013; Tügel 2016). The strike at Pierburg won a wage increase of 1 Deutschmark per hour and the abolition of the “easy work” category (*Leichtlohngruppe*), which devalued women's work, largely because it could count on support from the works council and the local branch of IG Metall (Braeg, 2012). In contrast, striking workers at Ford Köln were less successful as they faced opposition from the employer, the union and the works council. Earlier in 1973, IG Metall and the works council had refused to give an elected Turkish works council representative leave of absence to fulfil his duties. Thus, the Ford Company could depend on the works council's approval when it fired 300 Turkish guest workers for returning late from their yearly summer holiday in Turkey. The six-day-long strike was unsuccessful as it did not achieve its demands, and a wave of repression ensued. Most importantly, the strike underlines how autonomous migrant labour conflicts can inadvertently lead to greater integration within the industrial relations system. The historian Nelli Tügel (2016) reveals how the strike forced the local IG Metall to create a new full-time role for an official in charge of representing and organising Turkish guest workers, and how the composition of the works council changed following the works council election in 1975.

A decade later, in 1986, the DGB would found the anti-racist organisation “Mach meinen Kumpel nicht an!” (Don't attack my pal!) in the wake of an election campaign demonising asylum

seekers. The organisation provided resources and educational material for anti-racist campaigning in trade unions, and established an informational exchange of good practices in the workplace which continues to be run by the DGB Bildungswerk – a training institute for trade unionists. With this organisation, anti-racism entered the mainstream of the German labour movement, yet studies underline how West German trade union members continue to be more likely to support extreme right-wing positions than non-union members (Stoess, Fichter and Zeuner, 2007: 13). Moreover, the mainstreaming of anti-racism within the German labour movement did not hold ver.di back from refusing membership to a group of refugees in 2013 and the DGB Brandenburg-Berlin from calling on police to evict from their premises a group of refugees demanding trade union membership in 2014.

Refugees and the Logic of Optimisation

At the policy level, trade unions demand that refugees' entry into the labour market is optimised and that mismatches produced through uncoordinated migration into Germany are alleviated. IG Metall's self-titled "sustainable refugee policy" emphasises the need for occupational language courses and the importance of recognition of their formal qualifications (IGM, 2016a). This led the IG Metall to advocate a "year of integration" in 2016.

As the Dublin accords establish a common asylum policy across the European Union, IG Metall extends this logic of optimisation to the European level. Demands include the fair distribution of refugees across all EU member states and a unitary system of entry and humane standards in housing (IGM, 2015). IG Metall also writes:

At any rate, the task is to improve the required personal prerequisites of individuals who want to work. Significantly more financial resources as well as more human resources are needed at the Federal Labour Office for this purpose. On top of this, early integration in the labour market eases the burden on the social system considerably over the medium and long term (IGM, 2015: n.p.).

The state is described as perfunctory, with the union pointing to a lack of financial and human resources and to the inefficiencies which burden the social system. For that reason, IG Metall suggests that the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BA) – Germany's unemployment agency – should be required to note down asylum seekers' job qualifications at initial registration facilities. While this might smooth refugees' labour market entry, this policy proposal reduces refugees – humans who have fled from war, terrorism, often lost their families and crossed the Mediterranean – to their labour power. One could argue that this policy equates refugees protected under the Geneva Convention with labour migrants in search of better living and working conditions, as it is primarily geared towards the optimisation of labour market outcomes. This logic of optimisation means that IG Metall does not question which groups of refugees and asylum seekers the German government excludes. Instead, it demands the creation of a unitary system of entry. The demand for "humane housing", however, points to a broader agenda which takes account of workers as human beings, which I will return to later.

The IGBCE advances a similar set of policies in regard to refugees' formal qualifications. They suggest that bureaucratic hurdles in the asylum process, as well as the residential obligation, should be abolished (IGBCE, 2015). One could interpret this call as antagonistic in the sense that it runs up against current migration laws; however, it stems from the insight that a refugee's residence might not be the place where they can receive necessary medical support, let alone find an internship,

apprenticeship or job. By contesting these laws, the IGBCE argues for freedom of movement against the state's control of migrant labour. One could argue that the defence of the principle of freedom of movement emanates from the uncritical acceptance of free market principles and the belief that refugees and migrants will settle where jobs are (pull factors), and will move on if there are no jobs (push factors).

The logic of optimisation and the shared acceptance of Germany's migration and asylum policy is a product of the trade unions' traditional role and persistent self-image as a social partner in a tripartite corporatist system. By accepting the government's in-take of refugees and proposing improvements within the given framework, unions believe that they can maintain their political voice and their role as actors that shape labour market policies despite the waning political influence of the DGB. This explains why the German unions supported the government's two-year ban on Eastern European workers from new EU countries such as Poland, Romania and Bulgaria entering the labour market as regular employees. This position is not contradicted by the union campaigns for Syrian refugees to have access to the labour market. They rather underlie a statism and the belief that trade unions can shape labour market policies by not questioning the state's migration policies. Accordingly, the state ends up setting the very parameters of trade unions' migration policy.

Union Strategies and their Limits

Despite continuous threats from the government to lift the ban on agency work and employer associations' demands to deny refugees the minimum wage, German trade unions continue to engage in what Müller and Schmidt (2016) have called "refugee corporatism". The latest studies published by the Hans Böckler Foundation – the DGB's official research and study institute – show that Germany's tripartite system has seen trade unions, industrial chambers, employers and works councils working together to integrate refugees into the labour market (Giertz, Maschke and Werner, 2016; Müller and Schmidt, 2016). One possible explanation is that a high labour market participation rate and a historically low rate of unemployment reduce the potential for conflict between insiders and outsiders within these segments of the labour market.

IG Metall, for example, suggests that refugees should undertake a three-month integration course, followed by a three-month internship in an enterprise. After successful completion, they could begin an apprenticeship in that company (Luz, 2016). This proposal presents a viable alternative to the government's plan which represents a frontal attack on IG Metall's workplace and labour market power, as it would engender the growth of agency work. Ver.di (2016), on the other hand, has developed practical concepts aimed at integrating refugees into the labour market based on the principle that workplace integration constitutes the basis for participation in society. Ver.di works councils, shop stewards (*Vertrauensleute*) and private services companies such as TÜV Nord Bildung, TUI AG, Randstad and SAGA GWG have been cooperating to enable the successful integration of refugees in the workplace. As a result of this strategy, ver.di (2016) has negotiated the employment of 100 refugees as apprentices in Telekom – Germany's largest telecommunications company – on a yearly basis. In the public sector ver.di members, local works councils and branches use the institutionalised arrangement of awarding contracts to include contractual clauses providing internships, apprenticeships and full-time employment for refugees. Peter Bremme, a ver.di secretary from Hamburg, and his local union have developed a template union-company agreement suggesting additional facility time for works councils to work on refugees' professional recognition, CV training,

help with the search for jobs, test preparation and trade union education (Bremme, Wittkuhn and Gussone, 2016). By generating such best practices, ver.di brokers “decent work” for refugees, expands its workplace organisation, creates safeguards against further labour market segmentation along racial lines and sends a signal to the government that it accepts responsibility as a stakeholder in Germany’s refugee management.

Other sections of the labour movement have responded with an advice- and information-based strategy. These approaches acknowledge, to a degree, that individual labour market integration is central to societal participation, but that many refugees who have ended up in Germany have experienced war, family separation, challenges linked to border regimes and their migration route, and uncertain residency status. This requires one to think about “the whole worker” (McAlevey and Ostertag, 2014) – that is, to accept that the workers’ home, community and work lives are inter-dependent, and that the neglect of any one of these factors can weaken the development of agency.

The highly acclaimed DGB-supported project *Faire Mobilität*, which services Eastern European migrant workers and posted workers, is rather unlikely to reorient itself to catering for refugees – given the large scale of labour abuses affecting Eastern Europeans (Dälken, 2016). Moreover, its financing structure leaves limited room to pursue and realise other strategies.² For that reason the DGB national executive has launched a minimum wage hotline in Arabic and Farsi and published handbooks in German, Arabic, Farsi, English and French detailing issues such as the minimum wage, wage theft, agency work and self-employment (DGB, 2016). IG Metall has offered a space for language classes in its Frankfurt headquarters, and opened an information and advice bureau which services twenty to thirty refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in job, housing and other questions (IGM, 2016b). When it assists refugees in questions besides work and offers them language classes, it builds new links in the community and asserts the values of humanity and solidarity. The IGBCE holds networking meetings for trade unionists involved with refugee work, allows the participation of refugee families at their membership festival in Essen and organises football tournaments for refugees (IGBCE, 2016a). All of these approaches can be said to be informed by a “whole worker” approach, but only in embryonic form.

On that premise, integration cannot be reduced to allowing refugees to enter an exploitative, racialised and gendered labour market. It must include home- and community-building and requires a process of organising these workers collectively. Given German labour unions’ dual structure of representation through works councils and shop stewards, and workplaces as the centre of trade union activity, it is doubtful that IG Metall or IGBCE will fully develop a “whole worker” approach or engage in forms of community unionism. Nonetheless, these servicing strategies will provide refugees and new entrants to the labour market with the necessary knowledge about their rights and help them to integrate into society.

Why the *Willkommenskultur*?

While trade union density, collective bargaining coverage, union membership and political influence of the DGB are on the decline, Germany’s labour shortage is a critical factor to consider because it places trade unions in a relatively strong position to absorb refugees into the labour market and

² The project’s financing structure sees 80 per cent of its funding coming from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and 20 per cent from the DGB.

potentially even benefit from their presence. The Bundesagentur für Arbeit counts more than 2.1 million open job vacancies, with more than 700 000 new jobs created in 2015 (Beckmann and Klaus, 2015). According to the Boston Consulting Group (BCG, 2014), Germany will see a shortage of up to 2.4 million workers by 2020 and 10 million by 2030. This threatens Germany's competitive advantage and export-led growth model, on which unions in high-end manufacturing and other export-oriented industries depend. Consequently, there is a demand for workers – refugees or not – to fill vacancies in labour-intensive industries and those which cannot be automated. In this context, it is rather improbable that refugees will compete for the same jobs as German skilled workers any time soon as 70 per cent of job-seeking refugees and one-third of employees from countries eligible for asylum do not have a professional qualification (Brücker, Schewe and Sirries, 2016). Instead refugees are likely to enter a segment of the labour market which has been abandoned by skilled German workers and is predominantly filled by EU citizens from Eastern and Southern Europe. German unions thus have two tasks: to develop workplace power and to respond politically. Otherwise, employers and the AfD will pit these different groups against one another.

Trade unions' commitment and campaigning work against racism is one means to prevent such divisions from being exploited by employers and the far-right. Unions have been forced to be more outspoken in their anti-racism because the AfD attacks migrants, trade unions and workers' rights alike. At ver.di's migration policy convention, general secretary Frank Bsirske addressed the fact that a disproportionate number of trade unionists had voted for the AfD in recent elections. At another meeting the author attended, a ver.di youth member from an eastern region in Germany confirmed that the union's anti-racist activism, and particularly its opposition to the AfD and Pegida, has led to members leaving the union. Anecdotal evidence from the IG BCE also suggests that its pro-refugee position has members threatening to leave. This confirms that union members are not immune to racist and far-right arguments.

Some unions have responded by developing a communication and education strategy which seeks to inoculate their members against racism. The Food, Catering and Beverages Union has published a brochure with the title *Solidarität kennt keine Grenzen (Solidarity knows no borders)*, offering background information on refugees and advice on how members can counter the arguments of "radical opponents of refugees" (NGG, 2015). IG BCE has a similar leaflet titled *Seven facts against right-wing populist statements in the workplace* (IG BCE, 2016c). IG Metall has joined forces with the anti-racist campaign group *Aufstehen gegen Rassismus* (Stand Up Against Racism) and trained eighty members as "pub warriors against racism" (*Stammtischkämpfer*innen gegen Rassismus*) (Aufstehen gegen Rassismus Bündnis, 2016).

These materials and initiatives lend ideological support to the unions' policy of labour market integration and aim to build an anti-racist consensus among their memberships. But unions neither criticise nor mention Germany's exclusionary migration and asylum policy for people from Afghanistan, the Balkan states or Iraq. This limits them in their ability to develop an anti-racist politics which can target particular manifestations of racism. This is epitomised in the omission of any reference to Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism despite migrants and refugees from Muslim countries making up the largest proportion of migrants in Germany. It is not only the AfD or the likes of the best-selling author Thilo Sarrazin who hold negative attitudes to Muslims. Studies show that workers with a Muslim, Turkish or Arabic background are disproportionately discriminated against in the labour market (Peucker, 2010; Kreienbrink and Stichs, 2012).

Back at ver.di's migration policy conference, General Secretary Frank Bsirske positioned his

union against racism and the AfD by emphasising the migrant nature of the organisation. In the same vein, Michael Vassiliades, the General Secretary of the IG BCE, grounds his union's anti-racism in the membership's demographics: "We have members from 99 nations in our trade union. There is no place for racism and discrimination here. Those who come and stay in Germany – if they want to and can – can count on our support. (IG BCE, 2016b).

As IG Metall celebrates its 125th birthday, its messages of "125 years of commitment to more equality" and "the IG Metall is a migrant union" (*Einwanderungsgewerkschaft*) symbolise its anti-racist politics (IGM, 2016c, 2016d). These discourses are the product of an increased number of migrants inside trade unions, the diversified industrial sectors which unions like ver.di represent, and wider changes to the class structure in Germany. As ver.di does not ask for people's nationality or migrant background on its membership form, there is no reliable data on the number of migrants in each specific trade union, making it impossible to grasp these demographic changes. But the fact that one-third of all children under the age of five and one-fifth of the total German population have a migrant background shows that Germany is a country of migrants – a reality which the German state, its institutions and trade unions have long denied (bpb, 2016).

Nevertheless, these demographic changes do not automatically filter into union strategies. Time and time again, there have been examples of groups of undocumented and migrant workers who organise themselves and approach unions such as the NGG and ver.di, yet find themselves isolated as the unions cannot accommodate the needs and realities of these workers (language barriers, residency and work situation). On the other hand, precarious migrant workers at Amazon warehouses, Spanish care workers or Berlin's bus drivers are among those at the forefront of ver.di's campaigning and organising work. Correspondingly, migrants within ver.di have had the status of a self-organised group (*Personengruppe*) since 2011, meaning that they can file motions at the ver.di congress. And yet, migrants do not feature in prominent positions within the leadership and command little influence on the overall policy and political positioning of the union.

Conclusion

This article has investigated the relationship between German trade unions and refugees by focusing on unions' policy emphasis of integrating refugees into the labour market. It reveals that unions lend uncritical support to the government's refugee and asylum policy. Unions' criticisms, policy proposals and concrete measures epitomise what I would call a "logic of optimisation". As ver.di assumes that labour market integration leads societal participation, it engages in so-called "refugee corporatism" (Müller and Schmidt, 2016). This strategy runs up against employers' unwillingness to employ refugees and their concomitant use of refugees to undermine existing labour standards. Unions such as IG Metall, on the other hand, engage in an advice and information-based approach, responding to refugees' queries about work, housing and similar questions, thus approximating to a "whole worker" approach, which sees societal and labour market integration as mutually constitutive. It remains to be seen whether organising efforts will move beyond the traditional confines set by the industrial relations system. To what extent ver.di's and IG Metall's approaches differ needs to be researched in more depth. This article finds that unions' *Willkommenskultur* is based on Germany's labour shortage, demographic trends and anti-racism. In those respects IG Metall and ver.di have more things in common than those that divide them.

While this article has highlighted one particular aspect of the relationship between refugees and

German trade unions, further research is needed to understand how employers and businesses might use refugees to undermine trade unions' power in the labour market, how these new groups of workers are going to build workplace collectivism, and whether today's union structures suffice to organise a multi-national and multi-racial working class faced with the challenges of automation, increasingly precarious working conditions, and growing nationalist, racist movements on the streets and political parties in parliament.

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