

The Influence of the Discursive Power of Unions in the Swift Re-regulation of Slaughterhouse Labour during the COVID-19 Crisis in Germany

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the re-regulation of labour in the German meat industry during the COVID-19 crisis. While working and employment conditions have long been criticised with only minor results, the massive coronavirus outbreaks in German slaughterhouses led to a rapid reform of work in the meat industry. We argue that unions were able to exert influence on policy-makers based on the discursive power that they accumulated prior to COVID-19, but that they needed to adapt their framing strategies by including public health concerns to their criticism. That was possible because the outbreaks endangered local residents as well as the slaughterhouse workers, which decisively increased the pressure on policy-makers. The article contributes to the approach of discursive power resources and strategic framing by unions, and elaborates the relevance of the process of gaining discursive power over time as well as the unforeseeable changes that can dramatically increase a union's chances of political influence.

KEYWORDS

Coronavirus; COVID-19; power resources; unions; meat industry

Introduction

The German meatpacking industry is a key arena for the struggles over state regulation of economic activity. Numerous civil society actors – especially trade unions, social movements and church organisations – have campaigned for reform in this arena. Despite these campaigns, there were no serious attempts by the German government to regulate labour and employment conditions in the sector. This changed drastically during the COVID-19 crisis.

The sudden re-regulation of slaughterhouse work seems especially remarkable since the employment problems and the stressful working conditions in the industry are not a novelty, nor is the debate about the rearing and slaughter of animals and the ecological consequences of meat production. Further, it appears as though, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, labour unions had little influence on the German government's decision to re-regulate slaughterhouse labour, even though unions have long fought for such change. How can it be explained that the change in the institutional framing of slaughterhouse work only occurred in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis?

We use the power resources approach (PRA) and theoretical approaches about the role of strategic framing in the context of contested policies to discuss how the policy change in slaughterhouse work was achieved and how the COVID-19 outbreaks changed the political

salience of meat production. Based on an analysis of the media, public statements of unions and the political discourse on COVID-19 outbreaks in German slaughterhouses, we interpret the remarkably swift re-regulation process of meat production from a sociological perspective.

Our finding is that the politicisation of labour and employment conditions in the industry is the result of a newly gained bargaining power of the unions, which stems from the changing social and political interests in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreaks in German slaughterhouses. The new influence of the unions results from the fact that they were able to build discursively on the critique of working conditions in slaughterhouses, which had already been articulated for years, and to complement the frames about occupational health and safety with new, much more influential frames about public health. Strikingly, COVID-19 cases in the slaughterhouses were publicly problematised due to the risk they presented to the local communities, and not so much in relation to workers' health. Against this background, the new regulations represent a spillover effect of the pandemic, which, due to the spatial proximity to the slaughterhouses and meat-cutting plants as well as collective housing for slaughterhouse employees, was directed at local residents, and thus also at the German population as a whole.

This new constellation demanding a change in the labour situation, we argue, led to new power relations that put pressure on political actors to a degree that new regulations seemed inevitable. To explain the rapid and comprehensive reform of labour conditions in the slaughterhouses we must take into account the discursive power of unions and other collective actors built up over a long period of time. We argue that state actors were able to utilise this discursive power to construct a rationale for the swift re-regulation of meat production and to supplement it with the newly added dimension of spillover. This shows that discursive power built up over a long period of time can be involved in shaping policy change even when the direct influence of external actors such as trade unions seems rather small at first glance. In this way, we can also contribute to theorising on the power resources approach by looking more closely at the diffusion of ideas, strategic frames and legitimisation narratives between civil society and the state.

The next section gives an overview of labour relations in the meat industry and the public discourse of meat production. The following section describes the COVID-19 crisis as an action framework for regulatory efforts, and introduces the power resources approach, strategic framing and a model for analysing policy changes. The section after that reconstructs the political changes and the public discourse concerning meat production in Germany. We then interpret the results in light of social science findings on the COVID-19 crisis, and conclude by posing a series of questions.

Labour Regulation in the Meat Industry and the Multiple Crises of Meat Production

Social science research on slaughterhouse working conditions has specifically examined health risks, poor wages, employment of migrant workers and barriers to unionisation (Stull, Broadway and Griffith, 1995; Stull and Broadway, 2004; MCHR, 2012). It has been argued that slaughterhouse employees are invisible workers who have gained temporary visibility in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis (Cook et al., 2020). Research on the German meat sector has also focused on the restructuring (and precarisation) of the labour market since the European Union's (EU) eastern enlargement and on the agency of migrant workers in labour struggles (Birke and Bluhm, 2020).

The industry was characterised by a large number of small businesses until the mid-twentieth

century, but today a large part of meat production is concentrated in the hands of a few companies, whose employment models are characterised by processes of strategic outsourcing (Wagner and Hassel, 2016; Sebastian, 2017). Especially since the accession rounds of 2004 and 2007, the wage gap within the enlarged EU has enabled company managements to recruit labour from Eastern Europe (Seeliger, 2019). These workers are often migrant labourers who support their families at home with wages earned in Germany.

The specific construction of the common market allowed meat companies (or their subcontractors) to establish non-transparent employment constructions, which enabled a particularly effective exploitation of labour through wage pressure and other disciplinary measures (Brinkmann and Nachtwey, 2017). By purchasing labour through contract work, companies and subcontractors can effectively outsource parts of their core business (Hertwig, Kirsch and Wirth, 2015). The (formal) division of the labour process into in-house work based on a standard employment relationship (SER) and outsourced services of “so-called ‘auxiliary and supplementary work’” (Fiedler and Hielscher, 2017: 169) has allowed firms to avoid paying fixed wages for certain occupational groups. As Bosch, Hüttenhoff and Weinkopf (2020: 2) state, based on a series of studies, wages below €5 per hour and working hours of up to fifteen hours a day were the norm.

Slaughterhouse work in Germany was considered a labour field with a low degree of unionisation until the COVID-19 crisis (Wagner and Refslund, 2016). However, this does not mean that workers cannot incorporate resistant practices into their everyday work. Based on fieldwork in the Oldenburger Münsterland, Birke and Bluhm (2020: 35) identify sources of counter-power stemming from shopfloor work organisation. Their perspective, informed by important elements from the Labour Process Debate, enables them to see how workers can apply strategies of sabotage – for instance, in sequences of animal cutting. Moreover, the recruiting policies pursued by the subcontractors are falling below the main companies’ expectations. While such dynamics can certainly improve the political positions of single workers on the shop floor, it remains unclear how far they can extend the power resources of the trade unions involved. It is in this sense that Birke and Bluhm (2020: 48) finally identify “an absence of trade unions”, whose presence in the field they find to be “more indirect”.

As Klaus Dörre (2020: 167) notes, the “pincer grip of economy and ecology ... marks a crisis lurking unresolved behind the corona pandemic”. This also applies to slaughterhouse work, which even before COVID-19 was massively criticised by trade unions and other civil society organisations. For the unions, slaughterhouse work in particular represents an expression of a crisis of labour relations that is unfolding through a proliferation of precarious labour and employment relationships. Through globalisation, de-industrialisation and neo-liberal reforms, Western European labour relations have come under increased pressure, causing an overall precarisation of work. Precarity refers to the “insecurity and deterioration of material, social, cultural and political participation on the one hand and the social reproduction of wage earners on the other” (Goes, 2015: 56). This deterioration is reflected in increasingly flexible and precarious employment relationships, deficits in health and safety protection, and also in reproduction and co-determination, as precarious workers are increasingly deprived of the material basis for labour-policy resistance.

This crisis of labour relations is partly caused by problems in the process of European integration. The integration of Central and Eastern European countries mobilises a labour potential that can meet the demand in northern and western European countries, especially in low-skilled areas of economic activity, but also puts pressure on the collective bargaining systems of western European political economies (Seeliger, 2019; Nachtwey and Seeliger, 2020). For the western

European trade unions, special difficulties in organising mobile workers result from their often temporary employment. A generally weak bargaining position emerges, caused not only by the language barrier but also by the repressive approach of foremen and management (Sebastian, 2017).

Moreover, the public perception of slaughterhouse work is largely determined by discourses on animal ethics and ecological crises. This is based, among other things, on the increased cultural sensitivity to animal suffering and critiques of the negative effects of industrial meat production on climate change and biodiversity (Sebastian, 2019; Benton et al., 2021). While these issues played only a minor role in the COVID-19 discussion of slaughterhouses, it seems plausible that the multiple criticisms of slaughterhouses among the general public have created a fundamental image of a “reform jam” in an industry in dire need of change.

We argue that the public standing of the German meat industry had already been damaged for several years prior to the arrival of COVID-19, especially due to several failed attempts by labour unions to reform slaughterhouse labour. The legitimacy crisis of meat production can thus also be understood as a discursive frame of the political regulation debates in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Accordingly, based on the analysis of our empirical data, we want to discuss to what extent the rapid re-regulation of slaughterhouse work is discursively linked to the public pressure to change the working conditions in slaughterhouses already built up by the labour unions and other civil society actors.

The German meat industry constitutes a fruitful empirical case to discuss the question of “how important are class and power for conflict and change in Western societies” (Korpi, 1983: 1). This article contributes to research on slaughterhouse labour in an innovative way by examining the previously understudied influence of the discursive power of unions on the re-regulation of slaughterhouse labour. It draws attention to how unions can exert pressure on policy-makers via influencing political discourse. We can thereby contribute to sociological theories on power relations, discourse and policy change.

Theoretical Framework:

The COVID-19 Crisis as an Action Framework for Re-regulation

The role of power resources and framing strategies in policy change

Building upon a tradition of analysing working-class politics by focusing on sequences of conflict (resolution) within the political economies of modern capitalism, contributions to the power resources approach generally focus on patterns of collective mobilisation and their underlying dynamics. In the context of contemporary labour studies, the PRA “has significantly shaped the way scholars are dealing with the issue of union revitalisation and labour conflict, as studies from different world regions have examined union renewal as a process of utilizing existing power resources while attempting to develop new ones” (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018: 113). The central idea is, thus, to highlight the agency of workers and their organisations in relation to the broader structural framework.

Over the past years, various typologies have attempted to capture the interplay of different power resources at play in labour politics, mostly applied by trade unions. In the following discussion, we rely on the proposal made by Schmalz et al. (2018) who argue that while structural power derives from the wage-dependent workers within the economic system – either as workplace bargaining power, or as marketplace bargaining power – associational power follows from

collective mobilisation, usually achieved through the organisational form of trade unions. Institutional power, on the other hand, is the historical result of struggles between capital, labour and the state, which has resulted in overarching systems of rules and routines. Finally, Schmalz et al. (2018: 122) define societal power as “latitudes for action arising from viable cooperation contexts with other social groups and organisations, and society’s support for trade union demands”. These latitudes, they go on to explain, are themselves constituted from two sources – while coalitional power refers to the networks political actors find at their disposal, discursive power refers to the ability of unions to influence public debates. While the narrative potentials are, generally speaking, only limited to the imaginative potential of the speaker, exercise of discursive power operates in line with existing ideas of morality and appropriateness.

For our analysis, we mainly utilise the concept of discursive power. Discursive power can be easily integrated into the broader discussion about the role of civil society actors (such as social movements, interest groups or church associations), framing strategies and the cultural context of institutional change. Various studies about policy contestation have discussed how framing can improve or worsen the chances of influencing policies (Williams, 2004; McCammon et al., 2007; Meyer and Laschever, 2016; Sebastian, 2021).

Benford and Snow (2000) distinguish diagnostic framing (what is wrong?), prognostic framing (what needs to be done?) and motivational framing (why do we need to act?). They argue that frame resonance, which is the degree to which a given frame is accepted by the public as legitimate or appropriate, is a key factor in the explanation of civil society influence in policy change. However, frames can successfully resonate with the public but fail to cause immediate policy change. Thus, discursive power can influence a public debate on and the broader cultural context of a policy in the long run, even if it fails to cause policy change in a specific historical situation.

On this basis, we argue that in the present case the role of the trade unions seems minor at first sight, since it was not the years of pressure by trade unions on politics based on successful mobilisation of workers that led to the policy change, but the coronavirus pandemic as an exogenous shock that set political change in motion. However, it seems that the rapid and comprehensive reform of labour conditions in the slaughterhouses can only be explained by the discursive power of unions and other collective actors built up over a long period of time. The trade unions’ diagnostic framing strategies shifted in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis by focusing on public health as a new pressing problem of slaughterhouse labour; at the same time this allowed public attention to be focused on working conditions as a whole. Our argument is that this discursive power was taken over by state actors to legitimise the change in policies. In this way, we can also contribute to theorising on the PRA by looking more closely at the diffusion of ideas, frames and legitimation narratives between civil society and the state.

Politicisation and policy change in meat production

From a procedural perspective, the regulation of meat production work is the result of a policy-making process, at the end of which stands the production of a policy (Jann and Wegrich, 2003: 89). Jann and Wegrich (2007: 44) differentiate between the phases of problem definition, agenda-setting, policy formulation, implementation and evaluation; these phases do not necessarily have to follow chronologically, but can occur in different loops or with interruptions. The contingent dynamics of such processes are also described by Schneider and Janning:

Apart from the deliberate initiation of political issues by social or governmental actors, structural triggers for problem articulation can also be found, such as certain events (accidents, disasters, wars,

revolutions, etc.) that can catapult certain issues onto the political stage from one day to the next (Schneider and Janning, 2006: 55).

To better examine the complex conditions under which the discursive power of unions and other civil society actors influences policy-making, we also use Schneider and Janning's (2006) concept of political salience. The higher the political salience of an issue, the greater the chance that policy-makers will consider it urgent. Schneider and Janning differentiate political salience into six dimensions:

1. concreteness and clarity (unambiguity vs. ambiguity)
2. social relevance (strong vs. marginal social concern)
3. temporal relevance (absolutely urgent vs. postponable)
4. complexity (simple vs. complex)
5. novelty (routine vs. novelty)
6. valuability (high vs. low symbolic importance) (Schneider and Janning, 2006: 56).

We see the re-regulation of meat work as a policy change that gains its significance within the triple crisis of European integration, labour issues and ecological issues. By constituting itself as a “community of fear” (Biess, 2020: 33) during the pandemic, German society increased discursive pressure on policy-makers through the suddenly heightened political salience of slaughterhouse work, adding the new public health concern to the already existing problematisation of aspects of European integration, labour and ecology, thus eventually “breaking the camel’s back”. Without the preceding multiple crises in the meat industry on the one hand, and without the change at the level of the conflict actors involved in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic on the other, we argue, the transformation of the institutional framing of meat production seems unlikely.

The Road to Re-regulation of German Meat Production Labour

In this section, we reconstruct the change in policy regulation of the meat industry in terms of the five phases of policy change – problem definition, agenda-setting, policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. Only the phase of evaluation is not included in our assessment, as the law had only recently been enacted at the time of our investigation. Our empirical analysis is based on various types of documents including media articles, press releases by trade unions, protocols of parliamentary meetings and public statements by politicians. We discuss the role of unions in the public and political debate about slaughterhouse operations and the special role of Tönnies Holding. Tönnies is the German market leader in pig and cattle slaughtering, with annual sales of 6.1 billion euros in 2018. At its headquarters in Rheda-Wiedenbrück, the company operates Germany’s largest slaughterhouse and employs around 7 000 people there.

Problem definition

The phase of problem definition began long before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The labour situation in slaughterhouses had already been publicly debated as a problem between 2007 and 2009 (Bosch et al., 2020: 2). At that time, the employment relations within the meat industry were going through a structural change. In the course of the EU’s enlargement, permanent employees were systematically replaced by low-wage eastern European contract workers. Tönnies

was criticised in the media for employing “labour slaves” via subcontractors (SWR Report Mainz, 2007). Around 2012, the media debate about the poor working conditions of precariously employed workers in the meat industry intensified in Germany. The newspaper *Die Zeit* described the conditions in slaughterhouses as “carnage ... of a ghost army from Eastern Europe” (Kunze, 2014). The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported on “our new starvation workers” who lived in “junk accommodation ... made of branches, plastic foil and blankets” (Ankenbrand, 2013).

The media’s definition of slaughterhouse work as “modern slavery” (Grossarth, 2013) was supported by civil society actors, especially by the Food, Beverages and Catering trade union (Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten, NGG) and by church organisations. The NGG made slaughterhouse work one of its main issues. For example, the union frequently and publicly criticised “scandalously low wages” or the “scandalous conditions in the posting of workers in the meat industry, especially in slaughtering and meat-cutting” (NGG, 2014a, 2014b). Through the misuse of temporary work contracts, NGG (2014b) complained, the industry could lower wages and avoid social benefits. In various press releases, the union sharply criticised the meat business as an “exploitative industry” that made use of “criminal tricks” to avoid paying decent wages (NGG, 2014c). Through its “Fair Mobility” initiative, established in 2016, the German Trade Union Confederation (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, DGB) has tried to educate eastern European workers about their rights in Germany and to mobilise them for industrial action. However, these attempts to organise the workforce were met with little success.

At that time, political initiatives for re-regulation focused on the establishment of a sectoral minimum wage for employees in the meat industry (Weinkopf and Hüttendorf, 2017). With the introduction of the industry minimum wage in 2014, the wages of contract workers employed in the meat industry increased. However, criticism of poor working conditions persisted – partly because subcontractors were publicly criticised for circumventing the payment of the minimum wage. For example, media reports criticised the renting of expensive collective housing, false wage settlements, penalties for (alleged) rule violations and making workers pay for their tools (see, for example, Haneke, 2020).

In 2015, public and political pressure led to a joint voluntary commitment by some leading slaughter companies to “transform their structures and organizations in such a way that all employees working in their plants are in employment registered in Germany and subject to social security contributions” (BMWK, 2015). However, this declaration only led to a slight increase in permanent employment (Bosch et al., 2020: 9ff). In the eyes of the NGG, the voluntary commitment could not solve the problems of the meat industry. The system of work contracts, it claimed, continued to be a “cancer that has still not been eliminated” (NGG, 2016). The unions’ criticism of the meat industry did not cease. In 2019, the NGG was still talking about “lousy working conditions, horrendous rents for accommodation whose prices could compete with top residential locations in major cities, violence and oppression” (NGG, 2019).

However, the public debate on slaughterhouse labour was noticeably reignited only in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, after COVID-19 outbreaks occurred in a large number of German slaughterhouses from April 2020. It became apparent that the legal measures and the corporate commitment had not sustainably changed the employment structures and working conditions of the meat industry. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic – particularly between 2013 and 2016 – some media outlets had addressed the issue of working conditions and reflected the main points of the NGG’s criticism, but the pandemic led to a mainstreaming of union frames in the media, with the underlying master frame of poor working conditions also being addressed through the vehicle of public health risks.

Tönnies Holding, in particular, was once again the focus of media and political attention after more than 1 500 employees were infected with the coronavirus at the company's site in Rheda-Wiedenbrück in June 2020. As a result of the outbreak, all 7 000 slaughterhouse workers had to go into quarantine. While the "first wave" of the pandemic in Germany seemed to be over, the COVID-19 outbreak in Rheda-Wiedenbrück led to a large-scale lockdown of the district of Gütersloh. Around 370 000 people were affected by the restrictions in the aftermath of the outbreak at Tönnies.

These widespread negative consequences for the population led to a nationwide intensification of the discussion about slaughterhouse work. In terms of discourse, this discussion tied in directly with criticism that the NGG had made publicly in previous years. The causes for the COVID-19 outbreaks were identified as precarious employment, poor housing conditions, long working hours in confined spaces, communal journeys to work in minibuses, and the temperature in the workplace. The NGG increased the pressure on the German government and the parliament by making numerous critical public statements (for example: NGG, 2020a). The union framed the COVID-19 outbreaks as the "sad result of a sick system" (NGG, 2020b), discursively linking the current crisis to years of debate over slaughterhouse labour and to the emerging discourse on public health: "The meat industry has proven to be unwilling to reform and is fundamentally sick. A first therapeutic measure is the ban on work contracts, a second is local prosecutor's offices for occupational health and safety" (NGG, 2020a). This link was further expressed when the NGG criticised Tönnies: "In this company there is no sense of responsibility for the health of the employees and the general public" (NGG, 2020c).

In comparison with other forms of industrial work, the meat industry appeared to be particularly susceptible to COVID-19 outbreaks, and its employees particularly vulnerable (Günther et al., 2020). Tönnies became the representative of a meat industry criticised as irresponsible. Headlines such as "Rheda-Wiedenbrück: A town united in rage" (Roth, 2020) and "Tönnies paralyzes Gütersloh" (Haarhoff and Kreutzfeldt, 2020) make it clear that the criticism of slaughterhouse work was augmented by the new dimension of the pandemic.

The conditions in the Tönnies slaughterhouses allowed the coronavirus to spread rapidly. The lockdowns expanded the circle of those negatively affected to include the workers in the factories and, by extension, the entire population. "This ominous combination of poor working conditions and threats to general health led to an entirely new level of outrage" (Bosch et al., 2020: 16). The meat industry lost massive public and political support in the wake of these developments. The "image of the industry [was] completely ruined", assess Bosch et al. (2020: 19).

Agenda-setting

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the public problematisation of slaughterhouse work had led to phases of political agenda-setting. Two attempts at re-regulation in 2007 and 2009 failed due to industry resistance, and the regulatory debate was interrupted in 2014 by the introduction of the minimum wage and the above-mentioned declaration of voluntary commitment. However, as the renewed attention in the context of the coronavirus crisis showed, the central points of criticism could not be overcome by these changes so the conflict over working conditions continued to smoulder.

After slaughterhouses repeatedly turned out to be "super-spreaders" of the coronavirus, a renewed political debate on the re-regulation of slaughterhouse labour ensued. The German Ministry of Labour pushed for changes to the labour law framework for meat production. Labour Minister Hubertus Heil, a member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), announced

that he would “put an end to organized irresponsibility” (quoted in Junginger, 2020) and called for a ban on work contracts and temporary labour in the meat industry. He publicly stated that “Tönnies had taken an entire region hostage” (quoted in Stegemann, 2020), as the restrictive measures resulting from the COVID-19 outbreaks at Tönnies affected the entire population surrounding the Tönnies plant. In view of these setbacks in the fight against the pandemic, the chances of success for the federal government’s coronavirus policy as a whole appeared to be threatened. In the public discussion, which was largely determined by Heil’s criticism of Tönnies, discourses on public health and labour law were noticeably combined. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, for example, quoted the Minister of Labour as saying, “There must be an end to health hazards and the exploitation of people” (Stegemann 2020). Overall, it is evident that Heil, too, had used arguments previously raised publicly by the unions and other civil society actors.

In addition to the federal government, numerous members of parliament called for re-regulation of labour and employment within the meat industry. During the debates in the Bundestag, several members of parliament stressed that the health risks to the population affected by the coronavirus outbreaks were an important element in the urgency of re-regulation. Furthermore, their framing of the re-regulation of meat production was evidently aligned with the frames previously used by the NGG. For example, Michael Gerdes, a member of the SPD, criticised:

It can be stated that the meat industry is currently experiencing its most serious crisis. Yes, the Corona Pandemic brought the barrel to overflowing. The political and public confidence is finally gambled away, especially since the problems and misconduct of individual companies no longer remain hidden. We had to put parts of the population, or more precisely the people in the districts of Gütersloh and Warendorf, on lockdown for safety’s sake. The meat industry’s neighbors were virtually held hostage (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll, 19/173).

Green MP Beate Müller-Gemmeke pointed out that it was only the health threat to the population that motivated the federal government to act:

After all, the disastrous working conditions in the meat industry have been known to us all for many years, but little happened. Only when there were the Corona hotspots, for example at Tönnies, did the federal government become active (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll, 19/201).

The fact that the population itself was also galvanised by immediate danger from the slaughterhouses is emphasised by SPD Member of Parliament Katja Mast:

This law is a team effort. For example, in my constituency, in Pforzheim and in the Enzkreis, there was massive tailwind for this law today through the support of thousands of citizens, the unions, the district administration, the party branches (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll 19/201).

It is difficult to assess the impact of unions on the processes of agenda-setting and policy formulation. However, it is obvious that the original trigger for agenda-setting was not the unions’ years of protest, but the sudden massive outbreaks of COVID-19 in the industry. On the other hand, many parliamentarians referred to the problems that the union had been addressing for years and the NGG again increased its commitment to slaughterhouse reform in the second half of 2020, when the bill was developed and passed. The NGG and other German trade unions were among the interest groups that lobbied federal ministries, the Chancellor and other high-ranking politicians

on the issue, although lobby organisations from the meat and food industry and employers' associations were far more frequent guests of German politicians (Bundestag-Drucksache, 19/22997). Most important, however, seems to be that the responsible policy-makers were able to harness the discursive power of the union, built up over a long period of time, to generate the necessary political and cultural legitimacy for slaughterhouse work reform.

Policy formulation

On 20 May 2020, Germany's federal cabinet agreed on a ban on contracts for services and temporary employment in the meat industry. On 29 July 2020, the cabinet passed the draft of the Occupational Health and Safety Control Act (*Arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz*) and introduced it on 31 August 2020 (Bundestag-Drucksache, 19/21978). In its explanatory memorandum to the bill, the federal government explicitly referred to the Tönnies case and the risk to local residents: "The recent COVID-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses in North Rhine-Westphalia and the affected communities have drawn increased attention to the working conditions of an industry that has repeatedly come under criticism in the past because of these working conditions" (Bundestag-Drucksache, 19/21978). The draft refers in its reasoning to large-scale examinations of the slaughterhouses in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state. Approximately 8 800 offences were detected, including 5 900 against working-time regulations: "Cases were uncovered, in which employees worked 16 hours in a day. In many cases, work was done without a break. In addition, serious deficiencies were found, for example in the area of technical occupational safety" (Bundestag-Drucksache, 19/21978). As a further justification, the draft law mentions the living conditions in the collective accommodations of the precarious workers. During inspections, "mold infestation, danger of collapse, leaky roofs, catastrophic sanitary facilities, vermin infestation and fire protection deficiencies were found in some cases" (Bundestag-Drucksache, 19/21978).

It became clear during the parliamentary debate on the first reading of the bill on 9 October 2020 that there was a broad political consensus on the fundamental need for re-regulation. However, opposition parties criticised numerous details, in particular the frequency of the planned inspections, the dimension of fines, regulations to ensure production in the event of seasonal increases in meat consumption, and the definition of craft businesses that were to be exempt from the law (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll, 19/173; Bundestag Plenarprotokoll 19/201). In order to prevent a potential weakening of the reform, the NGG directly intervened with relevant politicians such as the Bavarian Minister President Markus Söder, whose party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), opposed a strict reform (NGG, 2020d).

In previous consultations, the lobby groups representing the meat industry had succeeded in exerting considerable influence on the formulation of the legal regulations or even preventing them altogether. This problem was now publicly debated, for example in the form of an open letter from researchers and traders to the German government demanding that the planned reforms not be "watered down" in favour of the interests of the meat industry. Federal Labour Minister Heil picked up on these concerns and warned the Bundestag "that a huge mass of lobbyists here in Berlin will try to weaken this sharp law"; these are "representatives of organized corporate interests with very, very much money in an industry worth billions" (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll 19/173). He stated that he wanted to "really drain the swamp in parts of the meat industry with this law and not give in to the lobbyists' attempts to formulate loopholes in the law" (quoted in Peter, 2020). Concern over too much influence by trade unions, on the other hand, was not part of the discussion.

Implementation

The Bundestag finally adopted the Act on 16 December 2020 with the votes of the CDU/CSU, SPD, Greens and Left parties (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll 19/201). On 1 January 2021, the Labor Protection Control Act came into force. Since then, companies in the meat industry with more than fifty employees have been legally obligated to refrain from using temporary work contracts in their core areas of slaughtering, meat-cutting and processing. The ban on temporary work came into force on 1 April 2021. Seasonal additional demand may still be covered by temporary labour until 2024. It was also decided to improve provision of accommodation and the monitoring of occupational health and safety, and to impose stronger sanctions for violations. As Bosch et al. (2020: 3) stated in July 2020, “In just a few weeks, political measures became possible that had been prevented for years by an opaque lobbyist network”.

The Changing Political Salience of Slaughterhouse Work

In an article in the *Tageszeitung*, Kriener (2020) describes slaughterhouses as “social taboo zones”. As the reconstruction of the policy cycle has shown, the coronavirus pandemic made it possible to undermine this tabooing of events in the environment of the meat industry. The nature of the public and political debate surrounding the introduction of the Occupational Health and Safety Control Act makes it clear that the issue of occupational health and safety in the meat industry was characterised by a markedly high level of political salience from the middle of 2020 to early 2021. This will be illustrated below using the six dimensions of political salience according to Schneider and Janning (2006).

Concreteness and clarity (unambiguity vs. ambiguity): While the multiple crisis of meat production generates numerous problems in need of political reform, a delimited sub-area could be clearly identified in the reform deal despite its interdependence and multiple causes. This concerns the working and living conditions of contract workers as the cause of the vulnerability of local residents to the coronavirus.

Social relevance (strong vs. marginal social concern): The social relevance shifted as a result of the expansion of the group of people affected. Whereas previously only employees, unions and other civil society organisations (churches, social movements and so on) considered the issue highly relevant, the regulation of slaughterhouse work became a central health policy issue as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Temporal relevance (absolutely urgent vs. postponable): While the solution to the multiple crises of slaughterhouse labour was postponed several times after unsuccessful attempts or only marginally influential reforms, the political perception of urgency changed with the COVID-19 crisis, which, as an exogenous shock, generated immediate pressure to act. Further postponement of regulation would have meant not only maintaining poor working and living conditions for employees, but also endangering the entire population.

Complexity (simple vs. complex): In light of the public debate, the complexity of the three crisis dynamics – apart from the question of animal welfare – is much more complex than the question of health protection during the COVID-19 pandemic. While European integration, the regulation of the labour market and overall the question of social natural relations are complex phenomena, the immediate threat posed by the virus appears easy to comprehend.

Novelty (routine vs. novelty): While the crisis dynamics of European integration, the precarisation of labour and social natural relations are, as it were, part of the background noise of public debates,

the threat posed by the coronavirus represents a new political problem. It can be assumed that this led to a stronger presence of the topic in the public debate.

Valuability (high vs. low symbolic importance): In light of current political developments, all three crisis dynamics are objects of public interest and significant moral projections. European integration as well as the question of “good work”, and especially the vulnerability of nature in the so-called Anthropocene, actually offer promising possibilities of media and other public resonance. It seems all the more remarkable that a combination of the three – previously relatively disparate – crisis discourses could only bring about successful regulatory efforts in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The regulatory relevance in the present case also results from the special symbolic significance of the handling of the Tönnies case for the efforts of the federal government in combating the pandemic as such.

As could be shown, the salience of meat production changed abruptly due to the coronavirus infections in slaughterhouses. However, it is equally clear that the re-regulation debate refers in many aspects (explicitly or implicitly) to the previous political discussion on slaughterhouse labour as voiced by unions and other civil society actors. The remarkably swift identification of the working and living conditions of contract workers (dimension of concreteness) or the markedly value-laden nature of the debate, for example, only become comprehensible against the backdrop of the slaughter industry’s pre-existing, multiple legitimisation crises and the discursive power that the unions had established over the years.

The fact that the political decision-makers preferred the reform of occupational health and safety as a solution to possible alternative strategies (such as company testing obligations or technical improvement of ventilation in the workplace) also requires explanation. Here, too, it seems plausible that the reaction to the increased risk of infection in slaughterhouses was also intended to solve previously existing political problems in the context of meat production.

Conclusion and Outlook

As has been shown, the coronavirus pandemic was an essential condition for the sudden re-regulation of slaughterhouse work in Germany. The trade unions succeeded in following up on the already massive criticism of working conditions that existed prior to the coronavirus pandemic by introducing the public health crisis of meat production as a new, prognostic frame into the discourse. This finding illustrates the relevance of discursive power relations in explaining institutional change on the basis of new, unforeseeable developments, but also that successful framing can discursively tie in with established frames, so that the historicity of frame development over time shows itself to be particularly relevant. Analysing the discursive power of unions and the development of their strategic framing over time makes it possible to uncover, as Hien (2021: 2) points out, “layer upon layer of fundamental social problems”. A precondition for the rapid change of legislation was the gradual scandalisation and critique of the working and employment conditions in the meat industry through German trade unions and civil society.

In the mid-1980s, corresponding observations led Ulrich Beck (1985: 29) to diagnose a “new kind of ‘ascriptive’ fate of danger” that threatened to affect the members of the risk society “beyond class and status”; “modernization risks”, Beck continues, “sooner or later also catch those who produce them or profit from them. They contain a boomerang effect that explodes the class schema”. However, as the case presented here also shows, the different population groups are by no means equally affected. First and foremost, the migrant workers are directly endangered, but their fate only gains political salience – and this is the macabre twist in the policy cycle – when local

residents are also exposed to the risk of infection. This biopolitical spill-over is the central mechanism explaining the particular speed of the re-regulation of German meat production. This finding also raises questions about the difficulties of representing non-union migrant workers and their vulnerabilities.

It is unclear to what extent the far-reaching ban on working contracts and temporary employment in the meat industry will actually improve the working conditions of employees or whether companies will succeed in undermining the institutional requirements and at best cosmetically improve the precariousness of slaughterhouse work. In April and May 2021 the social debate over meat production seemed to gain new momentum. After many years of hardly any industrial action in the slaughter industry, the NGG succeeded in organising warning strikes at several slaughter plants. The fact that the unions have gained bargaining power in the wake of institutional change in the meat industry is demonstrated not only by the newfound mobilisation potential for strikes but also by the new collective bargaining negotiations, which are being conducted with renewed rigor. The conflict over slaughterhouse labour does not seem to be over yet and a process of union renewal seems to be emerging.

“So how”, Birke (2021: 45) asks, “will the operational division of labor in the meat industry change after the pandemic and after the reforms?” Dealing with the coronavirus pandemic offers, as Steg (2020: 79) optimistically puts it, “the possibility of ushering in a new stage in the relationship between state and market”. A labour market deregulated on an EU-wide scale for the mass utilisation of animals under the most precarious conditions would have to be replaced by an economically and ecologically, and thus politically, feasible alternative to ensure general (healthy) well-being.

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