

Towards a Europeanisation of Industrial Relations

Fourth British-German Trades Union Forum

Berlin

5 and 6 July 2005

Executive Summary

European Union legislation is starting to make a significant impact on industrial relations, and in particular on the crucial three-way relationship between management, employees and trade unions. The establishment of European Works Councils and the creation of information and consultation rights have provided new channels for employees to make their voices heard and to influence decisions about the future direction of their company.

Do these developments herald the slow birth of a Europe-wide system of industrial relations that will function alongside the increasing number of multinationals that treat Europe as a single operational entity? And on what basis will the very different national institutions and practices of industrial relations come together? Will there be a genuine Europeanisation of industrial relations based on the social model, with its guarantees of a central role for trade unions and its entrenched social dialogue? Or will we see continued national diversity within a loose framework of EU legislation, which could well perpetuate the existing pattern, already apparent in France and the UK, of weak unions under pressure and declining collective bargaining coverage?

In July 2005 some 40 British and German trade unionists – from leaders and senior policy-makers to workplace organisers – met in Berlin to discuss these questions, which are central to the future health of trade unions in both countries. The occasion was the fourth British–German Trade Union Forum, a collaboration between the Anglo–German Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Hans Böckler Stiftung. The Forum aims to develop closer ties between trade unions and trade unionists in the UK and Germany, and specifically to provide the opportunity to learn from policy and practice in the two countries. Its annual discussions are unique, for it is thought to be the only transnational body to bring together European trade union activists working at different organisational levels.

Two days of lively and intensive debate focused on how trade unions should respond to these opportunities, especially created by the new information and consultation laws.

Although trade unions in Germany and Britain operate in strikingly different political and industrial contexts, the organisational challenges are similar. Rights to information and consultation will certainly strengthen the voice of employees. If trade unions are to benefit by rebuilding their membership and influence, they must first overcome the antagonism still prevalent in some unions, especially in the UK, to participating in a company's long-term development, and then accept that worker representation will now take place through two channels, union and non-union. The increased bargaining powers given by the new information and consultation rights will also provide unions with an instrument to establish themselves in unorganised workplaces – especially important in the private sector, much of which is a union-free zone in both countries – and to demonstrate to non-unionised workers how effective unions can be.

The Forum's broad conclusion was that the new rights offer an important step forward. Employees can now – for the first time ever – participate in decisions before they are made. Trade unions need to commit resources to a major education programme to inform employees of their rights and to equip them to play a meaningful part in consultation. The potential benefit to unions is great. The potential benefit to companies is equally significant. Modern companies depend on knowledge and skill, much of which resides with their workforce. Information and consultation offers companies an opportunity to foster long-term co-operation rather than focus solely on short-term shareholder value.

For more information please contact:

Anglo-German Foundation/Deutsch-Britische Stiftung

Annette Birkholz
Press and Publications Officer
Anglo-German Foundation/Deutsch-Britische Stiftung
Hackescher Markt 1, 10178 Berlin, Germany
Tel +49 30 2063 4985, Fax +49 30 311 099 20
E-mail ab@agf.org.uk, Website www.agf.org.uk

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Dr Ernst Hillebrand
London Office
Office 312
The Chandlery
50 Westminster Bridge Road
London SE1 7QY
Tel: +44 (0)20 7721 8745, Fax: +44 (0)20 7721 8746
E-mail: feslondon@dial.pipex.com, Website: www.fes.de/london

Hans-Böckler Stiftung

Nikolaus Simon
Geschäftsführung
Hans-Böckler-Stiftung
Hans-Böckler-Straße 39
40476 Düsseldorf
Tel: +44 (0)211 7778 153/4, Fax: +44 (0)211 7778 256
E-mail: Nikolaus-Simon@boeckler.de, Website: www.boeckler.de

Notes to the editor:

Since 1973 the Anglo-German Foundation contributes to policy-making in Britain and Germany by funding bilateral research and discussion of economic and social issues which challenge both countries, and by making the results of this work available to decision-makers, practitioners and their advisers.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, founded in 1925 as a political legacy of Germany's first democratically elected president, Friedrich Ebert, is a non-profit making, political public-interest institution committed to the principles and basic values of social democracy in its educational and policy-orientated work.

Hans-Böckler Stiftung

The Hans-Böckler Stiftung is the institute of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) to promote co-determination, research and studies. In all its fields of activity it is committed to co-determination as a creative principle of democratic societies. It promotes this concept, supports mandate holders in co-determination positions and advocates the furthering of co-determination rights.